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### The Story of a Bookstore<sup>1</sup>

Being a habitu  of a bookstore is an integral part of becoming an educated person.

Kenneth Sherrill, quoted in Pulley 5

Close your eyes and picture this. You walk through a pair of unprepossessing standard double-doors, glass, covered with posters and notices. Once through, you are brought up short: there is no clear way to move forward. You are faced by a shelving unit full of books, with piles more stacked on top. Some are arranged cover-outwards to tempt the passerby to pick them up. You notice flyers nearby featuring some of those same covers and realize the authors are doing local readings. The shelving makes a bit of a maze and, as you move through the room, you need to step around more than one pile of books. You came in to buy your first year textbook and there it is, but you linger. There are so many other shelves beyond those holding textbooks and you are distracted. Yet it is such a small space. All around you people are browsing. Some are having conversations. While you wait in line with your textbook you are surrounded by more books, shelves of them on either side, all crisp and colourful and definitely not textbooks.

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This was our bookstore for years on the Saint John campus at the University of New Brunswick. Unlike the store on our larger and older campus in Fredericton, the one in Saint John was independently run by a small staff employed by the university. Our bookstore won awards. It won a Libris award from the Canadian Booksellers Association for best campus bookstore in 2005. It won awards for its business practices. It was something special, something unique. It was a hub of activity on our small campus. We could direct guests there, certain that they would find it worth their while.

Pat Joas, the woman who managed the bookstore, was a reader. The books she selected were curated. In addition to the fine collection of contemporary Canadian writing on hand at all times, she stocked books based on her knowledge of the community. More than once I found an esoteric text for which I was the only possible buyer; Pat kept the teaching and research interests of the faculty in mind as she ordered.

The bookstore was centrally involved with the cultural life of the campus and the city beyond. We have a reading series, the Lorenzo Reading Series, directed for many years by contract academic professor and governor general award winner Anne Compton. This series features Canadian writers, some newer, some more established. The bookstore was an enthusiastic partner in each reading. Not only would Pat bring in copies of the featured writer's current book, but as much of their backlist as she could. The bookstore and the reading series were indivisible, a widely known beacon of contemporary Canadian literary culture that drew in many, many regular visitors from the wider community.

Our campus is located in the suburbs; for some time there was even a branch of the campus bookstore in the city of Saint John, home to readings and other cultural events, often

organized in collaboration with local groups and galleries.

You may have surmised, from my use of the past tense and my somewhat elegiac tone, that this happy situation no longer exists. You would be correct.

In September 2010, we returned to campus to discover that our bookstore had been sold. Pat had decided to retire and our employer took the opportunity to divest itself from the bookstore business. We joined with our colleagues on the Fredericton campus and signed an agreement with the Follett chain. Follett's, as you may know, is one of the two or three largest campus bookstore chains in North America. Its head office is in the U.S.A.

The timing of the turnover made it clear that our administrators knew that the decision would be an unpopular one with faculty and staff. The VP and Assistant VP at the time played hot potato, each implying without quite saying it that the decision had come from the other. At meeting after meeting of senate, questions were asked, deferred, and asked again, and meanwhile the stock at the bookstore was being sold off or sent back in order to make room for more tee-shirts. No-one mentioned the disconnect between the rhetoric of “niches of excellence” and the decision to replace one of our own niches with a chain store.

I can hardly bear to go in any more, and I am not alone.

While in the past most faculty and instructors felt loyalty to the bookstore, the same cannot be said for the new operation. Many of my colleagues have disclosed that they advise their students to buy textbooks from the cheapest suppliers, in many cases Amazon or some other online retailer.

One hears that chain stores at selected campuses — large and prestigious “marquee schools” (Pulley 6) — can offer a considerable range of books, but that is not the case in Saint

John. Economies of scale mean that we have traded a place where faculty had longstanding relationships with staff, to a barebones outlet that claims it can no longer even stock a few bestsellers, never mind the shelves and shelves of trade books we enjoyed in the past.

The administration was asked to confirm that there would be no job loss, and that workers would not have diminished pay or benefits. The answers were dissatisfyingly vague, and staff were too intimidated to complain about or even discuss the changeover. Some part-time jobs traditionally filled by students were certainly lost and retirees from back-office jobs were not replaced. When asked to explain the decision, the then-Assistant VP repeated the tired saw, that “we weren’t in the business of selling books.” Where does it stop? Where does a university draw the line around its proper “business”? One hears of all sorts of elements of campus life being outsourced. Certainly catering and bookstores are among the most common functions to be outsourced, along with maintenance and cleaning. One commentator likens the outsourcing trend to “beach erosion” (Pulley 2). But the privatization trend has now made significant inroads into a surprising array of functions, from residences, to aspects of administration such as recruiting (Kirp 3).

We let something slip away from us at UNBSJ. I am angry with our administration and I am angry with my colleagues and myself for allowing ourselves to be worn down when we tried to pursue the issue. Worn down and distracted by new threats, new battles. And so the bookstore slides into the murk of our campus history. The administration has no interest in remembering past glories on that slippery, unsearchable pile of undated words that is the university website; not when they themselves have actively destroyed them. So the bookstore exists in individual memory, something with which those of us growing ever more senior can bore junior colleagues

and students alike while they face even larger battles.

We are all too aware that it has become axiomatic for those preparing the budgets that every aspect of the university operation has to be at least cost-neutral, and preferably, to turn a profit. It is increasingly difficult for departments to argue for courses, never mind positions, because they ought to be there in order for a given programme to have integrity. It is obvious to anyone in English, my discipline, that in order to have an honours program you need to have, for example, a medievalist, even if their courses are not always as popular as, say, contemporary Canadian lit. It will all even out, the reasonable person would say. The program has its own integrity and some things, even if they are in the red if you budget in a particular way, are essential. These arguments are increasingly difficult to make in the current environment, where each and every slice of the operation has to at least break even or risk being cut. If such arguments can no longer be made for academic programs with any expectation of acknowledgement, never mind success, it becomes almost impossible to argue for an expansive notion of a campus as a community, from the classes and labs to the residences, cafeterias, bookstores, and grounds. Yet we lose much when we lose that community.

Our campuses are losing their sense of place. Offices and classrooms are in constant flux and become interchangeable. The bookstore and the library were two pole-stars when I was a student, yet neither exist in any meaningful way for my students. The bookstore I have described and the library is gone, replaced by a “learning commons,” a light-filled, airy building where the books that survived the transition — many did not — are hidden in the basement in movable shelving units that confound casual browsing. I know I risk sounding like a hopeless curmudgeon. I know that our students — some of them — are still managing to read. I know, at

least theoretically, that just because I mark my own education by a series of libraries and bookstores, that is not the only model. I have to trust that our students can still embrace a life of the mind even without those paper emblems of that life that were so central to me. But I cannot help but see the wholesale rejection of books on my campus as a rejection of the professoriate, and a rejection of professionalism more generally. We are a small campus in an industrial city in a sparsely-populated, resource-dependent province. It is becoming more and more clear that New Brunswick is an economic sacrifice zone, with the full complicity of our political leaders in obedience to their corporate bosses, and, it is clear, with the full complicity of the upper administration and the Board of Governors of the university. Young people in an economic sacrifice zone don't need books. The employer is not merely driven by the bottom line. These are policy decisions, part of the ongoing erosion of the public realm by the forces of neoliberalism. Henry Giroux explicitly ties the privatization of university services to the loss and restructuring of public space (446).

If I can leave the sorry tale of our bookstore, I'd like to use the time remaining to say a few things about other contracting out at UNB and make some gestures towards the future. There was a time when all university employees were considered to be performing public service (Brantlinger 2). I recently discovered that the company that has subcontracted for the cleaning at our campus deliberately rotates the workers between buildings in order to prevent them from developing relationships with those whose offices and labs they clean. To bring the point home, those same workers are forbidden to chat with university employees. No doubt there is some concern about the possibility of our tainting them with our unionist ideas; practically all non-managerial UNB employees are now unionized. But I think it is more straightforward. They

don't want people to know about the conditions under which their employees — formerly our employees — work.

A few years ago the woman who was the main cleaner in my building was diagnosed with cancer. She had no medical insurance connected to her work and no sick time; if she missed work, she didn't get paid. If she didn't get paid, she couldn't pay her rent. We raised over six thousand dollars for her in our building, so she was able to take the time off work to get her chemotherapy treatments and not lose her apartment. She kept her home until it was time for her to go into hospice care, because we knew her and offered support. Her name was Bridget. I couldn't tell you the name of the people who clean our building these days, they move through so quickly and, as I said, they aren't supposed to talk to us. If one of them received a terminal diagnosis or was at risk of losing their home, I'm not sure we would even know.

We were on strike this past January, for three weeks. We were locked out the next day, and classes were cancelled for the duration. But while we were out we heard about the workers in the cafeterias being laid off. On the Fredericton campus the cafeteria workers are employed by Sodexo and are unionized with CUPE, so we had a point of contact. Our union began a fundraising campaign and raised several thousand dollars over this past term and the workers were compensated for their lost wages. On the smaller campus, my campus, the food workers are not unionized and are employed by Chartwell's. A second fundraising campaign was announced as the first one was winding up. We heard rumours that the company was unhappy, but we have had no official word. This was the same company that implemented a no-tips policy for their workers at the campus Tim Horton's just as we got back to work, which we got turned around. They are apparently sensitive to anyone drawing attention to the low wages of their employees.

It's good that our members responded to the needs of these other workers. I trust that it was not just a symptom of the heady atmosphere of the strike. I suspect, if the bookstore closure had happened now, with our current heightened state of awareness, that it might have played out differently, but I don't know. But that awareness of the wider university community needs to be codified; it needs to be shaped into a "Living Wage" campaign so that campus workers are not beholden, are not dependent on the good will, the charity, of others. We are moving into a period when connections between academic unions are not enough. Connections between campus unions are not enough. We need those connections, of course, now more than ever. But on a modern campus, in this neoliberal landscape, if we are to maintain any sense of the campus as a discrete community, we need to organize more socially. That is the only way to connect with those working for outsourcing firms. Jane Willis writes,

Thus, just as the factory became emblematic of both employment and the labour movement in the twentieth century, despite the fact that only a minority the world's workers were ever engaged in factory employment, I contend that subcontracted employment relations are becoming paradigmatic today. Increasing numbers of workers are engaged in subcontracted employment relationships, and this is reconfiguring the nature of work. Subcontracted employment has significant implications for the conditions, experience, and politic of work. It is a particularly effective way for employers to cut costs, shed responsibility, increase flexibility, and disempower the workforce. (444)

For some time now academic unions have been reaching out to the wider labour movement. The next step is to go beyond trade unionism to embrace what has been called variously social

movement unionism, networked trade unionism, or community unionism (Wills 445).

I'd like to close with a gesture towards the Living Wage campaigns that have been so successful on a growing number of campuses on this continent and in the UK. These campaigns target the practice of outsourcing work to companies that pay below a living wage by building public awareness in order to effect university-wide Living Wage policies. I think that this may be the next step for us. I cannot help but note that many of these campaigns have happened at wealthy institutions such as Harvard and Swarthmore. Here in Canada there is a campaign at Simon Fraser. It would be interesting to explore the dynamics of a similar campaign in a depressed economy with high unemployment. Perhaps there will be a Part Two to this presentation, at a future meeting.

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