

Chapter Title: What Will You Make?

Book Title: Exploded Views

Book Subtitle: Speculative Form and the Labor of Inquiry

Book Author(s): Jonathan P. Eburne

Published by: University of Minnesota Press. (2025)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jj.18799912.8>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Minnesota Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Exploded Views*

What Will You Make?

What follows is the sole chapter in this book to have, in part, appeared previously in print. An exercise in “explosion” from the outset, it was written around the same time I began revisiting the other projects. “What Will You Make?” is a process-oriented meditation on opening a nonprofit bookstore, and like the other pieces gathered together in *Exploded Views*, it’s a revision of and reflection on earlier, unfinished work. There are, in fact, several abortive or incomplete projects wrapped up in this final chapter, but the core project is an ongoing one, and thus remains steadfastly open-ended. I started making noises about opening a bookstore over a decade ago, and I returned to the project in earnest during the Covid-19 pandemic. It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a very long time, and I’ll say more in what follows about why I think it’s so important for people like me to open bookstores and other kinds of cultural spaces.

But first I’m going to talk about the chapter’s genesis as a piece of writing. What follows began as an outline for a book proposing to document, step-by-step, the process of opening a bookstore in rural central Pennsylvania, where I live and teach. Then as now, I was enchanted by the way the proposition sounded: I was going to write a book about creating a bookstore. Beyond the reflexive charm of the sentence, I thought there might be some value in documenting the trials and tribulations of the process, especially since it’s not my day job. As I make sure to acknowledge in the article below, I teach literature; I am not an expert in bookstore management or nonprofit organizing. Documenting my steep learning curve would be interesting, I thought, precisely because I am *not* an expert in these fields. If I could figure out how to open a bookstore, then perhaps I could help others to do the same.

But a question soon arose: Did opening a bookstore really require writing a whole new book about the process? The answer was: No. There are plenty of other ways to gather and pass along real-world

experience, after all. The prospect of writing a book ultimately fell through. An occasion later arose, however, to write a short essay instead. In response to an invitation from Ranjan Ghosh to contribute to a “special focus” section of *The Minnesota Review* on the “Creative-Critical,” I revisited the propositional language I’d begun spinning out and realized how directly it spoke to the journal’s topic, or at least what I understood it to mean. I had originally planned on contributing a piece written with and about Laura Anderson Barbata, a brilliant transmedia artist who works on long-term, collaborative projects that play out in real time, in public settings.¹ Alas, Laura’s calendar made this plan (temporarily) impossible, so I turned to the bookstore idea, which explores a long-term real-world intervention that is at least somewhat reminiscent of her artwork. “This could work,” I thought. Even so, this choice has led to some of the least satisfying prose I’ve ever written, for reasons I will try my best to explain.

I’ll say a word here about the framework within which I wrote the article. My understanding of the “Creative-Critical” prompt was that it sought to blur the distinctions between two kinds of writing: “critical” writing, a category into which academic scholarship in the humanities tends to fall, and “creative” writing, which is presumably what artists and creative writers do. There’s no inherent incommensurability between these activities, which are only as oppositional as the processes of breathing in and breathing out. It’s hard to practice one without the other for any length of time. Yet their separation can become all but absolute in professional contexts, as the categories of “creative” and “critical” often become mutually exclusive when measured according to normative institutional, economic, and reputational criteria. What does it mean to unsettle the presumptions that go along with these terms, and thus to reckon with the many forms of research, labor, administration, financial obligation, training, know-how, and cultural production involved? That was my sense, at least, of what the *Minnesota Review* question was asking.²

My plan was to blow up the abandoned book outline into a meditation on this question, and I wished to do so in a way that didn’t simply purport to make scholarly writing look more like “creative writing.” Rather, I was interested in approaching the terms *critical* and *creative* as broadly and as naively as possible, as evolving processes rather than

established genres. That is, I wished to consider *creation* as something more than the manufacture of yet another collection of words, and instead as the aggregate result of research, labor, administration, financial obligation, training, know-how, and making—the kinds of work that creating a bookstore would involve. So too did I wish to disaggregate *criticism* from the sphere of written responses to cultural work, and instead to demonstrate how practices of analysis and judgment can take up residence in public space as a function of the same kinds of work that make creation possible.

There's a logical reason why I found the writing to be unsatisfying: according to these definitions, my article could never fulfill its own claims in textual form. The article's thesis points to an ecology of practices that extend beyond the page to include concrete actions in the real-life world of lived experience, on-the-ground organizing, and financial consequence.³ I find this proposition exhilarating, on the one hand; it rings true for me with that unnerving sense of utter obviousness that major realizations often bear. *Of course* there's more to it than writing, even for a literature professor. Much of the labor involved in teaching, after all, has to do with conjuring an atmosphere conducive to intellectual exchange. Why not take up such "conjuring" as a sustained project in its own right, building new sites for culture work beyond the walls of the university or other cultural institutions? My bookstore thesis designates the creation of "durable space" as a medium for critical and creative intervention.⁴

However exciting this proposition might be, it is nevertheless a nerve-racking one. For on the other hand, not only does it prescribe the fundamental insufficiency of text as a privileged medium for creative-critical work, but it also fundamentally alters the demands of participation. I get paid to write books; I do not get paid to make bookstores. Creating new real-world environments for the exchange of knowledge requires new real-world resources as well. I could certainly look to artists and writers who have opened bookstores and cultural spaces as models: Theaster Gates, Martha Wilson, Louise Erdrich, Lauren Groff, Marc Lamont Hill, and Anne Patchett. But these all seemed like high-profile examples, possibly helpful but certainly intimidating. What might the consequences of failure look like?

What, even, might the parameters of success look like? And perhaps most immediately: how could I possibly begin to carry this out?

My contribution to the *Minnesota Review* forum took the form of a question as well. As a vehicle for such concerns about the stakes of heeding a world beyond print, the question externalizes what I've often asked myself: "What will you make?" This question became the article's title, and it reflects the spirit of self-interrogation—and speculation—that animates the article, and this book, as a whole.

What Will You Make? The Bookstore as a Critical-Creative Act

"All organizing is science fiction."—Walidah Imarisha

The thesis of this article is a proposition that extends beyond its pages and directly concerns the life of its author. It is thus a proposition that makes me nervous. My thesis proceeds from the insistence that creative-critical practice take heed of the material, intellectual, and institutional environments that enable it. It may be commonplace to acknowledge how the real-world cultural spaces in which creative and critical work take place shape these pursuits, materially as well as ideologically. My proposition is that such spaces can serve as a medium for critical-creative work in turn. To organize, to build new institutions, to gather communities: working within and through real-world cultural environments constitutes a creative-critical practice in its own right. It both extends from and, I propose, also enables future iterations of critical-creative practice in other mediums, from text to performance, from film to visual and digital art.

What this means, in short, is I am starting a bookstore. As I write this article, I have begun to take the first steps toward opening a bookstore and arts space in my small town in rural Pennsylvania. They're small steps, so far, and this article is but one of them. Indeed, I am deeply aware of the fact that I cannot write the bookstore into existence; there are many, many other steps involved. This fact is what excites me most about the proposition. It's also what makes me the most nervous.

Reflecting on these opening lines over two years later, I find myself stumbling over the claim that writing an essay constitutes a "step" toward opening a bookstore. Sure, I admit that a brick-and-mortar storefront cannot be written into existence, but how could an essay

be considered as part of the process at all? One could split hairs in considering how much prose is required to found a nonprofit (in this case) entity, between mission statements, communications with volunteers and board members, fundraising appeals, and grant applications. And whereas there is a distinctly parliamentary quality to this kind of foundational work, this wasn't the point I wished to make. For me, the conceit of documenting the process served a mediating function, at once a forum for sounding out the endeavor and a kind of autobiographical pact committing my intentions to writing. This pact, in my case, substantiates the "science fiction" I attribute to Walidah Imarisha in the article's epigraph: the task of following through with a speculative undertaking.

When I moved to central Pennsylvania nearly twenty years ago, I was unsure about my precarious employment status, but I was, I thought, certain of two other things. The first was my commitment to literary criticism as a discrete intellectual endeavor, a realm of humanistic inquiry wholly distinct from artistic or administrative activity. The second was my assurance that I was not likely to remain in Pennsylvania for very long. It turns out that these certainties were fundamentally inverted: after teaching for eighteen years at the Pennsylvania State University, I find myself wholeheartedly committed to the intellectual and artistic life of the rural, postindustrial region where I live. Conversely, the cultural work I do has tended to stretch the domain of criticism to an almost unrecognizable degree of obliquity. My work today has less to do with interpreting texts than with creating meaningful environments for critical and creative dialogue within the living arts and related fields of knowledge and experience.

I am in the midst of planning a bookstore and arts space in my town, which is located at a far enough remove from the local university—thirteen miles—as to render academia all but hidden from view. There has not been a brick-and-mortar bookstore in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, for over a century. This absence persists in spite of the fact that Sylvia Beach was a frequent visitor to the town during the early years of the twentieth century, where she regularly visited her grandparents before moving to Paris and founding the iconic Shakespeare and Co. bookstore in 1919. The creation of a community-supported bookstore in this town

of six thousand people is more than a prospective literary landmark, however; it presents a way to draw together many of the culture workers, artists, and young people who live in the region but who are not necessarily affiliated with the university—and who are aching for further solidarity.

Beyond what I consider to be the public benefits of such a space, the project represents the culmination—as well as the extension—of my work as a scholar and teacher in the humanities. This project speaks, on the one hand, to the profound investments of cultural workers who dedicate themselves to inventing and sustaining new kinds of cultural institutions, whether nonprofit arts organizations, mutual aid networks, or entrepreneurial ventures. On the other hand, it approaches the formation of intellectual communities as a creative act unto itself—that is, a creative act consistent with the work of cultural analysis and critical thinking, rather than as a sphere of activity fundamentally alien to them. I am interested in the notion that to practice creative-critical work is to introduce the question: What will you make? I approach this question from the vantage-point of my orientation as a critic and writer—but especially from my orientation as a (white, settler, cis-het, employed) body in space. To put this otherwise: I've become increasingly aware that the medium in which I work is not just text, or print (as in the case of this article), but also and especially *space*.

I am fond of this assertion, which I credit to the scholar and artist Kevin Adonis Browne; in a conversation about his own artistic practice, Kevin referred to the bookstore I described to him as an art project in the medium of space. But if it *is* an artwork, then it is a motivated artwork, as I suggest in the next part of the article. For the kind of space I'm describing has become exceedingly rare, and painfully necessary, in a political environment hostile to so many forms of embodiment and so many forms of knowledge.

In what follows I outline an approach to creative-critical practice that reflects on what it means to engage in acts of experimental research-creation, when such experimentation extends to the very environments in which research-creation takes place. Whether they take the form of classrooms or libraries or galleries, parks or coffee shops,

kitchen tables or bookstore shelves, such environments comprise the medium of space in which I work. "Space" is far from an abstraction, however fragile, temporary, and provisional its function might be as creative or intellectually generative. It is a medium that describes the concrete physical and material coordinates of any *place*, as much as the sphere of encounters and transactions that unfold within and through them. What is most exciting about my proposition is therefore the most nerve-racking aspect of it as well: the imperative that creative-critical practice bear lived economic, temporal, and interpersonal investments and consequences alike.

I am not an expert on bookstore management, nonprofit organizing, or "arts entrepreneurship." I am writing this article precisely because I am not an expert in these fields. As a teacher and scholar, I am interested in what it means to foster intellectual community. What does this mean, exactly? I study avant-garde movements and other kinds of artistic and political collectives, and this interest in the real-life commitments of creative people simmers in me, as much as in many of the students I teach, as an inexhaustible point of interrogation. Even so, the gritty particulars of establishing a new brick-and-mortar site of intellectual exchange have remained largely foreign to me, as tends to be the case with many of my undergraduate and even graduate students in the humanities. So much of what I do involves setting up camp within existing infrastructures, whether in a classroom, a campus office, a coffee shop, or a scholarly network. What might it mean for humanist critics to place a greater emphasis on creating, rather than merely occupying, the kinds of environments that make intellectual life possible? I follow Kimberley Kinder's lead here in shifting my focus from institutionalized or provisionally occupied space to the construction of "durable spaces," long-term physical spaces where "people iteratively provide emotional, intellectual, and practical support," thereby creating "strategic venues for building trust, changing habits, and questioning norms."⁵

I take the liberty here of pausing to shill Kinder's book *The Radical Bookstore: A Counterspace for Social Movements*, which has served as a bible of sorts. I have given away so many copies that I've all but transformed this remarkable sociological study into agit-prop. What ultimately makes the book so important is how it treats radical bookstores

as real, historical entities with a concrete economic existence, and not as figments or aspirations.

The economic precarity of many independent artists and culture workers has long demanded the creation of new organizations as a necessary survival tactic within the capitalist cultural landscape, yielding pop-up galleries, art squats, radical bookstores, cooperative studio and living spaces, mutual aid practices, and independent publishing and distribution networks. Such survival tactics can evolve into fully fledged institutions committed to their own organizational self-preservation; but many autonomous organizations strive to resist the bureaucratic mission-creep of the Non-profit Industrial Complex.⁶ Performance artist Martha Wilson, founder of Franklin Furnace, understands the administration of such organizations instead as an art form. As Wilson explains in a recent interview:

I had complained to a friend who started an art space in Seattle, Anne Focke, who started a space called And/Or Gallery, . . . about how much time administration took away from being a practicing artist. She said to me, on the phone (this was 1978): “why can’t we consider administration to be a creative practice?” Ding! Like, oh! It’s true, because what you do as an artist is problem-solving. And what you do as an administrator is exactly the same: you do problem-solving. And if you don’t have the knowhow to do something, you find somebody else who can help you to figure it out.⁷

I take Wilson’s point here both as an encouragement—in recognizing administration as a creative act—and as an exhortation to gather knowhow rather than accumulate capital. So too can the administration of new, collaborative, autonomous cultural spaces comprise a sphere of intellectual resources additive to the existing landscape of universities, schools, libraries, museums, and other nonprofits. At the same time, soliciting “knowhow” finds its complement in the imperative to redistribute it. This is the very mission of Wilson’s Franklin Furnace, which continues to this day as an online archive and aggregator of funding opportunities and residencies for emerging artists.⁸ By this logic, “problem-solving” is as much a critical act as a creative one, to the extent that it amounts to redistribution of resources, whether knowledge,

labor, funding, or prestige. It can serve as groundwork for a prefigurative politics of culture work.

The challenge here is not the concept; it's the difficulty of carrying it out. I wrote about an earlier, waylaid attempt to launch a bookstore in my town for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in 2014, which documented my collaboration with a local historic preservation organization to save a nineteenth-century theatre damaged by fire.⁹ What had started out as an effort to start a cooperative bookstore ended up as a somewhat quixotic proposal for a community arts center. That campaign met its conclusion with the demolition of the theatre in the early hours of 2014. With this early attempt very much in mind, I wish to direct my attention here toward the question of what such an order of "making" demands. I am not proposing a career shift; the bookstore is an extension of my critical and creative work to date, not a substitution for it. The feasibility of any such extension is nonetheless deeply bound up in the risks—financial, temporal, emotional, relational—of undertaking it. My exploration of these risks is undergirded by real-time investigations into the process of making a creative-critical environment that can provide space for further creative-critical practice in turn. What does starting a bookstore demand, when approached not as a "business proposition" or lifestyle change but as a series of actions continuous with criticism and creativity? What resources does it demand, in terms of time, labor, capital, energy, frustration, friendship, commitment, persistence—and to what extent do these demands complement or compromise other forms of creative and critical work?

Though posed as a question (the titular "what will you make?"), the article so far is propositional. It outlines a plan of action that takes place beyond the printed page. All I can really argue for logically is that this plan of action be understood as "creative-critical." The rest is ultimately a matter of pointing: of gesturing in anticipation toward the kinds of work that the project will entail. Whether or not this pointing will result in a real-life bookstore is not in the article's—or this book's—power to determine.

I'm tempted to catalogue the litany of bookstore-related tasks I've put aside to write these reflections, and to comment on the feeling of tightness in my chest as I do so. I'm going to dwell instead, however,

on the conceit of the article as a kind of promissory note. The challenge, indeed, is not the concept, or the proposition, but the difficulty of carrying it out.

Then as now, this promissory gesture reminds me of the compositional method of Mr. Earbrass, the ridiculous, anvil-headed literary auteur who finds himself the protagonist of Edward Gorey's illuminated chapbook *The Unstrung Harp; or, Mr. Earbrass Writes a Novel* (1953). It's a marvelous little book that demystifies the labor of creation while still reveling in the absurdity of those myths. At once a prolific author and a failed writer (or vice versa) Mr. Earbrass wills his novels into existing by divining a title (in this instance, *The Unstrung Harp*) and only then, in response, writing the novel to which the title will belong. I can imagine Mr. Earbrass wrestling with a question similar to that of my article: "What will you make?" The title is the easy part. He chooses it at random from a list he keeps in a little green book.¹⁰ What follows is far more challenging: the *Sturm und Drang* of composition, the protracted tedium of revision, copyediting, and proofreading, and the various irritations and humiliations of a published author. Stumbling across an earlier publication in the remainder bin of the bookstores he visits while pontificating, Mr. Earbrass carries out his literary life with surges of inspiration and fits of existential angst. He is nonetheless something of a literary shaman. For me, he looms large as a spirit medium for the act of transforming empty intentionality into prose, however unsatisfying the results might be.

My own ambitions may stray beyond the printed page, but the prospect of authoring a bookstore in Bellefonte nonetheless resembles Mr. Earbrass's methods with an arresting degree of verisimilitude. First comes the title. And to be frank, I've long had a name in mind for the bookstore, making the process all the more consistent with *The Unstrung Harp*. The name my collaborators and I have come up with for the bookstore is "The Print Factory," based on the hope that the bookstore might someday house a printing press, and thus foster new literary activity in addition to trafficking in print. But again, as Mr. Earbrass's trials and tribulations suggest, the title is the easy part. The tricky part is—well, all the rest. In this regard, the published *Minnesota Review* article serves as little more than an extension of the title, still pointing to the work that remains to be carried out beyond

the page. As a fundamentally hopeful, if “nervous,” document, the article looks boldly forward in time; I even refer to it as one of the “steps” involved, naively conflating signifier with signified, as if the article itself were a conduit to the imminent labor of organizing and administration it anticipates.

Yet the article points backward in time as well. Consistent with its speculative, science-fictional premise, it casts about for useable histories and precedents as part of its scholarly undertaking. However obvious an observation this might be, it’s nevertheless an important one: plenty of other people have managed to carry out projects similar to the one I’m proposing. This doesn’t mean the work is easy; it just means that it’s possible. More dauntingly, though, the article’s backward glance is haunted by my own prior setbacks. This is neither my first attempt at opening a bookstore nor, for that matter, my first experience of writing about the frustrations of the process. The historic-preservation odyssey I recounted in the 2014 *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay still looms large in my imagination as a reminder of how far a project can stray from the “everyday utopia” it strives to become.¹¹ Moreover, much of the propositional language of the article (which, you may recall, I repurposed from a book outline), derives in turn from a variety of fellowship applications. Even my writing about the project amounts to a veritable shadow CV of bootless grant proposals. (A “shadow CV” is a neologism that refers to a documentation of one’s a history of rejections, rather than a resumé of accomplishments; its aim is to normalize and demystify the amount of rejection that occurs in academic life, especially for the benefit of early career scholars.)¹² There’s a lot of baggage here, and it comprises some of the less visible kinds of labor involved in the scholarly universe, as much as in critical-creative activity and local organizing. There’s more to it, however, than the emotional labor of stomaching rejection. (Mr. Earbrass’s discovery of his novel in the bargain-bin of *Mssrs. Scuffle and Dustcough*, *Booksellers* hardly precludes him from buying the copy.) For there is also the protracted timeline, the innumerable false starts and missteps, the iterative process of refining or rephrasing the words one uses to articulate the project. This is all part of the work. The sunken labor of prior efforts and iterations is as much a part of the project’s archive as the more public-facing signs of activity and

accomplishment, such as filing for 501(c)(3) status, opening a bank account, signing a lease, or scheduling a grand opening.

The animating tension between a future-oriented essay and a backward-facing archive of prior endeavors forms the basis of the next section of the article, which expands on its epigraph about “science fiction.”

1. Science Fiction / Fantasy

It's important to state this outright: I love bookstores. I love books, too, and I love libraries and reading rooms, but I am far more moved by the aggregate social phenomenon of a bookstore than I am by, say, the act of reading itself. All the same, I am aware of the extent to which this love is bound up in the trappings of consumption: I am one of those types of readers who seeks to purchase the physical objects that organize their passions—at least, to the extent that I can afford to do so. Bookstores, in this regard, are transactional. They are not automatically a public good, nor do they categorially offer a refuge from structural injustice and toxic behavior. Regardless of their intellectual appeal, bookstores still operate within a cultural landscape defined by contemporary norms and, in particular, consumer capitalism.

Why, then, am I proposing to open a bookstore and not a free space for book exchanges, say, or a lending library? First of all, I have no interest in opening another Barnes & Noble; my understanding of “bookstore” is a modified one, predicated not on the (fairly absurd) premise of selling books for profit, but instead on creating a physical, brick-and-mortar site in the center of town that can serve as a collective hub, resist gentrification, and *just happen* to display books available for purchase at a modest price. I propose, in other words, a “business model” consistent with prefigurative critiques of the contemporary marketplace: a community-supported, cooperative third place rather than an entrepreneurial endeavor. I discuss this at greater length below, but the booksellers I've interviewed have all insisted that a bookstore's function as a gathering-place precedes its function as a repository of books for purchase. When I spoke with Elaine Meder-Wilgus, who runs Webster's Bookstore Café in State College, Pennsylvania—the sole remaining independent bookstore in the immediate Centre County region—she lamented the loss of gathering places throughout the country, noting

that business owners have “turned the gathering places that we do have into very singular, event-based spaces.”¹³ Meder-Wilgus has multiplied this tendency rather than seeking to reverse it: Webster’s is not only a bookstore and café, but it also houses a small record store and vintage clothing boutique and hosts events, performances, meetings, and clubs on a daily basis. The point is to ensure that people can gather with different and variable sets of expectations; a bookstore exemplifies but does not, in itself, guarantee such expectations.

I have known Elaine for over twenty years; when I arrived in the region in the early 2000s, her bookstore, Webster’s, was the last of the independent bookshops that had once proliferated in downtown State College, Pennsylvania, where the university is located. By the time I arrived, all the other bookstores had closed.

Yet even Webster’s has faced severe trials of its own. It lost its lease on the main commercial street and reopened in the basement of a nearby building; on account of this involuntary relocation, the business was saddled with debt, and was even at one point threatened by a kind of mutiny from within, when a former employee attempted to lay claim to the bookstore’s future. Throughout all of this, Elaine has always been a wise and profoundly patient mentor, willingly interested in my long-gestating schemes about launching a possible sister store in Bellefonte. When I sat down with her for a formal interview in 2021, I strongly recall thinking to myself, “*this* time I really mean it.”

One piece of good news: subsequent to the publication of my article, a new independent bookstore opened in State College called *The Squirrel and the Acorn*. Its owner and sole employee, Andrew Aschwenden, has also been a great source of inspiration and advice.

Second, the fact that a bookstore necessarily participates in the sphere of capitalism and local zoning, governance, and finance is fundamental to its significance. Like other commercial sites, bookstores are part of a broader set of physical and cultural environments of the town, city, district, or strip mall where they take up shop. They are likewise part of the commercial and cultural and intellectual infrastructure of a geographical region. Yet the meaning of bookstores has everything to do with their capacity (or incapacity) to suspend, however temporarily,

the reigning logics of the marketplace—and the extent to which they crowd, complicate, or, at best, foster alternatives to the dominant cultural norms these logics uphold (whiteness, heteronormativity, neurotypicality, affluence, Anglocentrism). Any collection of books is a speculative endeavor; as material objects they can be bought and sold, or admired for their design or scarcity, much like any other commodity. But their capacity to be read—or not read—opens up to a sphere of encounter, discourse, disagreement, reflection, and imagination for which they serve as a medium, however temporarily or provisionally.¹⁴ Books themselves are the site of all kinds of exchanges, commercial and otherwise. They are sites, in short, of commerce. (The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy published a short book some years ago titled *On the Commerce of Thinking* [2009] expounding on the possibilities of this term.)¹⁵ Bookstores, in turn, multiply the real and potential spheres of exchange. On account of such multifarious orders of commerce, bookstores reside at the intersection between knowledge and materiality, pleasure and meaning, different orders of social experience, as well as different classes and comportments of people.

However fanciful this might sound, it is not idealistic to claim that bookstores bear the capacity for their human and nonhuman inhabitants to *become* something else, even in spite of themselves. What is far more challenging, however, is the work of maintaining any such “capacity to become” in practice, because the minutiae of operating this kind of public space are grounded in an unflagging capacity to fail. And there is so much failure out there, so many dead-ends and disappointments.

Over the past year I have been speaking with booksellers and meeting with local organizers and community members in my town; I was delighted to encounter two part-time booksellers who were interested in the possibility of developing a brick-and-mortar space as well as collaborating with me and each other. They both shared a vision of a bookstore and cultural space that could offer a refuge and safe space for under-served or marginalized people in the region. Both booksellers owned small businesses that operated as vendors in local antiques malls: one sold secondhand copies of contemporary fiction; the other sells children's books. Working with them, whether together or separately, was a mutually advantageous arrangement, as I would be willing

to undertake a significant fundraising initiative and contribute labor. Since I have a day job with the university, my interest lies in enabling rather than single-handedly “authoring” the creation of intellectual space. Collaboration is essential.

The secondhand-fiction bookseller, a former high-school English teacher, went back to school this past fall, thereby deferring some of their brick-and-mortar aspirations. And then their marriage ended, prompting an abrupt shift in priorities and an imminent relocation to another state. Not all the pressures on creating intellectual space are financial ones. My collaboration with the children’s bookseller likewise reached a detour, when their precarious life conditions—including long Covid and severe, chronic health issues in their immediate family—prompted a move to the dryer, warmer Southwest. By the time this article goes to press, I hope that there will be more to say about some of the other collaborations that have come to light in the meantime.

These last sentences were especially hard ones to write. When I began working on the piece in response to Ghosh’s *Minnesota Review* invitation, these partnerships were still very much in play. We had even reached the point of drafting articles of incorporation and were beginning to look at real estate. The life situations of my two working partners changed almost overnight. Even as I was writing about the project and espousing the significance of making things and crafting durable spaces, the reality of the bookstore itself suddenly seemed quite far away for all three of us.

The form of research-creation in which I have begun to participate is neither an abstraction nor a fantasy—nor does it amount to a bankable form of “realism,” according to the logical parameters of late capitalism. Rather, it unfolds as the work of speculation: a set of concrete steps toward the not-yet-known. An early lesson toward undertaking a project of this scale came from an artist friend of mine, who described their own creative process as the realistic, deeply pragmatic undertaking of an outlandish proposition. “How,” they asked, “might one build a zip line to the moon?” This was quite literally an outlandish proposition. But leaving the outlandishness aside for a moment—and this was my friend’s point—the question remains: how would one start building such a thing?

Speculation is not fantasy; it is a thought-experiment grounded in praxis, in making. At the very least, a zip line to and from the moon would probably require some sort of track that could circle the earth, to account for the moon's orbit. Whether realized in plastic or textual form—or in technological form—the imaginative process demands reckoning with the practical aspects of creation, as well as its worldly effects and consequences.

My understanding of speculation here alludes to Walidah Imarisha's claim that the world-creation to which activists and organizers dedicate amounts to the critical-creative practice of science fiction, insofar as this work suspends and reimagines dominant narratives of power.¹⁶ Imarisha's claim comes from her introduction to the speculative-fiction anthology *Octavia's Brood* (2015), where it refers most immediately to the social justice work and creative writing of Black women. The financial understanding of speculation, which designates the practice of risking initial investment for future profit, is both embedded in and superseded by Imarisha's "science fiction," in the sense that the risks of world-making are far greater than monetary loss alone, but also bodily, mortal, historical. I nonetheless consider Imarisha's sentence to signify absolutely: *all* organizing is science fiction, but this is especially the case for organizing that seeks to create new worlds and reimagine dominant narratives of power. And this is the kind of science fiction I am invested in supporting and understanding.

The science fiction of creating intellectual space may be anathema to the devil's advocacy of capitalist realism, but it is no less deeply invested in pragmatic and material concerns. Consider what starting and operating a bookstore involves, the procedures required to organize, plan, finance, stock, staff, and operate it, from first premise to physical premises. The steps involved range from questions about location, scale, and relation to the community it serves, to questions about who will be interested, willing, and able to collaborate in the project. One must attend not only to sources of income and start-up finance but also to organizational and managerial practices, as well as contractual, legal, zoning, and liability considerations. Such pragmatic demands begin to address the fundamental question embedded within my approach to creative-critical practice, which is to understand what it means to traverse the boundary between the hypothetical and the actual.

Unsurprisingly, organizing of this kind isn't usually something that happens in isolation. In the coming months and, hopefully, years, I will continue to document the collaborations and conversations involved in these science-fictional first steps. Drawing on conversations with bookstore workers I have known, or whom I contact as I learn the ropes—including workers at leftist and anarchist bookshops, LGBTQ bookshops, Black-owned bookshops, and other small, independent booksellers of used and new books—I am especially interested in discovering how this process translates into concrete decisions and steps in the formation of the new bookstore. In turn, by documenting the processes of researching and laying the organizational foundations for the bookstore, I aim not only to help create a bookstore in my town, but also to develop practical tools for passing along shared, collective knowledge about this kind of creative-critical work.

You may have noticed that these final sentences sound a bit like they came from a grant proposal, which in fact they did. I could say more here about how closely a grant proposal resembles a work of science fiction.¹⁷ I wish to stress instead how closely the residual prospective language of grant applications and book pitches approximates the fundamental messiness of my approach to opening a bookstore (as much as to the staggered, digressive process of exploding a scholarly project). What, I wonder, is a “practical tool”?

Unlike its name, “The Print Factory” is anything but a *sui generis* achievement. After all, it doesn't even exist—at least, not yet. There's a website, an EIN (employer identification number), and even a lease on a storefront in downtown Bellefonte, but the building has been undergoing extensive renovations for over a year. Sometimes colleagues ask me, “How's that bookstore going?” or “is it open yet?” (As this book goes to press, The Print Factory inches ever closer to reality, with its timeline almost uncannily correlative to the scholarly writing process.) I always find myself searching for the appropriate tone for a response—reassuring them that all is well, while also disabusing them of any false sense of finality.

The Print Factory thus offers an object-lesson in dispelling whatever heroic ideas about “the creative” and “the critical” I might continue to harbor. Science fiction is not fantasy, and a bookstore cannot

simply be conjured, however readily the *concept* of opening a bookstore might come to mind or however urgently an intellectual refuge and safe space might be needed in a rural town like mine. But there is conjuring all the same. Beyond the administrative ins and outs of nonprofit management and local ordinance, there are jobs, time commitments, and families to negotiate, my own as well as those of my collaborators. Our project did not begin with a wheelbarrow full of startup capital or a throng of investors. Long construction delays meant that two board members who had planned to manage the brick-and-mortar storefront had to move on to other jobs. The Print Factory is, for the foreseeable future, an all-volunteer initiative. Should The Print Factory come fully into existence, it will have been very much an act of collective authorship.

I take solace from Kinder's recognition that, even for radical booksellers, "the compromises required to build alternatives within real-world constraints thwart aspirational purities."¹⁸ Such compromises, endemic to working within a late-capitalist economic system, invariably "lead to disappointments and failures," as well as political and interpersonal tensions. Kinder upholds the importance of "constructive activism" through the founding of nonnormative cultural environments, but she reminds her readers that "alternative norms and contentious practices do not unfold evenly in space." Again, I take solace from this acknowledgement. "Incompleteness," she writes, "has benefits, not just liabilities."¹⁹ I consider this to be essential wisdom for persisting through the messy, ever-incomplete pragmatics of operating a bookstore or counterspace of any kind.

The next section of the article addresses the "compromise" represented by bookstores themselves. It thus shifts momentarily away from the pragmatics of collaborative organization to meditate on the ways in which bookstores themselves organize and administrate the ways people engage with and through them.

2. Self-Help

Bookstores operate at a kind of crossroads, the meeting point between two worlds that often presume to thrive on their distance from one another. One might even say that they *comprise* such a crossroads: on the one axis is the world of the marketplace and all it represents. This is the

material axis; it extends from the world of publishing to all the other operations of commerce and consumption, accumulation and distribution, buying and selling. On the other axis is the world of letters and ideas, of knowledge and all this represents in turn. This axis might thus be considered the intellectual or even spiritual axis, the axis that stretches from Orphic underworld to invisible truths—but also from past to future, from the historical to the speculative. And oh, how ideal this second axis sounds. The books in bookstores might likewise be described in an analogous fashion, as paper machines that possess bound and printed (or electronic) forms, but which open up linguistically to concepts, knowledge, and story-worlds that transcend the here and now. Mind you, there are likely just as many terrible books as there are terrible people, and I've spent time in bookstores containing plenty of both.

All the same, to the extent that this crossroads logic rings true, I propose that bookstores multiply such material-spiritual conjugations to a virtual infinity. For not only can the books themselves be purchased by any number of individuals and added to any number of respective libraries and knowledge-hoards, but so too must bookstores themselves manage the daily ballast of material tasks necessary to sustain an operating business. In order to provide a space for the marvelous, they have to be practical, everyday. This is true whether the business takes the form of a multinational corporation or an anarcho-socialist collective. There's buying as well as selling to be done, not to mention ordering, stocking, staffing, accounting, organizing; sorting, storing, cataloging; programming author events and other activities; administering online sales and distribution, and thus, too, packing and mailing; and so forth.

Creating a bookstore and cultural space demands taking stock of the meaning and value of such places in a knowledge economy that has not yet, thank heavens, fully managed to kill them off entirely. What a bookstore is—or rather, does—has much to do with its survival. For many people, bookstores function as a “third place.” That is, they are neither homes nor workplaces, but something else—unless, of course, one's workplace or place of residence happens to be a bookstore. The existence of such third spaces is hardly a self-evident phenomenon. As the continued existence of new spaces and mutual-aid networks attests, the constitution of such spaces from within the very sphere of consumer capitalism is—for many—a political or spiritual lifeline. In the case of

radical bookstores, they can even function as “a counterspace for social movements,” as Kimberley Kinder puts it in her recent study *The Radical Bookstore*, spaces that operate “in parallel with normative spaces without necessarily attacking or supplanting them.”²⁰ At the very least, they present places in which one might prefer to spend one’s time.

Creative-critical practice of the order I am describing here is thus persistently speculative, in the sense that it strives actively to generate and reproduce further possibilities. “We discover ourselves and each other by accident, sometimes,” Meder-Wilgus explains, likening the potentialities of a bookstore as a cultural space to the ways people *use* bookstores. Describing the college students who visit her bookstore—Webster’s is located in the university town of State College, Pennsylvania—Meder-Wilgus notes how important it is to relearn the skills and habits involved in such acts of discovery:

Their expectation of how to behave in a bookstore is lacking, sadly. I think some of them have never truly experienced one—they were not raised with a bookstore in the area that they lived. They did not go to bookstores; they bought things online or maybe they went to a library. So I’ll either see one of two reactions: they walk in and don’t know if they can make noise, which is why we always have music playing. But otherwise they think of the staff here as librarians because they’ve only ever asked for a book, or gone to—I don’t even know if they had card catalogs right now. The bookstore, we’re a teaching place. To me, from my point of view as a bookstore, the greatest tragedy: the loss of using our brains just to browse. That, to me, is just awful. I’ll go out on a limb and say that it’s similar to people not knowing how to go into nature and just be there, letting go; it’s analogous to the art of browsing, letting all this information come in.²¹

To let the “information come in,” as Meder-Wilgus puts it, requires sustaining and multiplying the kinds of safe environments in which browsing, “letting go,” can take place and become habitual.

What is particularly exciting—and rare—about bookstores, as a number of my friends have pointed out, is that they’re a place you can go to talk with other people about objects of mutual interest: poetry, comics, cookbooks, music, trivial subjects, cosmic speculations. You’re

allowed to talk about such things; you're *supposed* to talk about such things, and especially to ask questions, since there's an underlying commercial logic for doing so. At the same time, you're not required to say anything at all; it's not a classroom. Nor is it a utopia. There is no shortage of close talkers, mansplainers, poseurs, creepers, stragglers, potential stalkers. One is perpetually reminded that not all socialization is social; some people, like some books, are generally to be avoided. Yet this non-utopian capacity is precisely what makes bookstores so significant. We approach the future—in the most hopeful senses of possibility, freedom, community—only through a messy tangle of intermediaries. Bookstores multiply such intermediaries, from words on the page to the tangible forms of the bound codex or stapled pamphlet; from the physical spaces in which books are displayed and sold (and sometimes pilfered) to the financial systems and distribution networks necessary for renting and filling the stores themselves; from the spectacle of infinite knowledge to the bodily specificity of the slightly smelly person standing next to you near the philosophy section.

I had nobody particular in mind when I wrote about the “slightly smelly person” in the philosophy section; it’s a common enough stock character in virtually every bookstore-related memoir, guidebook, or story I’ve read. That figure is really just a stand-in for the broader “tangle of intermediaries” that make bookstores so invaluablely messy, as places characterized by browsing and juxtaposition.

For me, however, there’s a further entanglement. It warrants noting again that I’m conducting this project both in addition to and in spite of my job as a university literature professor. This compromise is one of the messiest aspects of the project, and if nothing else, it does indeed tend to thwart any aspirational purities to which I might otherwise become susceptible.

I’m still working out how to manage the temporal entanglements, as well as the financial and ethical minutiae involved, but here’s a short answer: Since opening and running bookstores is not my day job, I have instead been looking for ways to stretch my day job to accommodate it. In this manner of compromise, I have been strongly influenced by the aptly titled *How to Make Art at the End of the World*. Published by Natalie Loveless in 2019, this book rethinks how creative work

functions within the institutional environments of North American research universities. I have picked up Loveless's use of the term "research-creation" to describe a hybrid practice of transdisciplinary creation that puts pressure on normative criteria for intellectual work. As Loveless writes, research-creation "demands a reconfiguration of standard academic pedagogical training and assessment practices, what we permit our professors and students to do and know."²² I'd love for such language to be helpful on the university end of things, but I refuse to let the bookstore become a satellite of the university. I've been hoping, on the contrary, to channel university resources into the community.

I don't yet know whether my involvement with the bookstore has reconfigured my own classroom performance in any meaningful way, but many of the undergraduate students I've spoken to about it are excited by what it represents. Like Loveless, I maintain some pretty high hopes for the ways in which creating space for community-based education can make literary studies feel more firmly grounded in extra-curricular life, while also fostering the cultural life of the town where I live. In the meantime, Loveless's ideas about research-creation propose how meaningful critical-creative work can be carried out in local communities through a renegotiation of university standards and resources, rather than in spite of them. I don't necessarily consider this to be a generalizable principle, since universities are far from a universally available source of financial and cultural capital. But given where I live and work, the university is a fact of life. It remains to be seen whether such protocols are in fact renegotiable. But in my case, at least, reconfiguring or bending academic protocols outlines a ready course of action for The Print Factory.

I'm also aware that there are far more radical approaches to this kind of undertaking. One would be to grit my teeth, quit my day job, and devote myself full-time to the creative-critical formation of intellectual space in central Pennsylvania. Is this not one of the factors driving my opening claim of "nervousness" in the article? Such a totalizing shift in livelihood might make for a compelling personal odyssey, but it is hardly a reproducible model. The financial status of The Print Factory is almost comically modest; there's no budget to underwrite a career change, whether for me or for anyone else. The

whole point of this experiment, after all, is to encourage the foundation of more bookstores—and more counterspace for intellectual exchange—not to prescribe an existential overhaul as a criterion of possibility. Another voice in my ear is the authorial whisper of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who, by contrast, strongly advocate sticking to my day job. In *The Undercommons* they propose a more radical ethos for dealing with universities and other neoliberal institutions: the only possible relationship to a university today, they write, is a criminal one.²³ What I take this to mean, in part, is that I will never convince the university that my project is anything other than a waste of time, at best. I'm willing to live with that. The other sense of "criminality" has to do with the fact that there's always an unequal exchange of labor going on; I am not tenuously employed, but so many other people are. What resources are available to our community project that might not otherwise be forthcoming?

Things are looking up, all the same. As this book goes into production, I can now walk through the beautifully renovated storefront, mere days from completion; we can begin building shelves shortly after the landlord's builders leave. I'm now working with a tertiary iteration of The Print Factory's core team of collaborators. This group includes: my fabulous colleagues Dara Walker, a historian; Mandisa Haarhoff, a literary scholar and playwright; Andrea Miller, a telecommunications scholar; Kathy Pletcher, an administrator and fellow Bellefonte resident with whom I previously collaborated on a campaign to retire the local high school mascot; Barrett Marshall, a former civil rights lawyer who works as an educational consultant; and Oliver Baker, a literary scholar and activist. Until very recently, our group also included Elena Quiñones, the longest-tenured member of The Print Factory team, who was involved in the project for over two years and has been instrumental to its evolution; Elena stepped down earlier this summer after making a career shift. Like Elena, and like me, everyone involved in The Print Factory is a volunteer, which means that everyone is managing other work, other life responsibilities. Call it criminal, openhanded, or simply messy, but a significant part of the sunken labor required for our collective research-creation project involves marshalling the resources and privileges of our day jobs as much as possible toward supporting the bookstore. For this

reason it also involves remaining vigilant about our expenditure of time and effort. How can we ensure that the onus of volunteer labor does not fall heavily on any one person, or compromise anyone's well-being? How can we continue to steal time from our jobs, so that it does not get stolen back in turn?

3. Current Events

A bookstore is not a neutral environment, as much as the corporate takeover of the market throughout the 1980s and 1990s tried to make them *feel* neutral, by featuring fewer books and more coffee shops, reading spaces, games and toys, and bargain tables. In shopping malls and, later, in big-box outlets, firms such as Barnes & Noble, Borders, FNAC, Waterstones, Indigo, Dymocks, Weltbild, and of course Amazon.com have sought to smooth out the idiosyncrasies of individual vendors, the surfeits and lacunae of booksellers who lack the expediciencies of a fully networked supply chain. Even so, everything in a bookstore signifies. It signifies no less intensively than the architectural features of any temple or church, or the product placement in any franchise supermarket: each title, each virtual pathway from bestseller to bargain-bin, manifests an open set of decisions, expectations, and interactions.

As the foundation for my creative-critical practice, rendering such sites legible is only the beginning of a more entrenched process. Whether one knows it or not, something always happens, or not-happens, in these places. Even at the most grimly antiseptic remainder outlet, it's still possible to loiter, to leaf, to browse, to take up temporary residence. There might not appear be much of a difference between browsing books in public and browsing for books online from the (presumed) comfort of one's own home. But, then again, one's home is not always a comfort. By contrast, no matter how dreary a bookstore might be, there's still almost always a possibility of taking refuge there. Just start looking at the shelves. The calculated probability that spending hours in a bookstore tends to yield stronger book sales can never fully determine how much time or enjoyment you might squander there, regardless of whether or not you decide to buy something. That calculated probability is why commercial bookstores tend to feature cafés; but they do not and cannot calculate how much you might need to spend time in them, or how much you might come to rely on them. Many people manage to create

their own bookstores, to hollow out their own third spaces, from the resources they have at hand.

My own creative-critical work of bibliophile research-creation involves the practical steps of setting in motion, while also seeking better to understand, the processes at work in the life-worlds of a bookstore. As the project evolves, I will continue to reflect not only on how the intellectual environments created through books, browsers, readers, and culture workers are shaped by their own local conditions, but also on how they shape, resist, and are further shaped in turn by how people use them. And it's not only people who take up temporary residence in such environments; as a massive (science fictional) undertaking, it remains unflaggingly significant to attend to how impersonal market forces and other nonhuman agents interact with these environments.

I remain actively engaged in the process of starting a bookstore in Bellefonte, and the project is an ongoing, staggered, and open-ended one. Regardless of whether my bookstore project yields a success story or a moral lesson—regardless, that is, of whether it ends in tragedy, failure, or farce—my hope is that this article speaks to the deep, if speculative, investments demanded by creative-critical cultural work, as well as what it means to pursue critical-creative work in the medium of space.

The published article ends with a sort of ellipsis: What happens next? You'll have to wait and see.

This leaves me at something of an impasse now, however, since I first began writing these concluding lines on the same day as I replied to copyediting queries for the *Minnesota Review* publication. Unlike the other projects exploded for this book, no significant amount of time has passed between the initial text and the exploded marginalia—at least, not in terms of publication calendars. This timeline has lengthened during the publication process of *Exploded Views*.

Thus I could go on writing, but doing so would not advance the timeline of the bookstore project in any meaningful way. As I write these lines, The Print Factory is closer to existing than it was when I edited the closing lines of the *Minnesota Review* article, but for the moment, we have yet to move into the building. I have about thirty boxes of donated books in the garage, along with a neon sign that

says “books.” Yet even after another year or so, the question remains: “How’s that bookstore going?”

It is tempting to imagine a narrative convention whereby I could report on advances in the project, perhaps in diary form, as the text of this chapter goes through its own subsequent phases of revision and publication. We’ve located a site! We’ve just built the shelves! And now we’ve opened the doors! Wouldn’t it be marvelous if, after a brief section break, The Print Factory could suddenly have sprung into existence, as if cobbled together overnight by little elves?

Even Mr. Earbrass knows that such stories do not write themselves.