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Between Refusal and Refuge. Queer Feminist Bookstore Savannah Bay

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ABSTRACT

Feminist bookstores have played an important role in the creation of feminist spaces since the end of the 20th century. In the Netherlands, Savannah Bay is one of the last remaining in a previous network of feminist bookstores. This article explores how the bookstore manages to uphold its function as a feminist space while operating in relative isolation. The data used for this analysis consists of a series of interviews with volunteers working at Savannah Bay. This data is analysed via Bonnie Honig's *Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), which connects three forms of feminist resistance within one arc of feminist refusal. Crucial to this arc is the circular movement where the women first leave the city, then organise a new way of living, and then return to the city to implement their ideas. By reading the experiences of Savannah Bay volunteers via Honig's theory of refusal, this article analyses how the bookstore manages to uphold a feminist space while being embedded in a predominantly patriarchal public sphere. It demonstrates the complex ways in which Savannah Bay continuously negotiates its relationship to the customers and volunteers it caters for on the one hand, and a patriarchal public sphere which it seeks to reform on the other hand. Additionally, this reading extends and nuances Honig's theoretical approach by relating it to empirical data, which raises questions about the conditions for fulfilling Honig's feminist arc of refusal, and about the relations between the various moments on the arc.

Keywords: feminist, queer, refusal, bookstores, counterpublics, Bonnie Honig

INTRODUCTION

> 'even when refusal seems to reject the world, it betrays a deep attachment to it, if not to the world as it is, then surely to a more just world that is not yet.' (Honig, 2021: 3)

It is well-documented that feminist bookstores, magazines, printing presses, and publishing houses played an important role in the feminist activism of the end of the 20th century (often called second wave feminism). Nancy Fraser describes the 'variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places' as the most striking example of an alternative public sphere in her famous critique of Habermas (Fraser, 1990: 67). Building upon the work of Gayatri Spivak, she understands these extensive networks of feminist thought and action as *subaltern counterpublics,* existing alongside and in opposition to the mainstream democratic public sphere.

The specific role of feminist bookstores in North America is explored by Kristen Hogan in *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* (2016). Hogan focuses on bookstores not as isolated places, but as connected organisations sustaining relational practices of accountability among bookwomen in the US. In the Netherlands the role of books, magazines, and publishing presses has also been documented: for instance, Jann Ruyters (1993) describes the landscape of Dutch feminist magazines; Gloria Wekker recalls the importance of finding Audre Lorde's book *Zami* in a Rotterdam bookstore for the organisation of the black, migrant and refugee women's movement (Frank, 2019); Marja Vuijsje (2018) centres her recollection of the feminist movement around the feminist books that she found discarded on flea markets and by the roadside; and Marijke Huisman (2016) focuses on feminist publishing collective *Uitgeverij Sara* as a case study for writing inclusive histories. Recent exhibitions such as *Feminist Design Strategies* and *Gerse Vrouwen* and the online interview series *In conversation with the Black, Migrant and Refugee women's*

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movement shed light on the activist infrastructures of feminist organising in the late 20th century in the Netherlands.[1] They mark what Gieseking (2020) calls the 'constellations,' networks of orientation points that include people, events, publications, and places, of feminist and queer lives.

Dozens of women's bookstores opened their doors in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s, bearing names such as *De Feeks ('The Hag'), Dulle Griet ('Silly Broad'), Dikke Trui ('Fat Trudy'), Sappho, 't Wicht ('The Wench'),* and *Xantippe*. The oldest one is the only one still in existence as a feminist bookstore: *Savannah Bay* in Utrecht. Named after Marguerite Duras' play, Savannah Bay is an independent bookstore in the centre of Utrecht, the Netherlands. It first opened its doors under the name *De Heksenkelder* (*'The Witches' Cellar'*) in 1975 as the first feminist bookstore in the Netherlands, initiated by Dorelies Kraakman and Sylvia Bodnár. Marischka Verbeek became the owner in 1997. She opened the bookstore to a wider audience and Savannah Bay became a general bookstore with feminist literature as its specialty. In the early 2000s, many feminist spaces in the Netherlands went online or closed their doors. Savannah Bay continued to exist and survived what its owner Marischka Verbeek called a 'long feminist winter'[2] (in Huisman *et al.*, 2019: 63[3]). Whereas at the end of the 20th century, Savannah Bay was one star in a larger constellation of the feminist movement, in the past 20 years it has been a more isolated refuge for feminist and queer stories. Although Savannah Bay never functioned in complete isolation, it clearly no longer operates in the cooperative network of feminist spaces that is emphasised in most of the literature on feminist bookstores. Instead of relating to a broader network of feminist bookstores and other like-minded spaces, Savannah Bay now primarily faces a public sphere that remains predominantly patriarchal. How then, does this bookstore still function as a feminist space? How does it continue to serve the queer feminist community while navigating the patriarchal public sphere in which it needs to maintain itself?

If existing theory locates the political potential of feminist spaces in the counterpublics that they form in relation to each other, it seems as if a relatively isolated space like Savannah Bay lacks this potential. It might even appear as an apolitical refuge for a specific subculture. But we argue that this view does not do justice to the roles that Savannah Bay plays in the city and lives of clients and volunteers. We propose that Bonnie Honig's recent *Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021) helps understand how Savannah Bay continues to function as a queer feminist space in Utrecht in the absence of a strong network of feminist bookstores. Honig's theory allows us to see Savannah Bay's practices as moments of feminist refusal and attunes us to the possibility that these practices are part of a political struggle for feminist futures. At the same time, the specific context of Savannah Bay raises several theoretical questions for Honig.

A Feminist Theory of Refusal connects three forms of feminist resistance within one arc of feminist refusal. Honig draws these three moments of refusal from her feminist retelling of Euripides' classical Greek play *Bacchae*, where they correspond to three stages in the tragedy. The women in the *Bacchae* first refuse their dedicated roles in the city. They then move out of it, to the mountain Cithaeron, where they dance, eat, rest, and eventually kill the king. But Honig stresses that they do 'not stay on Cithaeron: it is one stop on a larger arc of refusal' (2021: xii). Her feminist understanding of refusal includes the three concepts of inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation that together form refusal's arc. In the third move, the *Bacchae* women return to the city. Honig speculates that their return aims to claim the city to 'make their freedom permanent' (2021: 95). Our analysis of Savannah Bay contributes to Honig's theory by emphasising the interdependency between the city and practices of refusal, and by raising questions about the relations between the three moments: what material conditions need to be fulfilled for the arc of refusal to truly lead to feminist futures?

METHODOLOGY

In this article, we use Honig's theory of refusal as a conceptual framework to analyse a set of interviews with the people who work at Savannah Bay and for whom the store serves as a cornerstone in their queer feminist lives. This data was collected in the context of Savannah Bay's 35th anniversary, when a group of academics came together to write a communal history of Savannah Bay. One of the authors of this article, an active volunteer at Savannah Bay since 2018, was connected to this project and conducted a series of 11 interviews with contemporary volunteers to understand the role the bookstore plays in their (feminist) lives (Huisman *et al.*, 2019: 197–222).

[1] *Feminist Design Strategies* is one room of the exhibition *Designing the Social,* at *Het Nieuwe Instituut* in Rotterdam. https://ontwerpvanhetsociale.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/feminist-design-strategies; *Gerse Vrouwen* explores the women's movement in Rotterdam was organized in 2021 by Dig it Up and Dona Daria in Rotterdam; Atria, 'In gesprek met de Zwarte, Migranten-en Vluchtelingenvrouwenbeweging.' (February 2022) https://atria.nl/nieuws-publicaties/feminisme/feminisme-20e-eeuw/in-gesprek-met-zwarte-migranten-en-vluchtelingen-vrouwenbeweging/.

[2] See Wekker (2016) for a discussion on the impacts of political re-organisations and financial cutbacks in the social sector on feminist movements in the Netherlands during this period.

[3] Much of the historical information in this article is based on the research conducted for this commemorative book, marking Savannah Bay's 35th anniversary in 2019 (Huisman *et al.*, 2019).

Participants were recruited via an email addressed to all active volunteers in this period. Additionally, the owner of the bookstore was interviewed.[4] In preparation for the interviews, participants used mapping methodology to draw an image of the bookstore indicating the lay-out of the space. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2019 in the bookstore itself by this same author. The participants were asked to reflect on the lay-out of the store (both via a walk through the space and via their drawing) and then answered questions on their personal connection to the store, the feminist function of the store, and the store as a place for community building. By focusing on the experiences and ideas of the volunteers we want to acknowledge both the important role that Savannah Bay plays in the lives of these people and the formative work that these volunteers do for the upkeep and continued reshaping of the bookstore. Below, we model the analysis of our data around Honig's three-part theory via the concepts of inoperativity/intensification, inclination, and fabulation.

REFUSAL 1: INOPERATIVITY AND INTENSIFICATION

In Euripides' play, the *Bacchae* starts when the women of Thebes use the arrival of Dionysus, god of wine and theatre, as an opportune moment to leave the city. They abandon their work, refuse to return to their looms and households, and join the Dionysian rituals. The king, Pentheus, imprisons some of the women but they escape and leave the city for Cithaeron. The key point for Honig's first step of refusal is based on the women putting down their work and leaving the city. Honig connects this moving away, this interruption of (re)productivity, with the concept of 'inoperativity' as she draws it from Giorgio Agamben's discussion of Bartleby's famous formula 'I prefer not to'. Criticising Agamben for his primary focus on the suspension and pure passive potentiality of becoming useless, of refusing functionality and instrumentality, she argues that an 'inoperativity that abandons the city, or suspends the everyday, is a move in the feminist arc of refusal, not its destination' (Honig, 2021: 15). Refusal, she argues, includes not a suspension but an *intensification* of use (22). The bacchants, contrary to Bartleby, do not just put down their work individually but 'seek freedom in work refusal, then in abandon as assembly, and then in defence of their new form of life against sovereign intrusion' (Honig, 2021: 21). Building upon Judith Butler's performative theory of assembly, Honig reads the women's refusal to go back to their looms not as the end-goal of their political action but as the start of new forms of collective life. What happens when we use Honig's concept of inoperativity to analyse Savannah Bay? Where can we locate 'no use' in this bookstore? And where can we locate the 'new use' in Savannah Bay? What work is intensified?

A Suspension of Dominant Norms

The first suspensive step of Honig's feminist inoperativity is easily recognised in Savannah Bay. The bookstore, like all parts of feminist subaltern counterpublics started in the 1970s, was arguably born out of a moment of suspension of patriarchal and commercial norms. As regular bookstores and mainstream literature hardly had any material on women, emancipation, and feminism, feminist bookstores, cafés, and magazines were started in refusal of this male-dominated mainstream (cf. Fraser, 1990). Co-founders Dorelies Kraakman and Sylvia Bodnár designed the space to be a source of knowledge around all aspects of women's emancipation. Rather than a conventional business space, *De Heksenkelder ('The Witches' Cellar')* was to be a non-commercial meeting space where women could relate to each other outside the patriarchal structures that shape public life. The connected café *De Heksenketel* (*'The Witches' Cauldron'*) was supposed to finance this idealistic enterprise and further stressed the social dimension of the project. Both spaces were regulated via a collective of mostly lesbian women. When asked for her definition of a 'feminist bookstore' by a journalist during the opening of bookstore, Kraakman explained that it related to: '[w]omen exploring each other. It relates to the rejection of a masculine culture that controls society as a whole. We want things to do things differently' (Huisman *et al.*, 2019: 13).

When the feminist movement in the Netherlands started to dwindle in the 1990s, the collective dismantled and Marischka Verbeek became the owner in 1997. The collective organisational structure had to give way under pressure of new regulations from the Social Services in the Netherlands. People who had been able to support the store were increasingly forced to take up paid labour and the store struggled financially because of this (Huisman *et al.*, 2019: 29–88). Marischka opened the bookstore to a wider audience – Savannah Bay became a general bookstore with feminist literature as its specialty. Gone were the days when men were banned from the store to facilitate the radical feminist pursuit of creating a 'women's culture.' Over time, Savannah Bay's ideas on feminism have broadened and become more explicitly intersectional (Huisman *et al.*, 2019: 88–118). Today, the bookstore presents its feminism as a counterpart to general notions of 'patriarchy,' broadly understood as a conglomerate of

[4] The design of this project was approved beforehand by the ethical committee of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Netherlands.

heteronormative patterns that govern the public sphere. This includes misogyny, but always in direct connection to queerphobia, transphobia, racism, ableism, neoliberalism, and anthropocentrism.[5]

At its inception, Savannah Bay operated in active refusal of the dominant commercial and patriarchal public sphere. But over time, these political commitments became less explicit. Given the increasing context of economic precarity for the bookstore's existence since the 1990s, many of the forms of inoperativity and intensification found at Savannah Bay are not always conscious decisions on the part of the owner or the volunteers but are informed by necessity and survival. The refusal of neoliberal and patriarchal norms is far from complete, rather it is a continuous negotiation. Honig reads the inoperativity and new use of the *Bacchae* women as a conscious political decision on their part.[6] However, the context of Savannah Bay suggests that a full arc of refusal is not always possible: the survival of the bookstore was partly dependent on toning down feminist political commitments in favour of a more general and economically viable approach. Savannah Bay also highlights (as we will now argue) that in austere political-economic contexts, remaining practices of refusal can follow from necessity, and are often undertaken by people who fail to comply with the dominant economic norms. Without idealising these far-from-ideal moments of inoperativity, Honig's work allows us to see the political potential of these moments. Savannah Bay's context contributes to this insight by also emphasising the material conditions for refusal.

As Savannah Bay is shaped and maintained almost exclusively by unpaid volunteers, the people who perform this work have suspended their regular participation in society in quite a literal way. Most volunteers do not have a full-time paid job, but are students, (temporarily) unemployed, or officially exempt from paid labour due to health issues. Although there are also volunteers who contribute to Savannah Bay in addition to paid forms of employment, the bookstore significantly builds on the work performed by volunteers who fall (partly) outside of traditional forms of paid labour. During our interview, the owner explained that this is not an idealistic decision but a result of economic necessity. Even so, this still facilitates different kinds of working relationships. By retreating from paid forms of work, the volunteers working at Savannah Bay redirect their care and efforts towards contributing to the bookstore. The owner of the bookstore explains what other forms of intensified use can be gained:

> No one works for nothing, but not everyone needs money. With every new applicant I ask: what is in it for you? Distraction? Knowledge of the book trade? A social environment? Sometimes they do not yet know themselves. This is something you have to make happen for them, which does not always work out. At times I am like a mother with 14 children who can't keep track which of them is in need of attention.

Working with volunteers seems to immediately invite a rethinking of the way we reward labour. Stepping away from the default system of financial compensation, the personalised rewards that Savannah Bay offers require a different type of management wherein the owner and the volunteers pay attention to each other's specific needs, limitations, and requirements. During several of our interviews, this relationship was referred to by the volunteers as resembling a mother-child relationship.

During our interviews, the volunteers frequently mentioned the causal relationship between their retreat from regular labour and their engagement with Savannah Bay. One volunteer describes having fallen into 'a black hole' for two years after a heavy study program and wanting to give back to society upon recovery by taking on this job. In response to the question of how they started working for the bookstore, another volunteer explained:

> I remember very well how I started here. I became ill in 2007/2008 – I suffered from tinnitus and hyperacusis. I could not do anything due to the pain in my ears. Everything worked out in the end. After a couple of years, I wanted to re-enter society so I looked for a volunteer job that could be done in silence – a bookstore!

Other participants explained that they started at Savannah Bay because volunteer work was a mandatory part of their therapy, or because they were too intimidated by applying for a more regular job and therefore continued to work for the bookstore:

> What else was I supposed to do? I had never applied for a job before. I was a socially anxious person. I still can be today. What if I have to apply for a job? And what then if I get hired and I have to chit-chat with colleagues? Here, I have a function I understand so it is not difficult.

[5] The bookstore prides itself on being an inclusive space that does not dictate the limits of feminism. Therefore, we will make use of this same broadly defined but clearly intersectional understanding of the term of patriarchy in this paper.

[6] Her feminist reading of the play criticises the more traditional understanding of the bacchants as merely intoxicated by Dionysus (Honig, 2021: xii).

Savannah Bay is therefore mostly shaped by people who have, voluntarily or involuntarily, withdrawn from traditional forms of work. Even if this is not always the result of political intentionality, we can still see this as a refusal of dominant economic norms of individual productivity that do not work for everyone – for instance for people with mental or physical disabilities. It should be noted that this turn to volunteer work out of refusal is not open to everyone. Only those who have the social and financial network (either personally or supported by welfare benefits) to live outside the structures of regular working conditions can afford to do volunteer work at Savannah Bay. This practical condition affects the group of volunteers that shape the bookstore.[7]

Intensification and Rest

Honig's critical feminist reading of inoperativity builds upon the recognition that suspension of regular work does not mean stagnation or isolation. Honig invites us to recognise how putting down traditional use facilitates new assemblies, 'intent on *enjoying* themselves in proximity to each other in ever new, queer, nonreproductive ways that are irreducible to use' (Honig, 2021: 32). This focus on enjoyment and rest is central for Honig and resonates with Savannah Bay, where many volunteers describe the bookstore as a place 'to be yourself,' which in turn creates a sense of calm and relaxation. Outside the direct grip of everyday restrictions on non-normative identities and lives, the volunteers experience a sense of quiet, almost peaceful relief. The owner remarked: 'There is a book that is titled: *Waiting to Exhale*. I remembered that phrase. That's what I see people do here.' The volunteers all describe Savannah Bay in different variations of the following:

> This is still something you recognise in Savannah Bay: everyone can be themselves and can present themselves as they want without anyone thinking it is strange – this holds both for volunteers and for customers. We try to break free of categories. We don't look at how you are supposed to behave but rather: if you like to be a certain way, then be so! And be welcome.

From these stories, it becomes clear that living in a patriarchal society can be hard work for volunteers. Savannah Bay provides a nurturing environment where they can cease the work of upholding societal expectations around norms relating to gender, sexuality, and productivity. This desire for engagement with a feminist space seems to drive the attraction of many of the volunteers to the bookstore. When asked to describe the volunteers of the bookstore, the owner responded as follows:

> I think that they are all people who look at the world and think: what am I doing here? Does this world want me? Does it even understand me? And do I want this world? And here they think: Oh, but *this* I understand, here I can be and here I am allowed to be. It is like landing.

Based on the interviews, it became clear that an important part of the intensified care that facilitates the new uses of Savannah Bay is directed at this creation of a space where the volunteers experience that they can 'be themselves.' For most of the participants this is explicitly related to queerness and as such more difficult to find in the dominantly patriarchal public sphere. Many of the volunteers we spoke with indicated that their first interaction with Savannah Bay was the result of their search for queer or queer-friendly spaces. The bookstore was a place where they could lean into their interest in and affection towards this community and move beyond the hetero environment of their day-to-day lives. One participant related:

> I came to Savannah Bay because it had a queer section. A section that I didn't grow up with but that I always felt I wanted. It is still quite a difficult conversation topic for me. I am not even that old and people know that I'm gay – I think – but I never really talk about it. It is impossible to discuss it with my parents. It is also complicated with my friends. Growing up in [a small city in the Netherlands] it was almost a forbidden topic, it was a forbidden topic at home, it remains something of a forbidden topic in my mind today. I really enjoy when people are very open about it and walk directly to the queer section and start discussing books. It makes me think: how fun! I wish I could do that.

For some volunteers, it is essential to stress that the store does not differentiate between people and that everyone is equally welcome. Other volunteers put more stress on facilitating people and voices that are marginalised in other spaces, including women, queers, people of colour, and people with disabilities. For many of these volunteers, Savannah Bay was a welcoming space when they needed support or care. Volunteers relate stories about the ways the Savannah Bay community provides intensified and specialised care in different situations. Examples include caring for a community member with chronic pain during Pride celebrations, support for a volunteer grieving the loss of her father, and guidance for people who are exploring gender identities and/or sexual

[7] Previous studies indicate that people without a higher education are less likely to volunteer in the Netherlands, as are people with a migration background. See Schmeets and Arends (2017).

orientation. This care is partly provided by the Savannah Bay community itself. Due to the plurality of bodies and identities, the community can provide different kinds of support. Sometimes, it is the mere presence of other people with similar queries or problems that can help someone out. This openness was very important for one volunteer who related the story of their gender transition:

> It is clear to me that my transition is connected to the store. The people here see it as such a positive thing. Before I came here, I didn't know anyone else who was transgender. Now I am very open about it, because I think it might help others as well. Everyone seems to be struggling on their own. But everyone who works here and all the customers let you know who you are and that is a very important thing for this store.

Savannah Bay is presented as a place that opens up possibilities that seem impossible or are marginalised in the world outside. Similarly, Honig understands the bacchants' departure of Thebes not just as the suspension of norms, but reframes it as the intensification of all kinds of new uses on Cithaeron:

> They establish a heterotopia where they can practice another way of living. Organized into three women-led bands rather than male-headed households, the bacchants together transgress all the norms by which they were governed in Thebes and they ground new normativities. The women flee the city that maternalizes them, but rather than refuse to nurture, which would be a 'no use' refusal of maternalism, they breastfeed animals out in the wild. Their nursing refuses the maternalism of heteronormative reproduction but not the intimacy of care. (Honig, 2021: 22)

The heterotopian space that the women in the *Bacchae* have created for themselves allows more room for rest, relaxation, slowing down, and thereby: intensification. In the context of the *Bacchae,* Honig relates this mainly to forms of slow time, slow cooking, and raw food. These practices can easily be understood as feminist practices that work to resist patriarchal and capitalist insistence on productivity and investment in the nuclear family. In the context of Savannah Bay, we have seen how the suspension of dominant norms of productivity and gender create space to exhale. This intensification is most clear in the relaxation that results from the absence of patriarchal labelling and judging people based on gender, sexuality, and productivity.[8]

The volunteers describe Savannah Bay as a space that allows for shaping new relationships which are not dependent on the strict norms and identities that structure the world outside the bookstore. The intertwined norms of patriarchy and productivity are both suspended here – enabling other, caring, forms of being together. Honig understands this suspension and intensification as one step in a larger arc of refusal that is ultimately committed to going back to and changing the city. Is this also the case in Savannah Bay, where we have seen that volunteers are sometimes politically motivated, but often guided by practical concerns? What happens in this space where people seem to feel welcome and valued? In the next section we further explore how we can understand the bookstore as a withdrawal from, and alternative to, the city.

REFUSAL 2: INCLINATION

Honig finds the second step of her arc of feminist refusal in the life the bacchants build for themselves outside the city walls. Here, the women live a lazy and wild life, nursing wild animals while milk, wine, and honey well up from the earth. Honig connects this life on Cithaeron to Adriana Cavarero's conceptualisation of 'inclination' as developed in *Inclination: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016). Via this concept, Cavarero invites us to explore and critique the consequences of the 'privileged upright posture and ethics of moral rectitude' by creating 'a new moral geometry of relationality and care' (Honig, 2021: 46, 4). This project enables Honig to explore what comes after the first moment of inoperativity/intensification. It points the way forward by looking for new, intensified ways of usefulness based on care, mutuality, and altruism. Cavarero finds this potential in the inclining body of the mother. Honig, however, criticises Cavarero's focus on altruist maternal care, and aims to 'disorient inclination from a maternal gesture of pacifist care to a sororal, agonistic gesture of feminist refusal made up of love, care, and violence' (2021: 47). In Honig's agonistic theory, there is an inescapable violence to politics – she argues that to recover Cavarero's understanding of inclination for a feminist theory of refusal, there needs to be space for conflict, not only care.

[8] Although many of the volunteers we spoke to relate this openness to Savannah Bay as a queer space, not all our participants stress this dimension as significant. The owner also remarks that queer spaces are not necessarily open to everyone by default: 'When I first came here, I was allowed to be bi and Dutch-Indonesian and queer and a book lover (…) That is not the case in all sections of the gay movement.'

Building upon Honig's reading of Cavarero, we ask: what corporeal choreographies are invited by the structure of Savannah Bay? Can we understand Savannah Bay as an inclinational heterotopia? How do bodies relate to each other and to their material context in the bookstore, and how does this create opportunities for restructuring care and relationships? Can we understand Savannah Bay as a place of maternal relationships, or can it provide space for more agonistic and political sororal relations?

A Choreography of Bodies and Bookcases

To prepare for the interviews, we asked all participating volunteers to draw a map of the bookstore. At the start of every interview, we asked the participants to give us a tour of the store and to indicate how bodies – both customers' and volunteers' – move through the store. It became clear in these conversations that volunteers distinguish between the front and the back of the store: where the front is oriented to a more general audience, the back of the space, past the cash register, is the site of the books that more explicitly focus on gender, postcoloniality, and sexuality.[9]

When asked how customers move through the store, all volunteers described a similar choreography, or rather: set of choreographies. Our participants explained that they differentiate between different kinds of customers based on the way they move through the store. There are those customers who are not specifically interested in the specialised profile of Savannah Bay as a feminist bookstore. These customers mainly browse the front half of the store and then move directly to the cash register. The people who come specifically for the specialised selection of Savannah Bay might browse the front half of the store but quickly find their way to the bookshelves in the back that hold titles on feminism, postcolonialism, and queerness. The volunteers remarked that this second type of customer might have some reservations in marching directly to the queer section. Some of the participants recognised this in their own first encounters with Savannah Bay. One volunteer remarks: 'LGBT people sometimes first pretend to be interested in general fiction and take their time to arrive at the LGBT corner. I always did the same thing. You tend to beat around the bush for a bit.' Another volunteer remembers:

> I came out the closet in Utrecht so I ended up here. I knew someone who volunteered here. I used to come as a customer. I was that customer who sneaks in and wants to be left alone to browse through the pink books in the back of the store. You couldn't do that online back then.

This secrecy around the queer corner of the bookstore has shifted significantly as societal norms around queerness also changed and the volunteers remarked that customers are much more confident in indicating their interest in these bookshelves than before. Some volunteers mentioned that they wished this section would not be located at the back of the store, as it seems to imply secrecy and even shame:

> Where I lived in the eighties – when I was not out of the closet but I really should have been – there was this dark and secretive corner. You had to ask the employee for the *gaykrant* [a gay magazine] which was kept under the counter. They gave it to you in an opaque bag so no one could see what you had bought. This is what it reminds me of a bit.

However, other volunteers explained that customers appreciate that this section is in a quieter part of the store so that they can take their time while they browse the shelves and have conversations with each other and the volunteers about the stories they are looking for. What is more, there is an ongoing and open-ended debate among the volunteers whether or not the queer section needs to be separated from the more general section at all. During a renovation in 2015, the bookstore experimented with placing queer fiction among the general fiction. The volunteers who were working in Savannah Bay at the time related that the customers were not happy with this new approach and on their request the queer section was re-installed (Huisman *et al.*, 2019: 114–116). The volunteers remarked that one of the great practical benefits of having a separate queer section is that they can more easily help queer customers find relevant books. On a more ideological level, the section indicates to customers that they are explicitly welcomed and catered for in Savannah Bay. One volunteer remarked: '[Those customers] think: how nice, a whole section just for us!'

The interviews sometimes showed a tension between focusing on customers (out of economic necessity) and creating a refuge for volunteers. The owner of Savannah Bay explained how this realisation shapes the store: 'Inspired by a course titled *bookseller of the future* I learned to look at the store from the perspective of the customer. I always used to focus completely on the volunteer, now I think about the customer.' Based on these insights, the organisation of the store started to become directed more towards creating an appealing shopping experience for customers, than allowing the volunteers to be as comfortable as possible. The volunteers noticed this:

[9] The layout of the bookshelves is reorganised every couple of years, which affects the ways people move through the store. This analysis is based on the descriptions of the space by the volunteers at the time of our interviews.

> Before the renovations the person working the cash register would be completely hidden which we really liked. It meant we didn't need to see the customers. (...) I like sitting in that big chair, but I am not allowed to anymore. That is one of the first things Marischka told me.

Besides the owner, however, none of the volunteers showed any interest in engaging structurally with the economic conditions Savannah Bay operates in. The volunteers frequently noted their lack of knowledge on financial matters and sale strategies and only mentioned finances as a vaguely perceived obstacle in the way of some of their own dreams for the bookstore, such as stocking the space with books from top to bottom or making it an even more specialised and dedicated space for feminist action and activism.

In her discussion on inclination, Honig criticises Cavarero's location of inclination as 'an imaginary completely apart from geometric verticalism' (Honig, 2021: 70). Instead, Honig argues that the bacchants should not stay on Cithaeron: the next step in her arc of refusal is to move back to the city, to kill the king and claim the city. Heterotopias, in her view, 'valuably serve as spaces or times of rehearsal where alternative forms of life can be tried out and explored' (2021: 71).[10] The value of these places of withdrawal and inclination, for Honig, ultimately lies in bringing those alternative forms of life back to the city. But where, in Honig's theory of refusal, the bacchants completely withdraw from the city (to return later), this withdrawal is much less complete in Savannah Bay. Rather, there are processes of hesitant withdrawal and coming back, afforded by both economic constraints and a material organisation of the space that creates a distinction between front and back, and where queer customers take time to make their way to the books of their actual interest.

Between Maternal and Sororal

The organisational structure of Savannah Bay seems largely horizontal. There is no discernible hierarchy *among* the many volunteers (there is a clear hierarchy between the volunteers and the owner) and no apparent conflict within the team. When asked to describe the volunteers and the community of Savannah Bay, many participants use words like 'quiet,' 'calm,' 'kind,' 'sincere,' 'friendly,' 'open,' 'trusting,' 'charitable,' 'sweet,' and 'reflective.' We find no mention of conflict or resentment and many words of appreciation for other volunteers and for the owner of the bookstore. In this remarkable peacefulness, we can recognise a hint of the heterotopian space of peacefulness and plurality that Cavarero explores via her notion of inclination. Honig, however, has her reservations about this pacifist conceptualisation because it leaves the notion of inclination 'vulnerable to mocking dismissals' (2021: 51). She argues that this might give rise to the idea that what happens in this heterotopia will never have any bearing on the vertical world outside. At a superficial glance, the inclined maternal body is easily (mis)understood as a passive and non-threatening entity. In fact, this very posture has been at the heart of the patriarchal positioning of women's bodies as subservient and self-sacrificing. While Cavarero acknowledges this, arguing that focusing merely on care 'not only risks repeating the stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman; it also, and above all, obscures the ethical valence of inclination, which consists in the alternative between care and wound,' Honig argues that she ultimately focuses too much on the side of altruistic care while leaving out the side of the wound (Cavarero, 2016: 105; Honig, 2021: 62). Honig therefore proposes to shift from Cavarero's maternal structure of care to a sororal structure as found in the *Bacchae*, changing the peaceful altruism of the maternal to a more agonistic approach:

> The Bacchae dramatizes inclination as refusal, but the central agency of inclination in the play is not maternity but sorority. This is important for a feminist theory of refusal because the sororal relationship is the more egalitarian of the two. In addition, the mood of inclinational refusal is not per se altruistic, as Cavarero says. It is agonistic: intimate and contestatory. (Honig, 2021: 60)

This differentiation between maternal and sororal relations might help us understand the peaceful environment of Savannah Bay – for it is apparent from our interviews that Savannah Bay aligns more with Cavarero's text than with Honig's in this aspect, and as such is susceptible to Honig's critique. This might indicate that the bookstore works along semi-hierarchical maternal relations rather than along the more egalitarian structure based on sororal relations. And indeed, even if the volunteers do not remark on any hierarchy among themselves, they clearly indicate the owner of the bookstore as a central maternal figure. The volunteers discuss her role in Savannah Bay as crucial. 'She keeps an eye on everything, works on everything in the background,' one volunteer remarked. Several volunteers explained that their affection and respect for the owner is an important reason for them to work at Savannah Bay and that 'Savannah Bay would not be Savannah Bay without her.' The owner herself is aware of her position. She admitted: 'For a long time I insisted that people do this for Savannah Bay, but in fact they also do this for me.' During our interview, the owner also frequently used language that indicated her maternal role in relation to Savannah Bay. For example, when she talked about the ways she supports, encourages, and lovingly corrects the volunteers: 'I might not have children, but I direct all of that energy to my volunteers.' Because

[10] Honig's theory here resembles theories of prefiguration.

Savannah Bay functions around this central maternal figure, the volunteers do not experience specific forms of ownership or responsibilities in relation to the bookstore. One volunteer remarked: 'Marischka really runs this place, I just do the work.' A number of the volunteers also expressed daughter-like concerns for the owner, wishing she would be able to take some rest and let someone else shoulder some of the responsibilities. We discussed in the first section how when collectively running the store was no longer viable in the 1990s, ownership was transferred to the current owner. We can now understand this move, which helped Savannah Bay survive, as a sororal, horizontal structure changing to a vertical, maternal one. But extending Honig's critique of Cavarero to critically look at Savannah Bay, we can see how it also limits its political potential. Indeed, most volunteers are not interested in co-formulating the strategic and economic orientation of the bookstore – they follow Marischka's decisions. This results in a peaceful way of relating to each other, but also in a lack of equal and agonistic politics.

Honig's theory presents feminist refusal as three subsequent moments: in, out, and back to the city. Derived from a reading of a play, this conceptually linear succession makes sense. Unsurprisingly however, these moments of refusal are messier in real-life situations like Savannah Bay. Honig implicitly admits this when she describes the arc as 'exemplary' and emphasises that it is not teleological, but phenomenological (2021: xiii, 103). But the context of Savannah Bay also raises a more structural question for Honig's theory. We have seen how, in Savannah Bay, the possibility of withdrawal and the continuation of heterotopian practices take place in economically precarious circumstances and are as such never complete, but rather a continuous negotiation. Moreover, they are dependent on a change from sororal to maternal relations. In this context, how can we understand the relations between the moments of feminist refusal? Do they necessarily follow up on each other, or are there specific conditions that need to be fulfilled for the full arc of refusal to be fulfilled? The next section looks at the relations of Savannah Bay with going back to the city.

REFUSAL 3: FABULATION

This third and final step of Honig's model is least developed, as it does not prominently feature in the *Bacchae* – but it is rather a speculative suggestion of what could have happened had the city been ready to receive the bacchants. It emphasises feminist refusal's 'obligation to return' and 'the promise of refusal as a world-building practice' (Honig, 2021: 104). When the slow time of Cithaeron is interrupted by king (and son of bacchant Agave) Pentheus, who dressed up to see what was going on, the women are notified by Dionysus that 'a "creature" is watching them, and the women attack the creature, at first singly and without success, then together' (2021: 9). They kill the king with their bare hands and with his head in their hands, they return to the city calling for a feast, where they are returned 'to the patriarchal fold' and exiled (2021: 80). The violence of this scene is shocking, but Honig embraces it as a parable about regicide, showing 'the need to dismember (…) patriarchy' (2021: 58).

In the absence of a successful return of the bacchants to the city, Honig turns to a *Bacchae* reading of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019). In Savannah Bay, however, the return to the city is a constant feature. As a bookstore located in the heart of the city of Utrecht, Savannah Bay is fundamentally linked to customers, publishers, authors, and distributors, but also to neighbours, tourists, and other people who might wander past the store. The bookstore is also more purposefully linked to different feminist and literary spaces and initiatives in Utrecht. The store often provides mobile book sales at literary events, co-organises events with other cultural institutions, and provides a space for third parties to organise events in the bookstore. The boundaries between Savannah Bay and the city are constantly shifting and have different degrees of permeability (as we also saw within the shop in section 2). Two of the most prominent manifestations of the outside world entering Savannah Bay that were discussed by our participants included the books and events that Savannah Bay offers to its public, and the customers who themselves engage with these books and events.

Claiming the City Through Stories

Honig turns to fabulation and telling stories to inspire freedom in her thinking about how a practice of feminist refusal can go back to claim the city. Citing Hannah Arendt, who writes that 'it is as though the men who returned from the Trojan war had wished to make permanent the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and suffering,' Honig sees the city as the physical manifestation of stories made permanent. She reads the bacchant's return to Thebes as a call for glory and remembrance (Arendt, 1958: 198; Honig, 2021: 91).

Honig argues that fabulation has a place in the arc of refusal because it allows for narrative contestation, for bringing in those stories that have been forgotten or deemed irrelevant or ugly. Where Hartman's fabulation gives centre stage to the lives and experimental practices of freedom by Black girls and women living in New York and Philadelphia between 1890 and 1930, Honig also looks for a way for these fabulations to 'collectivize or politicize' (Honig, 2021: 74). Can they change the city through changing the archive of public remembrance?

Volunteers stress that books and storytelling are at the heart of Savannah Bay. Most justifications for this stance revolve around the idea that books are ideal vehicles for the exchange of stories. The volunteers see an important

function for Savannah Bay as a place where unheard stories are available and promoted. In this insistence on 'unheard stories' we recognise the rejection of hegemonic storytelling and the desire to explicitly create space for counternarratives that can challenge the existing cultural archive and can 'claim the city,' as Honig would say. Asking if books are central to Savannah Bay, we received an almost affronted confirmation. In explaining the central position of books in this space, one of the volunteers remarks:

> Yes! Besides the fact that we love books (…), the stories that are concealed in these books can help you and you can share them. I don't know how else you can facilitate that. What would this place be where people come together? Organised events are only disconnected moments, but a bookstore is always open. (…) The added value in selling books are the conversations that occur around those books, by talking about those books.

When asked what are 'books typically sold at Savannah Bay,' the volunteers struggle to find satisfying examples or explanations, but most of them settle on the phrase 'untold stories' – seemingly indicating books and voices that are marginalised or absent in other bookstores. The volunteers stress that they find it important that anyone can find a moment of recognition, learning, or exchange in Savannah Bay. They enthusiastically described the conversations with customers where they could recommend certain books, and sometimes they emphasised the responsibility that they feel while doing this.

The promotion of unheard stories to the wider community is also done via events that are organised by Savannah Bay. The volunteers told stories about events that were specifically memorable to them, including the many editions of *Uit de boekenkast* during Pride celebrations where queer authors are celebrated, an event around historical and personal storytelling by members of the Dutch-Indonesian community in Utrecht, and a lecture on the concept of afro-veganism.[11] Via these events the city is explicitly invited into the store to share in the reconstruction of the existing archive, but these encounters can also have a reshaping effect on the volunteers themselves. During our interviews, the volunteers expressed appreciation for the opportunity to come across new stories and voices. One volunteer remarked on the event around Dutch-Indonesian storytelling:

> I heard many stories about people like Marischka: born here, with parents who were born there. And the battle to be accepted. I learn a lot from that and I notice how privileged I am that I don't have to deal with that. I like going to events on topics that I know very little about. That is one of the great things about Savannah Bay: you always learn something new.

Challenging existing narratives can also lead to discomfort on the part of the volunteers. This perhaps shows the political and agonistic nature of what happens when new stories are told. For example, several white volunteers indicated that they felt uncomfortable during events about colonial histories or events around storytelling practices by people of colour. Some indicated that they appreciated this feeling of estrangement, because it encouraged them to think critically about the many ways in which they are allowed to be comfortable as white people in the bookstore and in society more generally. Others found it more difficult to reposition themselves in such a situation. These feelings of estrangement can result in volunteers questioning their own position within the bookstore. Several of the male volunteers whom we spoke with indicated that they had these types of experiences when customers remarked upon the perceived irony that a man was helping them to find books on feminism. One volunteer remarked:

> It has happened to me a couple of times that customers were looking for feminist literature and apologised to me because I'm a man. That makes me question my position. Perhaps I am not the best person to advise you in this.

Similarly, hetero cis-gendered volunteers explained that they at times felt inadequate when a customer asked them for advice on queer books or queer culture in Utrecht. While the volunteers actively encourage and support the refusal of the normative archive, they are not always sure about their own position in this project. At times they feel explicitly included in the reshaping of the narrative, at other times they feel themselves excluded from it. Perhaps these emerging conflicts (rare within the friendly atmosphere of Savannah Bay) also indicate the conflictual nature of going back to the city: 'fabulation is agonistic,' it is a 'contest over meaning' (Honig, 2021: 103). If you do not just refuse and withdraw, but also want to change something beyond the bookstore, existing differences in position and viewpoint become more explicit. So far, however, Savannah Bay operates through a peaceful maternity, as we argued in section two, and these agonistic conversations are rare.

[11] The prominence of the Indonesian community in the Netherlands is linked to the colonial connection between the two countries, which lasted up until shortly after the Second World War. Another reason why Savannah Bay is invested in this community comes from the owner's personal connection to it.

The City is Not One

Honig uses the city as a metaphor for the archive and the public remembrance of great deeds, as well as a metaphor for the dominant patriarchal norms in society. Reclaiming the city means to take down patriarchy – to cut off the head of the king. We have already seen that Savannah Bay never completely leaves the city, and that returning to the city is also a continuously negotiated process. Any real city itself, however, is also continuously changing and is not as singular as it is presented in Honig's parable.

Savannah Bay is evidently in a constant dialogue with the city. This means that it is partly dependent on the willingness of the outside world to go along with the rewritings of the archive that the bookstore proposes. Following Arendt in describing the city as a 'site of public remembrance, keeper of its values and houser of its vernacular,' Honig describes fabulation as 'a right to the city: this means a right to retake its archive and maybe even transform the city. Like all new rights, this one demands a response from those who may not be ready for the claim, and so it may or may not succeed' (2021: 97).

Savannah Bay also faces this resistance from the city and has developed strategies to deal with this. Mostly, the bookstore positions itself as a gentle interlocutor. When asked if they consider Savannah Bay to be a feminist space, one volunteer explained:

> When people think of feminism they think of activism, but it simply means that all people are equal. It is an odd term because it immediately refers back to the boxes of 'man' and 'woman'. [Q: Does Savannah Bay take a position in that debate?] I think so, but I'm not sure what it is. It is definitely there, but it is not very explicitly propagated. Otherwise it would stigmatise us. People tend to really like this store. You can be very casual in your comments, without judgement. Keep it low-key and accessible.

Many volunteers mentioned this approach: to be a gracious and good-natured conversation partner who seeks to be non-judgmental and non-dismissive of other voices and opinions. Some volunteers regret this strategy of navigating potential resistance from the city. One volunteer explained that she feels this strategy restricts her feminist activism:

> Sometimes people ask me: 'Is this still a feminist space? Haha!' And then I have to respond: 'No, we do unheard stories now.' Which is fine, but I just don't think 'feminism' is a dirty word.

Despite her reservations about this strategy, she does align with it in the context of the bookstore. Another volunteer expressed some frustration at being partly dependent on the whims of the outside world.

> Since a couple of years, feminism is cool again. You can find it on T-shirts everywhere. It is getting a bit diluted because of this popularity. It is becoming a way of selling stuff. It is nice that we can ride that wave, there is a lot of new research and there are new books. But we now also sell socks and stuff and the anti-capitalist in me does not like that. But it does make us money. General bookstores in the city also started selling feminist books such as the *Rebel Girls* series, but they don't have our history behind it to back it up. They just recently initiated a little corner with feminist children's books, while we have had that for ages.

Although Savannah Bay clearly chooses to be willing to move along with the city's shifting relation to feminism, this co-operating strategy requires quite a lot of humility from the bookstore and the people who maintain it as a feminist space. Honig concedes that the city is not always ready to receive the bacchants upon their return, and that although feminist bacchants have 'an obligation to return,' 'this commitment is not for everyone all the time' (2021: 104). But can the city ever be truly ready? If we wait for the city to be ready for feminist futures, will we not end up endlessly delaying our claim to the city? While this strategy allows Savannah Bay to continue to exist, providing a peaceful refuge for its community, Savannah Bay's feminism has not (yet) reclaimed the city.

CONCLUSION

Connecting the personal experiences of the volunteers of Savannah Bay with Honig's theory of feminist refusal, we have analysed the relationship between this queer feminist bookstore and the dominant patriarchal world which it resists but to which it also must relate to survive. Placing Honig's theory of refusal in relation to empirical data has several important implications. Analysing Savannah Bay as a place of continuously negotiated feminist refusal and refuge raises questions about the conditions for fulfilling Honig's feminist arc of refusal, and about the relations between the various moments. Whereas most discussions of feminist bookstores understand them as broader networks of political and social organising, Honig's theory helps understand how a moment of feminist refuge and withdrawal in the (temporary) absence of such networks can be part of a larger effort to claim the city in the future.

But truly claiming the city is an agonistic, contestatory process, that might threaten the peaceful unity of a feminist refuge.

Savannah Bay refuses dominant norms of gender and productivity (as we argued in Refusal 1). No longer needing to conform creates space for relaxation, other modes of working, untold stories, and solidarity. However, contrasting with the conceptual clarity in Honig's work, the withdrawal from the city is never complete – as a bookstore sustaining itself through customers' purchases, this would be impossible. There is no clear cut between the bookstore and the city. Rather, the volunteers and customers are engaged in a continuous choreography of bodies and bookcases where the line between the norm and refuge from the norm is constantly negotiated (Refusal 2). This manifests itself symbolically, with the bookshop taking on a different meaning for different kinds of customers, but also spatially, with the more general books in the front of the shop, and the feminist and decolonial books at the back. In these mediations, and influenced by economic constraints, the people working at the store try to create spaces to exhale.

If Savannah Bay's withdrawal from the city remains incomplete, so does its return (Refusal 3). In Honig's reading of the *Bacchae*, the return fails, and the bacchants are exiled. But the bookstore is in constant conversation with the city through its transforming stories. At the same time, the gentle organisation of the bookstore is not interested to fully, politically, claim and change the city. The dynamic between the norm and refusal of the norm, between city and refuge, has enabled Savannah Bay to continue existing as a queer haven even when the feminist tide was low. To survive the 'long feminist winter,' Savannah Bay has become a place of refusal mostly in Honig's first two senses of the word: a place of inoperativity of dominant norms and intensification of inclined care. But Honig completes the feminist arc of refusal by 'returning to the city to claim it. At that point, it is up to the city: is it ready to receive them?' (Honig, 2021: 71). With the rise of queer, decolonial and feminist activism in the past years, Savannah Bay's temporary isolation has been broken from the outside in. Perhaps the city is increasingly ready. Perhaps it is time to claim it.

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