

Reading the Root Words: Literature in Radical Bookshops



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Introduction

“Even [in 2014,] with all our electronic toys and digital multimedia, the frontiers of political thought on both the left and right are still driven with reassuring frequency by books. Bookshops – and independent, alternative bookshops above all – should be treasured as an essential strand of our political culture.”¹

A radical bookshop, as within the scope of this research, is an independently run bookshop that self-identifies as ‘radical’, indicating its emphasis on literature that is written with a distinct sociopolitical and anti-fascist awareness, and in doing so engages with contentious politics. These bookshops strive to build community oriented spaces by way of selling literature accessible to and representative of a diverse demographic, including BAME, queer and feminist writing and writers. Lighthouse Bookshop, from its nook on West Nicholson Street, calls itself “Edinburgh’s radical bookshop”², and similarly, Calton Books, around the Barras Market of Glasgow’s east end bylines itself proudly as ‘the best wee radical bookshop in the world’³. These were the fieldsites of this research project, aimed at understanding and unraveling what makes literature ‘radical’ in nature, and how this element of radicalness translates to the creation of physical spaces like radical bookshops. The word ‘radical’ is stubborn in eluding definition, and in doing so covers heavily contentious grounds, spanning linguistic, scientific and political connotations. A more encompassing definition of the word is befitting here: the adjective ‘radical’, in the broader context of political action (where it normally implies left-leaning) is “Esp. of change or action: going to the root or origin; touching upon or affecting what is essential and fundamental; thorough, far-reaching.”⁴. Within the framework of this research, radicalness is being used as an indicator of the degree to which the act of bookselling can determine the

¹ Ally Fog, “Why radical bookshops are an essential strand of political culture”, *The Guardian*, 1 May, 2014 accessed 28/08/2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/01/radical-bookshops-political-culture-independent-books>.

² Lighthouse Bookshop landing page

<https://lighthousebookshop.com/>

³ Calton Books landing page

<https://www.calton-books.co.uk/?srsltid=AfmBOopewHNFHc11gaWwC7QXyiwaH9IQGEHO0wOEHxAm8a-DWvyFE4b7>

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, “radical (adj.), sense 7.a.” June 2025,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2462054059>.

circulation of knowledge at the grassroots level, i.e, amongst local communities. This includes the act of identifying the community and its nature, or constituents. The sale of a book is a multifaceted transaction with social, economic and political aspects since it always involves at some level, the passing on or acquisition of knowledge by way of material exchange between individuals i.e, it regulates who may have access to knowledge and can thus be considered a fair measure of the broader consciousness of the world a society develops. This paper attempts to anchor radical spaces in the literature that they emerge for and from, and espouse the principles of. By close reading literary texts of radical relevance, the radical is anatomized and viewed within physical establishments like radical independent bookshops, which often serve as ‘counterspaces’, or durable sociopolitically committed spaces engaged in some form of constructive activism⁵.

Radical Bookselling in the United Kingdom

Intuitively, it would be incorrect to say that any independently run or not-for-profit bookshop is not ‘radical’, or without its own social and political ideals that commit it as a counterspace. This research however, is concerned with what is explicitly recognised as radical bookselling in the United Kingdom and its historical milieu. Around the late 1960s and 1970s, several ‘radical bookshops’ emerged across the UK, with London at the epicentre of this mushrooming, owing to the deep cultural diversity of its population unparalleled by the rest of the UK at the time. These included specialised queer, feminist, green, black, socialist, communist, anarchist, and even some ‘community’ bookshops that identified themselves independent of political affiliations, forming one of the largest and most diverse thriving communities of its kind anywhere across the world.⁶ Prominently, these included some of the oldest radical bookshops in the UK (Housmans, established in 1943 for instance) alongside pioneering feminist, queer (Sisterwrite and Gay’s the Word respectively) and BAME (Bogle L’Ouverture) bookshops that defined what it means to be a radical bookshop in the present-day.⁷ These bookshops came to be allied under the membership

⁵ Drawing on the characterization of the same by Kinder, Kimberley in *The Radical Bookstore*, ‘Constructing Places for Contentious Politics’, University of Minnesota Press, 2021. p.34-35.

⁶ Cope, D., Bradshaw, R. “Radical Bookshops Listing”. Left on the Shelf. Accessed 22/07/2025. <https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/images/doc/Radical-Bookshops-Listing.pdf>

⁷ Ken Worpole, “The radical bookshops shaping Britain’s literary culture”, *The Guardian*, 22 November, 2022.

organisation of the Federation of Radical Booksellers (known as the Federation of Alternative Booksellers until 1980), which remained active until the 1990s. The FRB was deeply committed to organising and facilitating radical bookfairs, a practice they came to pioneer in the form it has taken presently. The Socialist Book Fair, International Radical Black and Third World Books Fair, International Feminist Book Fair, as well as other anarchist and local book fairs that interacted with the larger ones, were run and facilitated by independent presses and bookshops in and around London⁸. This set the blueprint for contemporary iterations such as the Alternative Book Fringe, which is run by Lighthouse Bookshop (as an evolved form of the Book Fringe originally organised by Word Power Books in Edinburgh, as well as the Edinburgh International Book Fair, and the Radical Book Fair. Into the 1990s, spurred by the revocation of the Net Book Agreement, many bookshops were forced to shut down under financial pressure and the FRB went defunct with them. In 2010, it was resurrected as the Alliance of Radical Booksellers (ARB)⁹ which remains active into the present-day and was formed by radical bookshops in operation around the mid-to-late-2000s, alongside some survivors from the FRB (Housmans in London, News from Nowhere in Liverpool, Five Leaves in Nottingham to name a few).¹⁰

It follows then, that radical bookshops espouse politically left-wing ideologies. In their inception across locations and time periods, almost all radical bookshops attempted to form a structurally radical set-up, i.e. enacting bookselling as a radical and expressive activity, instead of a like-for-like economic transaction. In pre-FRB times, this usually included the founding of an independent printing press alongside a bookshop, or the set up of an independent anti-establishment book distributor. One of the best contemporary examples of expressive radical bookselling would be News from Nowhere set up in 1974 as a not-for-profit radical and community bookshop committed to social justice in Liverpool, directed as a space for its overwhelmingly working class demographic. Since 1980, it has been run as a women's cooperative, which means there is no boss and no individual owner, and all the employees of the

⁸ Radical Bookselling History Journal, Issue 9, December 2024

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jpPXy_EMWszEFZvNBn-ey_iLzJwzL3P6/view

⁹ "What is the ARB?". Alliance of Radical Booksellers. Accessed July 22, 2025.

https://www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk/?page_id=2.

¹⁰ Natalie Hanman, "The return of radical bookshops", *The Guardian*, 12 April, 2010.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/09/return-of-radical-bookshops?CMP=share_btn_url

bookshop are paid equally at living wage rates¹¹, embodying an anti-hierarchical structure faithful to its working-class roots and principles.

Dave Cope, one of the founders of the Radical Bookselling History Project, and a long-standing member of the Alliance of Radical Booksellers, also spent a long stint working as a bookseller at Central Books in Liverpool. Upon being asked what the word ‘radical’ meant to him, and how he would define it, he mentioned, “I’d provide a whole host of definitions for the word before stating that I am flexible, and can’t quite answer this question. I recognise that the yearning to work collectively and avoid hierarchies is radical but I don’t think that should be a defining line for a radical bookshop. We want to be inclusive as much as possible, but everyone will have their own distinctions of what they think is radical.”¹² On reflecting upon why some bookshops have endured longer than others despite financial strains over the years, he mentioned, “they tried to be good bookshops, not just good radical bookshops. Yes, they were radical, but they were for everyone, as any bookshop would try to be.”¹³ Specifically with reference to ‘News From Nowhere’, Cope reflected, “Partly what kept them going was that the staff worked there for a long time, and there weren’t many changes of personnel. And I think the main factor that led to their survival was that they made an effort to serve every part of the community, not just focusing on feminist and queer or working class literature. They got the respect of everybody that way. They did have their tough times, especially with the first two premises which were small and isolated. And eventually, when they bought their own premises, it was a big factor in their survival.”¹⁴ It is more pertinent to think about *how* a space is made for everyone rather than whether or not it is so, i.e., to observe the means employed to construct a radical community space than test the validity of it.

Methodologies

Interviews and participant observation alongside close reading form the research methodology that aims to put a literary analysis in an anthropological context. The interviews were conducted

¹¹ News From Nowhere website, ‘About Us’, accessed July 22, 2025.

<https://www.newsfromnowhere.org.uk/info/About.php>

¹² Dave Cope, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 02/07/2025, transcripts 1.

¹³ Dave Cope, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 02/07/2025, transcripts 1.

¹⁴ Dave Cope, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 02/07/2025, transcripts 1.

as guided conversations, with questions directed at understanding how the bookshops were set up, by whom and upon what motivation, and how they have grown and chosen to function over the years. Naturally, the questions also ventured into the interactive role played by radical bookshops i.e, their community engagement, which forms much of their day-to-day functioning. Radical establishments address and foster people-facing interactions in an intentional rather than functional manner, and put forward specific efforts to make this known. Mandy Vere, who runs News from Nowhere noted that the late-2000s to 2010s resurgence of popularity that radical bookshops have enjoyed “has created a critical mass of participation – young people and older activists, like myself – and we’re noticing massively more people using the bookshop as a meeting point”.¹⁵ To anatomise this aspect, the nature of the physical spaces themselves has been analysed in reconciliation with their role as social spaces that are ‘physically realised (or objectified)’¹⁶. Participant observation, or the method of ethnography that, “is a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied”¹⁷ included visits to each bookshop, which were undertaken several times over the course of June and July 2025, in addition to previous visits that had been made to both bookshops since November 2023. Notes and gleanings from participant observation have been integrated in a narrative and experiential style drawn from fieldnotes as well as interview notes, in order to use the sensorial elements of conducting participant observation to set up a context for the literary analysis that follows it. This is structured to present first-hand observational notes and interview quotes as the basis for analytical or meta-notes.¹⁸ Interviews conducted with correspondents at both bookshops concluded in the same way - they were asked to recommend a text of radical literature or of radical importance published since 2000 and formative in constructing their personal outlooks, that they would put forth as essential reading today. Understandably, both interviewees attempted to skirt or deflect the question. It was either too personal and nebulous, hence too variable a question to answer, or there were simply too many works and writers to choose from. Robert from Calton Books

¹⁵ Natalie Hanman, “The return of radical bookshops”, *The Guardian*, 12 April, 2010.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, P., 2018. *Social Space and the Genesis of Appropriated Physical Space*. *Int. J. Urban Reg. Res.*, 42. p.109.

¹⁷ DeWalt, Kathleen M., 2010. ‘What is Participant Observation’. *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers*. AltaMira Press. p.10-11.

¹⁸ Bernard, H. Russell, and Gery W. Ryan, 2009. *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

recommended “Restless Land: A radical journey through Scotland’s history” by Alan McCombes and Roz Paterson. Mairi from Lighthouse refrained from citing a specific text, but recommended the works of writers Lola Olufemi and Naomi Braine as deeply influential in her own thoughts regarding feminism, community and direct action. I have exercised personal liberty as the researcher to choose excerpts from both.

Bodying the Bookshop

At Calton Books, I was generously handed six free stickers along with the book I had just purchased, and while my transaction took place, I peered around at the badges and pins lined up in front of me, many of which had the Irish shamrock, others the Scottish Saltire. At the other end of the shop there were t-shirts printed with slogans and images of famous radical activists, and I exited the shop with the owner’s phone number scribbled down on the sticky flip-side of Angela Davis’ face. He responded in the affirmative when I asked if this was all designed by the team at Calton Books, “They are a way to spread the message, let people know where the t-shirt was bought and what message it carries”¹⁹. Jane Cholmeley, in her recent memoir about Silver Moon, the first lesbian feminist radical bookshop set up in London in the 1980s says, “Our windows advertised that we were a women’s bookshop: come inside and you’ll find the wonder of women’s writing and a good deal of lesbian writing too. It was the suggestion of things to buy and politics marching hand-in-hand.”²⁰ It is worth considering that community spaces like radical bookshops are symptomatic in nature, i.e., they exhibit the behaviours of their owners and staff, thus they emerge already from a community and likewise for one, and the action of helping a community identify itself by way of space can be deeply radical, as well as forms the basis for modes of constructive activism. Especially in the case of Calton Books, a historical notion of community and space is constantly reckoned with. The owner referenced the Calton Weavers’ Strike of 1787, the first recorded working class protest in Scotland, as we spoke more about the community the bookshop associates itself with, indicated also by the name it takes on. Calton Books is set up in the eastern end of the city and associates itself with the working-class community of Glasgow. It occurred to me briefly that it made all the more sense to sell clothing

¹⁹ Robert Rae, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 14/07/2025, transcripts 2.

²⁰ Cholmeley, Jane. 2024. *A Bookshop of One’s Own*. Harper Collins: London. p.269.

as merchandise, and even if coincidentally, that Calton Books shares walls with a fabric wholesaler, since the land the establishments rests on has been fraught since time immemorial, by its relationship to the weaving labour workforce of the first wave of the Industrial Revolution, a birthplace of wage labour. The commodity of clothing or merchandise assumes a symbolic value and is handled and represented similarly.

The body of the bookshop is comparable to the human body and the value that its embellishments can bear. In simpler words, the body of the bookshop is a presentation or performance of its values and ideals within the context it chooses to share with its community, which in this case, was sown in the personal lives of the founder-owners who hailed from working class backgrounds themselves. “So, myself and a friend opened the shop because we felt there was a need for a left-wing shop in the city and there wasn't really anything, you know, in the sort of east of the city. So, in the past there used to be the Communist Party that had a shop in various parts of the city, which finally ended up closing. When I was younger, there was a Workers' Revolutionary party one, there was a Scottish Republican Socialist one. There was an Anarchist bookshop, et cetera. And they were all closed. So, we decided to open ours and not to be affiliated to anyone. That way we could offer a wider range of literature rather than party-aligned, so to speak.”²¹ The direct and stripped-down, almost utilitarian messaging of Calton Books draws out a sense that retail practices can be synergistic and contain a reciprocity. The bookshop is a very small establishment that stays open four days a week and runs for about a cumulative of thirty hours, factoring heavily into how books are stocked and sold. “We describe [ourselves] as a single end, which means a small one room flat where families would be brought up. Because it's a small space, you're kind of limited in what you can have. We try to offer a broad range of books, but obviously if your customer base is looking for specific things, then that's where the anti-fascist, Marxist, anarchist or feminist titles would have quite a lot of space, that's the books that sell.”²² On two opposite walls facing each other are the books lined up thematically, including Irish liberation, anticolonial and postcolonial literature, Black and pan-African literature, feminist and queer writing, communist and socialist works, anarchist literature etc. Beside the till is a little rack of Scottish Socialist Party journals, May Day

²¹ Robert Rae, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 14/07/2025, transcripts 2.

²² Robert Rae, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 14/07/2025, transcripts 2.

pamphlets and local left-wing periodicals. “We welcome different people, and not everyone who comes in is in a committee or is a left-wing activist or anything. There’s obviously people who are interested in learning. We’re happy to have conversations with people. You know what you know and what you’ve learned. I know what I know and what I’ve learned. And it’s that sharing, conversations and discussions with people where possible, but equally, we have customers that will come in and say, ‘Oh, here’s this new book. You’ve not got it in.’ And you say, ‘Oh, I didn’t even realize it.’ It’s about that sharing and dialogue and conversation.”²³

Lighthouse Bookshop in Edinburgh similarly makes use of its space in what feels like a welcoming, almost domestic set-up with small low chairs and stools in corners for customers to browse. There are pamphlets plastered all over the windows and front door, as well as little badges, pins, zines on sale at the till or in the small passageway connecting its adjoining rooms. Bookshelves are lined with handwritten labels noting a staff pick or recommendation accompanied by a short description. The informality of Lighthouse’s put-togetherness affords the feeling that you are being spoken to or guided along, discovering a trail of sorts, marked by the painstaking care with which the collection is organised. It is also framed within a distinct history of its own, and is an inextricable piece of modern Edinburgh’s bookselling history. The website notes Lighthouse as ‘a new incarnation of the Word Power bookshop Elaine Henry opened [here] in 1994. [We are] still home to Word Power Books, an independent Scottish publisher, though [we] have put the publishing on hold to focus on the bookshop for now!’²⁴ Mairi Oliver, who bought the premises from Elaine Henry in 2017, spoke about the need to have a dedicated space to a radical bookshop, and her burgeoning motivation to continue this one:

“It was a bit of a pipe dream but it looked like if I didn’t take over the bookshop that there was very little interest from other people who might have the capacity to continue a radical bookshop so there were some whispers about another kind of bookshop or turning into a more mainstream bookshop or closing it, and then she was just going to rent out the space. So, Lighthouse was my way of continuing Word Power, but I think I had a sense quite early on that Word Power had a very established presence - there were big boots to fill and Lighthouse would be my version of a

²³ Robert Rae, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 14/07/2025, transcripts 2.

²⁴ <https://www.lighthousebookshop.com/about>

radical bookshop for Edinburgh, it would carry on the legacy of a radical bookshop while renaming it, and really it was like in the name at the time, 'Lighthouse' as opposed to 'Word Power' was to delineate that a change had happened - to signal to people that they might expect something different because I didn't want to replicate exactly what Elaine had been doing nor would I necessarily have known how."²⁵ Mairi described Lighthouse's use of 'radical' as "a guiding light", or "this idea that [we] would be concerned with liberation politics and how we make the world a better place, concerned with addressing injustice where and how we saw it both in our industry, and more widely that it would become a collective outlook, that it couldn't just be about me and my politics."²⁶ In a sense, this epitomizes the definition of radical presented in the introduction to this paper - reverting back to the origin, while preserving the essential importance in being radical, that shapeshifts over time and across contexts.

Both witnessing and being in the midst of people circulating in and out of the bookshop was as valuable as the observational and immersive experience of scouring for books, browsing, or even attending events. Unlike Calton Books that is set up with a strong local Irish working-class background, the community surrounding Lighthouse is diverse and inconsistent owing to the concentration of university students, academics and tourists in the city, especially during the rush that consumes it for the city's varied cultural festivals in the summer. When a bookshop resembles something of a hearth to a constantly heterogenous and dissimilar crowd, there emerges some organic larger synchrony in the decision-making that leads people to congregate in spaces like this, making a fluid and changeable definition of community that is radical at its core precisely for this ability to self-determine. Much like at Calton Books, the invitation to initiate a conversation is central to the interactions that take place within Lighthouse Bookshop. Expanding on the radical nature of the bookshop and its relationship with Mairi's personal radical beliefs, she mentioned that "over time the bookshop ended up shaping me more than I shaped it. Regulars came in asking for things on topics that I had never engaged in at other than the most superficial level so whether that was anarchist politics, reading black and pan-africanist political thinking, I hadn't delved into those and people came in looking for them which opened up those doors to me to try and find them and figure out what those look like. Other kinds of

²⁵ Mairi Oliver, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 20/08/2025, transcripts 3.

²⁶ Mairi Oliver, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 20/08/2025, transcripts 3.

feminism and intersectional feminism, writing around sex work, a whole host of things. I think people saw the ‘radical’ as an invitation to engage and demand a higher standard of book selling. To demand more diversity, to demand to be heard, I think it was also this call that the place was theirs, that if you identified that way or if you were marginalized and minoritized and you were not represented elsewhere then this was your shop and you had a right to ask for more, and so that led to a lot more conversations.”²⁷

In the case of both bookshops, the economic practice of selling a book does not approach its stakeholders in a producer-consumer or seller-market sense, but accounts significantly for the dynamic nature of how individuals want to consume, especially how and where they decide to consume knowledge. In this self-fashioning, they attract each other to develop a thriving radical community that “does not stray far from the bookshelves”²⁸.

Close Reading

*Restless Land: Radical Rewritings of Scottish History by Alan McCombes and Roz Paterson*²⁹

McCombes and Paterson present a political narration of Scottish history from 500 AD to 1914 rooted in a principle of fact-based storytelling from a ‘radical and working class standpoint’³⁰. Scottish history makes for “good storytelling stuff”³¹, as McCombes puts it, “[But] we do not stand aloft and aloof from the facts. We venture opinions and draw conclusions. We take sides.”³² With reference to the Scottish Referendum he adds, “both authors intend to vote Yes. Both of us stand on the political left. Neither of us are members of supporters of the SNP.”³³ Their narrative thus uses more than a distinguishable voice, it is an identifiable one from the outset, and

²⁷ Mairi Oliver, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 20/08/2025, transcripts 3.

²⁸ Ally Fogg, “Why radical bookshops are an essential strand of political culture”, *The Guardian*, 1 May, 2014 accessed 28/08/2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/01/radical-bookshops-political-culture-independent-books>.

²⁹ All quotes are from McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. *Restless Land: A radical journey through Scotland's history Volume One (500AD-1914)*. Calton Books: Glasgow.

³⁰ McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. ‘Foreword’.

³¹ McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. ‘Foreword’

³² McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. ‘Foreword’

³³ McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. ‘Foreword’

addresses itself to a wide audience with the aim to clarify its stance with a chronological progression of facts. In working antithetically to the academic convention of presenting ideas and hinging opinions within larger networks of authority, or an academic frame of references, i.e., allusions and references to other works and writers, the account attempts to subvert the impenetrability of academic history writing that can seem disconnected and cumbersome to the unseasoned reader. The flow of the prose is conversational, emphatic, occasionally snarky even, supplemented by obtuse statements that pose necessary rhetoric while also informing with entertainment. In “Under the Union Flag”, the Union Act of 1707, the momentous event that married Scotland with England, is introduced: “Under the union, things surely could only get better? Actually, they got worse. Much worse.”³⁴ While it is not uncommon to have harsh statements in historical narrations, the repetition of ‘much worse’ produces a kind of blunt disdain that adds an honest but hyperbolic character to the narrative voice. Statements like this produce harshly transparent declarations to answer the big old “whose side are you on?” question. Strategic segues into explanations of social hierarchies are infused with a distinct vantage point or personal position amidst the text’s assertive alignment with Scottish independence and working class representation. For instance in the following excerpt:

Far from liberating Scotland from the middle ages, the union created a stalemate state which centuries later still has one foot mired in the fusty clay of feudalism. Even today, for a mere four hundred quid on Amazon, you can peruse 4,500 pages of *Burke’s Peerage*, which describes itself as ‘the definitive guide to genealogy and heraldry of the Peerage and Landed Gentry of the United Kingdom’, including ‘knights, Scottish and Irish chiefs, and Scottish Feudal barons’. If you thought such types only existed at Historic Scotland special events, dressed in clanking armour or swinging plaids for the entertainment of children, think again. Over 120,000 people are listed, each assigned a specific number to show their precise ranking in the social hierarchy of Britain. And if you’re not at least 4,500th in line to the throne, consider yourself a nobody.³⁵

³⁴ McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. ‘Under the Union Flag’ .p.93.

³⁵ McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. ‘Under the Union Flag’ .p.93.

The use of the personal pronoun 'you' and reflexive 'yourself' in the above excerpt shapes how the self is determined. It is entirely plausible to identify it as a working class individual who views the hierarchy from a place of loss or disadvantage, or penetrates the performative facade of the system, with the 'at least' implying a possible quantification or measurability of the 'you' in consideration, and the 'mere' prefixing the price of the book adds some sarcasm. Both in a temporal and socioeconomical sense, this construction of an 'us' and 'them' is further insinuated in the use of informal generalisations as 'such types', appearing to refer to another or an opposing; 'nobody', as a way of referring to one's own or oneself as being without personhood to the metrics in question. It permits the reader, regardless of who it may be, "to experience the past while recognizing its alterity".³⁶ The narrative does grow beyond identifying the self through a core set of beliefs and alignments, in-groups and out-groups, and engages with mainstream academic discourse, as well as prominent political and cultural figures in the Scottish zeitgeist. Later on in "The Empire State", the writers consider what the Union Act may have given Scotland:

If it had not been for the union, would Robert Burns have stuck to the plough, the whiskey and the women? Would James Watt's father have taught his son to play the bagpipes instead of instructing him in mathematics, woodcraft, metalwork and instrument making? Would the modern world have bypassed Scotland? The Scottish Enlightenment may not have flourished so spectacularly without the empire to raise it onto the global stage, but neither would it have been drowned at birth. Scotland had one phenomenal advantage over most other advanced European countries: its educational system was probably the most advanced in the world. It produced inventors, engineers, scientists and philosophers like Oxbridge today churns out BBC presenters.³⁷

Stylistically, rhetoric is used heavily throughout the narrative, and an interesting use of repetition and simile reveal in a way, the rhetorical and metaphorical nature of popular cultural figures who are fictionalised as heroes for the benefit of national history, thus James Watt, Robert Burns and even BBC presenters appear to have a balanced, mildly diminished portrayal. Still, the text

³⁶ Jager, Eric. 2016. "The Inscrutable Past: Writing Narrative Non-Fiction." *Postmedieval, Suppl. After Eco: Novel Medievalisms* 7 (2). p.194.

³⁷ McCombes, Alan, Paterson, Roz. 2014. 'The Empire State'. p.126.

manages to make itself expository rather than referential in nature, akin to sounding oratory instead of ornamentally verbal or intellectually verbose.

Experiments in Imagining Otherwise by Lola Olufemi

In a manifesto-like preface to *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*³⁸ Olufemi writes, “Here, the *otherwise* is a linguistic stand-in for a stance against; it is a posture, the layered echoes of a gesture. I promise you that no approximations will be made. Only pleas, wishes, frantic screams, notes on strategy, contributions in different registers. Substitute the *otherwise* with that thing that keeps you alive, or the ferocity with which you detest this world.”³⁹ A clear emphasis is placed on defying structure and genre through emotive words, time-bending and textured writing that reflect in the above description. *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* was written during the course of the pandemic in winter of 2020, and Olufemi describes the means of the work to the reader as “an invitation to imagine”.

‘Everyday atrocity’⁴⁰, is a piece that follows the bizarre event of the death of a man who falls out of the underbelly of an aircraft en route from Kenya, which lands in the back garden of an unassuming resident of Offerton, South London as a frozen ‘ice block’. Narrated alongside the 13th, 14th and 15th articles of the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, Olufemi examines what is missed between a human being’s theoretical entitlement to rights that are universally agreed upon, and the casual, easy violation and dismissal of them. Olufemi shows her line of thinking:

What good is it to talk about rights if people do not have *means*? I want to ask, how do ‘rights fail us and what would happen if instead, we supported each other’s claims to a liveable life? What does a ‘claim’ do that a right cannot? What could a pact do?’⁴¹

³⁸ All quotes taken from Olufemi, Lola, 2021. *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*. Hajar Press: London.

³⁹ Olufemi, Lola, 2021. ‘A note on language’. p.3.

⁴⁰ Olufemi, Lola, 2021. p.66.

⁴¹ Olufemi, Lola, 2021. p.67.

Questioning the absurdity of a news report that details a premature death in reconciliation with the ‘milestone in universalistic language’, the UN Charter of Human Rights, really exemplifies the experience of being an individual in the contemporary globalised world that characterises itself as the most accessible and connected world in the history of humankind. The above excerpt depicts the dichotomous experience of interrogating oneself with a rhetorical quality, but it is simply as much a concentration of questions that requires answering in earnest - answers that may likely not be generalisable and in this, are not rhetorical. It is here that Olufemi’s opening *otherwise* unravels itself to reading further.

Claim means ‘to state or assert that something is the case, typically without providing evidence of proof’; and as a noun, ‘a demand or request for something considered one’s due’.

I’m stuck on this question: *what was his due?*⁴²

Webs of questioning are followed down to the littlest, most atomizable linguistic detail, literally working in definitions of words to decode meaning. While the book opens with a recasting of ‘otherwise’, *Everyday atrocity* attempts to part through the quagmire that ‘rights’ connotes, followed by their a musing on their tangibility or implementation in ‘means’, and then reaching around to understand what a ‘claim’ is, finally how the state of being ‘due’ informs a ‘claim’. An act of renouncing any authority or knowability over the reader is indeed a radical act of dismantling unspoken power structures and conventions that can cloud literature and experiences of reading and writing. Assuming a register of questioning that is as communal as it is personal converges with the idea that a heterogenous global audience can be spoken at and with - that what may at times seem like an unfiltered record of Olufemi’s stream of consciousness is really quite essential and easily intelligible when permitted to collide with the readers’ own. Constitutions and charters choose instead a prescriptive language in an officious medium that is deceptively accessible. Olufemi uses her juxtaposition to expose this, but also more pragmatically notes the articles as they would formally be recorded, on the previous page, perfectly formatted and in readable language.

⁴² Olufemi, Lola, 2021. p.68.

Audre Lorde in conversation with Adrienne Rich about her seminal essays ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’ and ‘Uses of the Erotic’ in an interview in 1979 said, “They’re part of something that’s not finished yet. I don’t know what the rest of it is, but they’re clear progressions in feeling out something connected with the first piece of prose I ever wrote. One thread in my life is the battle to preserve my perceptions - pleasant or unpleasant, painful or whatever ...”⁴³ It appears Olufemi uses a similar principle in both embracing what is unknown or incomplete, as well as doing so in a style that is so intimately personal yet accessible and anchored in emotions that may speak to any audience. This is exemplified best in the paragraph that separates the aforementioned excerpts of questioning from *Everyday atrocity*:

I’m thinking of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem, I’m committing her to memory: ‘We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.’ Bonds might be more powerful than rights; they’re insoluble, they signal a mutual commitment to remain involved with one another beyond the narrowly defined limits of the law.

In ‘committing her to memory’, Olufemi commits the lines from the poem ‘Paul Robeson’ by Gwendolyn Brooks to a collective memory of reader and writer, similarly, the ‘bond’ goes on to write about in the lines that follow it only intensify this feeling further. Lola Olufemi’s voice remembers Gwendolyn Brooks’, who used her voice to bond to Paul Robeson’s, who dispelled his acclaimed bass-baritone to song.

Conclusion

Radical spaces have been narrativized in two ways within this research: as a ‘body’ or an animate space themselves, and as being ‘bodied’, or literally possessing a concentration of bodies or people at any given time. A sense of these observations falls in line with some of the earliest records that were made during fieldwork.⁴⁴ In this case, being radical becomes inherently

⁴³ Lorde, Audre, 2019. ‘An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich’, *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Random House. p.71.

⁴⁴ Risha Srinivas, Laidlaw Scholars Network, 18/06/2025.

about autonomy and self-determination, especially in the case of communities, and how people interact amongst themselves in those spaces.⁴⁵ Dave Cope had a pithy two-syllable response to my question about whether radical bookshops attract a specific crowd of people, if there was a pattern he had observed over the years. “Freaks”, came the response preceded by a brief contemplative pause and followed by a broad smile. “No, that’s just a joke.”, he continued, “It attracts all sorts of people, so I couldn’t say, really. Perhaps the single commonality is that they all possess some pre-existing curiosity in understanding the structures at work in our world, and this is the most tangible way of reaching into them.”⁴⁶ The findings of this research are able to pinpoint that the radical is invested in both bookshops, in mediating the nature of interactions that people may have with each other and with acquiring texts or material knowledge. On an individual case basis, the project is able to establish that with increased access to acquiring knowledge, the vaster the capacity to self-determine and the room to determine oneself translates to the existence of thriving communities.

<https://laidlawsscholars.network/posts/early-revelations-from-researching-literature-in-radical-bookshops>

⁴⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

⁴⁶ Dave Cope, interviewed by Risha Srinivas, 02/07/2025, transcripts 1.

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