

“THE WAR FOR THE IMAGINATION”

**Author Representations of the UK Public Library
Service in an Age of Austerity**

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Abstract

This study explores author texts on public libraries in the United Kingdom between the years 2010 and 2018. The texts appear in a national public debate about the value, purpose and direction of the library service following a significant number of library closures and funding cuts. These were the result of the global financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 and the subsequent implementation of the austerity programme by the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government that came into power in 2010. The term author texts refer to a variety of written materials such as opinion pieces, anthologies, memoirs, novels, short stories, poetry and picture books that provide a commentary on these events. Combining field theory with a thematic reading of the author texts, the study focuses on the struggle over how the public library service should be represented and defended as an institution and an idea in an age of austerity. The examination is conducted through situating the author texts within a five-space model that divides the library into dimensions of inspiration, performativity, meeting and learning, to which the librarian has been added as an inter-dimension. The study shows that the author representations are closely connected to the historic identity of the public library as a cultural institution and a public service.

Keywords

Public library, librarians, public library development, public debate, United Kingdom, authors, austerity, Big Society, public library closures, funding cuts, field theory, four-space model

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1. Introduction

“When I was a child I read books”.

Marilynne Robinson¹

In 2008 the Poet Laureate Andrew Motion called for a national conversation about public libraries in the United Kingdom. He wrote:

Libraries need more money and many need remodelling. Before this can happen there needs to be a national conversation about what we expect libraries to be like in 2008. Should they be full of books? Or should books take second place to machines? A lot of people, including me, come somewhere in the middle.

Motion 2008

Yet, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 the UK entered the most extensive recession since the Second World War (Chu 2017). Following the 2010 election of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government led by David Cameron, his chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced a five-year plan of fiscal austerity to erase the national deficit. The austerity programme has imposed significant pressure on local councils and hit hard against a public library service that was already struggling (Goulding 2006). Since 2010 hundreds of libraries have closed or been transferred to community groups and thousands of library staff have lost their jobs (BBC News 2016). According to author Alan Gibbon the public library service is currently facing “the greatest crisis in its history” (The Guardian 2016).

In 2013 I started working as a library assistant in a public library in East Sussex in England. When I left the post in 2016 the service had gone through a series of restructures, which were a response to significant budget pressures within the local council and resulted in the closure of several community libraries, significant staff redundancies and funding cuts. This situation is not an isolated occurrence as similar restructures are being carried out in public libraries throughout the UK. However, it could be argued that what has previously been an internal struggle within libraries has, in the light of recent events, become the topic of a large public debate (Galluzzi 2014). It may be suggested that the “crisis culture” that has long permeated the library sector (Buschman 2003, p. 3) has been forced to the surface by the very visible consequences of austerity in the UK. In 2016 the author Caitlin Moran wrote:

¹ Robinson 2012, p. 85.

I went up and saw some of the austerity last month. I hadn't intended to – I was just visiting my old home town – but I ended up in my local library: the one I lived in between the ages of five and fifteen. And there, in the library, was some austerity. A visible thing. Something you could mark out on a map, with a pin.

Moran 2016, p. 304

Hence, it would appear that Motion did get the conversation he bargained for, and more. The recent developments within libraries have indeed sparked a public debate, as well as protests and rallies nationwide. Looking at what has been written about public libraries during the past decade, it is evident that authors have been particularly visible and vocal in the debate. These authors have produced a large body of texts that provides an insight into the struggle over the conceptual borders of the public library service. In this study I explore author texts written about libraries between the years 2010 to 2018, which I refer to as the age of austerity. The term author texts refer to a variety of written materials such as opinion pieces, anthologies, memoirs, novels, short stories, poetry and picture books. Thus, the aim of this study is to examine how the public library is represented and defended by one of the most central voices in the debate – the authors.

1.1. Background

In an interview with *BBC News*, librarian and activist Ian Anstice states: “Our public library system used to be envy of the world. Now it is used as a cautionary tale that librarians use worldwide to scare their colleagues” (BBC News 2016). The aim of this section is to provide a brief background to the central events that have underpinned the rise and fall of public libraries in the UK. It will also include an overview of the national response to the perceived public library crisis, focusing primarily on the author perspective.

In his decade-by-decade analysis Nick Moore (2004) describes the origin, growth, consolidation, golden age and, finally, the decline of the public library service in Britain. Moore argues that the public library as we know it today is very much a product of the post-war welfare state. Despite this, most scholars trace the origin of the service to the 1850 Public Library Act, which was a result of Victorian social reform to support mass education and prevent civil unrest (Black 1996, Moore 2004). Although the Act was very restrictive, and the first services relied heavily on voluntary labour and book donations, it provided the legitimacy for further development. It was through these early efforts that “the idea of a library service open to all” was beginning to take hold (Moore 2004, p. 30).

The modern public library service emerged fully in the 1960s following the passing of the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act and the subsequent Bourdillion Report, which provided a comprehensive resource standard for the service. The following decade is often referred to as the “golden age of public libraries” in Britain (Moore 2004, p. 41). During this period the local authorities doubled their spending on public libraries, which resulted in a dramatic growth in the number of qualified

staff, the expansion of stock and the range of services offered. It was at this point that the public library became defined “less in terms of civic society and more according to the principles of welfarism: universalism; heavy investment by central government; and top-down services delivered by professionals committed to the public service ethos” (Black 2000, p. 111).

However, this development was brought to a halt with the economic crisis in the 1970s, which led to the government to reducing public expenditure. Although the cuts imposed by the Conservative Government in the 1980s caused the service to stagnate, it was not until the 1990s that public libraries in the UK truly began to decline (Moore 2004). Alistair Black identifies four central factors that impacted on public libraries during these decades: “cuts, class, corporate culture and computers” (Black 2004, p. 141). Firstly, Black argues that the cuts were becoming noticeable to the public, which prompted the formation of the first lobby group, The Library Campaign, in 1984. Secondly, Black argues that the public library, despite its liberal ideals, have tended to ignore issues regarding social class. With the exception of what Black refers to as “community librarianship”², the public library “had assumed an unmistakably middle-class identity, in keeping with its historic image as an institution of highbrow culture and social refinement” (Black 2000, p. 147). Thirdly, during this period it was also possible to detect the growing influence of management techniques adopted from the private sector, often referred to as “New Public Management”. Fourthly, Black highlights the impact of new media formats, information communication technologies and the contentious idea of the information society (Black 2000).

Moore also suggests that the lack of investment during this period led to a rapid decline in “both the quantity and quality of the service” (Moore 2004, p. 49). Firstly, he argues that the lack of investment in new stock combined with an increase in paperback copies significantly reduced the quality of the book stock. Secondly, he explains that staff numbers were kept the same but the proportion of qualified staff was reduced, which compromised the effectiveness of the workforce. Thirdly, he explains that in order to avoid protests many local authorities chose not to close service points but to reduce opening hours, which made libraries less accessible. These reductions, Moore argues, serve as an explanation for the decline in public libraries usage (Moore 2004).

However, whilst making a strong case for the lack of investments in public libraries, Moore does not account for other key changes that have affected the service in recent years. Anne Goulding (2006) provides a broader view on the central environmental factors that impact on public libraries in the 21st century. These include public sector reform, the rise of the knowledge economy, increased social polarisation and technological innovation, as well as changes in lifestyles and consumer patterns. These societal developments “all prompt a reassessment of whether the values and ideologies that sustained public libraries in the past are still relevant” (Goulding 2006, p. 18). Meanwhile, other research highlights the shift from modernity to postmodernity. Black (2000), for instance, questions whether the public library – an

² Community librarianship was a mode practiced by a group of radical librarians in the late 1970s and early 1980s who sought to empower marginalised groups in society (Black & Muddiman 1997).

institution characterised by modernity, professionalism, print culture and universalism – will survive in the postmodern age. Thus, although the challenges put forth by Goulding and Black are made more acute by the current lack of funding, this alone does not account for the uncertainty and lack of direction experienced by public libraries today. As such, it is evident that even before the implementation of austerity, the UK public library was already “a service in distress” (Goulding 2006, p. 3).

What follows here is summary of the central events that occurred after the financial crisis. Ben Chu, economics editor for the *Independent*, provides a critical summary of the economic and political developments in the UK in the past decade (Chu 2017). He explains that in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 the country entered the largest recession since the Second World War. Following the 2010 election and the forming of the Conservative–Liberal Democratic coalition government led by David Cameron, his chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced a five-year plan to erase the deficit. The plan entailed £110 billion of fiscal austerity measures, which meant significant public spending cuts and tax increases (Chu 2017). The term “age of austerity” was popularised by David Cameron in a speech that he gave one year prior to his election, where he stated: “The age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity” (Cameron 2009). This statement was a critique of the New Labour government in power at the time.

Despite the many warnings from economists “not to cut so deeply and so swiftly”, the plan went ahead, but the economy did not improve (Chu 2017). According to Chu local council spending has been reduced by an average of 40% since 2010. Looking back over the past decade, he argues that the austerity programme was, in fact, “a political choice” rather than “an economic necessity” (Chu 2017). However, after the general election in 2016, the current government led by Theresa May is now under heavy pressure to increase public spending. Yet, Chu concludes that although “austerity defined as a conservative political project to shrink the size of the state probably is over”, the British public will continue to pay the price (Chu 2017).

As Chu illustrates, the austerity programme has imposed significant pressure on local councils, which has impacted greatly on public libraries and library staff. In 2016 *BBC News* published data from 207 local authorities to estimate the overall impact of the austerity programme on public library services in the UK. They report that since 2010 343 libraries have closed, the number of staff has fallen with 25%, 174 libraries have transferred to community groups and another 50 have transferred to external organisations. Over the same period the number of volunteers has nearly doubled (BBC News 2016).

Hence, it is evident that public libraries are not only underfunded, but are also moving away from municipal control. This development is often attributed to the idea of the Big Society, which was the flagship policy of the Conservative Party during the 2010 election. The alleged aim of the Big Society is “to rebalance the relationship between individuals, society and state, encouraging the sharing of responsibility and placing trust in people” (Mycock & Tonge 2011, p. 56). In practice this means that local communities along with charities and social enterprises may take over the running of some government services such as public libraries. As evidenced by the *BBC News* data, this has become a desirable solution for many local authorities during periods of

severe financial restraints. As a consequence, the Big Society is often criticized as “a smokescreen for public service cuts” (Mycock & Tonge 2011, p. 56).

Yet, the dismantling of public libraries has not gone unnoticed. The perceived public library crisis has inspired what can only be described as a national protest movement. As well as existing organisations such as The Society of Authors and The Library Campaign, many new campaigns have sprung up, including, for instance, Speak Up for Libraries, Campaign for the Book and My Library By Right. It is also possible to follow the development of public libraries on the website Public Library News, which was created by the aforementioned librarian Ian Anstice. These protests, then, have brought together library professionals, local people and prominent public figures in the fight to protect public libraries from government spending cuts. Looking at the many examples of social action and outpouring of texts written in response to the crisis, it is evident that authors have played a significant role in this movement.

During the past decade there has also been a lively public debate surrounding the future of libraries, particularly in the *Guardian*, which has been reporting on the public library situation since 2009 (Galluzzi 2014). What follows here is a brief overview of the central events covered by the *Guardian*, focusing predominantly on author involvement. Around this time, the challenges facing libraries were becoming evident to actors outside the profession (Galluzzi 2014). For the first time since 1991 there was a call for a public inquiry prompted by the proposed closure of several libraries in Wirral in 2009, which ended with the council having to withdraw its plans. This encouraged other local communities to take action against library closures and cuts, which has prompted numerous high-profile campaigns involving both local people and top authors. The most noteworthy cases concern districts in London, such as Brent, Kendal Rise and Lambeth, but there have also been many nationwide examples of protests in rural areas, Northern cities and Scotland.

In 2013, as many public libraries were under threat, the doors opened to the new flagship library in Birmingham, which was met with great enthusiasm by the author community (Guardian 2009). Only a few years later, however, the *Guardian* reported that the library was struggling, proposing to reduce their opening hours from 73 to 40 hours per week and making 100 out of their 188 members of staff redundant (Morris 2014). There was also a controversial call for the public to donate books in order to fill the shelves of this towering landmark building (Flood 2015). The struggles of Birmingham library became widely known and even found their way into fiction in the novel *The Little Shop of Happy-Ever-After* (2016), where Jenny Colgan tells the story of a librarian who is made redundant by Birmingham City Council.

The authors have also been active in other forms of social action, including occupations of library buildings, public protests outside of parliament and several letter campaigns to top politicians. Many of these actions took place in connection with National Library Week, which is an annual event that started as a grassroots initiative by the author Alan Gibbons in 2011. The event takes place in October and has inspired much activity nationwide, which has received considerable attention in

the national press. Furthermore, several of the authors have also held key positions, such as that of Children's Laureates³, which they have used to advocate for libraries.

Additionally, the authors have produced a large body of texts that includes numerous opinion pieces in the national newspapers. An example of this was the "Love letters to libraries" campaign, where several prominent authors compiled letters addressed to their favourite libraries. The public library is also represented in anthologies, memoirs, novels, short story collections and picture written during this period. Moreover, some authors, including Stephen Fry and Irving Welsh, were featured in the documentary *The Safe House* (2016), where filmmaker Greta Bellamacina and journalist Davina Catt "document the history of British public libraries and their current decline" (Guardian 2016).

1.2. Problem Statement

The recent developments within public libraries have in a sense sent the service full circle. In some parts of the UK, libraries are turning back into humble community projects. It could be argued that this trend has called into question the very notion of a national public library service and its place in society today and in the future. Ian Anstice states that "the old certainties of public libraries being a public good, protected by popularity and government, have gone" (Anstice 2015, p. 4). However, from the national protest movement and fierce debate that arose in the wake of these events it is also evident that the idea of the public library lives on and will not be surrendered without a fight. Still, the fight is not for one single idea but a myriad of representations of the public library that exist in the mind of its defenders.

Hence, the public library debate is characterised by both consensus and conflict, which calls for an investigation into the struggle over which representation of the service should prevail. This fragmented image is one of the most contentious issues within public library research. According to Evjen and Audunson (2008) the fragmentation can be explained by the fact that public libraries are highly complex institutions that are situated under several different policy areas relating to culture, education and welfare provision. The public library is also shaped through its long history that may bring with it "deeply entrenched institutional images" (Evjen and Audunson 2008, p. 164). Similarly, Goulding writes:

It is perhaps inevitable that a service with its history and sustained by public funding will provoke disagreement and dispute about value, purpose and direction. Recent policy initiatives as well as broad social, technological and economic developments have brought issues of impact and rationale into sharp relief and forced public librarians and their supporters to engage with the underlying principles and justifications of public libraries.

Goulding 2006, p. 347

³ The position of Children's Laureate has been awarded to authors and illustrators of children's books since the idea was introduced by Ted Hughes and Michael Morpurgo in 1999. The role provides an opportunity for the recipient to promote causes related to reading and literacy. During the period of this study the position has been held by Michael Rosen, Anthony Browne, Julia Donaldson, Malorie Blackman, Chris Riddell and now Lauren Child (BookTrust 2017).

Thus, the central problem in this study relates to the question of how the value, purpose and direction of the public library service are represented and defended during a period of national austerity.

1.3. Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to explore the debate surrounding the public library in the UK, following the implementation of austerity measures in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008. It can be argued that the latent crisis experienced by public libraries in many countries today (Bushman 2003) has reached a breaking point in the UK. As such, this is a particularly poignant time and place to study the public library as the perceived crisis has brought about a national debate surrounding the central value, purpose and direction of the service, which is one of the most central questions in public library research. Moreover, it should also be noted that an underlying assumption of this study is that the way libraries are represented and discussed in the press and through other forms of representation has an impact on the public perception of the service (Hedemark 2009).

Hence, the aim of this study is to explore how the value, purpose and direction of public libraries are represented and defended by one of the most central voices in the debate – the authors. Authors have a strong cultural and historic link with the public library and remain one of its most ardent defenders. At the same time, these defences are not always met with enthusiasm by public library researchers, since the author perspective is sometimes perceived as elitist, nostalgic and reactionary and thus damaging to efforts to reinvent the image of the institution (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, Hedemark 2009, Glans 2016). As such, the author texts provide an excellent opportunity to explore not only how the library is represented in public discourse but also some of the central conflicts within the field relating to the institutional identity and image of libraries.

Finally, another central focus of the study is the wider socio-political context of the public library debate – the age of austerity. A large part of the author texts touch on issues relating to the effects of the austerity programme and the Big Society agenda, which are indicative of changes in the ideological climate in the UK. As such, it is also vital to consider the historic development of the public library and how this impacts on the way that libraries are perceived today. This situates the study in the research field that deals with issues relating to the changing role of public libraries in society. Moreover, although the situation in the UK is perhaps more extreme than in other countries, it can be argued that a similar sense of uncertainty is keenly felt throughout public libraries in the West. Thus, the findings of this study are also relevant to public library research outside of the UK.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How is the public library service represented and defended as an institution and an idea in author texts in an age of austerity?
2. How do the author representations of the public library service relate to the wider socio-political context of the public library debate?
3. How do the author texts compare and contrast with contemporary public library research?

1.5. Limitations

This section addresses the limitations of the study in relation to the temporal focus, the material selection and the definition of libraries and authors.

The temporal focus of this study is the period between 2010 and 2018, which I refer to as “the age of austerity”. It takes its starting point around the time when the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government led by David Cameron came into power and implemented the austerity programme. This is also when the public library debate began to pick up in the national press. Although austerity has been declared over (Chu 2017), I have chosen to continue the study to the present day because the debate is ongoing.

The selected material for this study is restricted to texts published through traditional channels such as the national press or the publishing industry and thus excludes materials produced through social media or in more informal forums. The reasoning behind this is to restrict the material to a manageable amount and select sources of a more permanent nature.

Moreover, although school libraries and university libraries are mentioned in the press, the focus of this study is on public libraries as they are the focal point of the debate (Galluzzi 2014). Public libraries are also unique in the sense that they are open to anyone. Hence, when I refer to libraries in my writing this is exclusively in relation to public libraries.

Finally, unlike some of the previous research (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, Hedemark 2009, Glans 2016) where the term author also includes journalists and other public intellectuals, I reserve the term for individuals who refer to themselves as authors. It should be noted, however, that the authors in this study produce a variety of textual expressions, which has resulted in a diverse collection of sources.

2. Previous Research

This chapter, which is divided into three main sections, provides an overview of the previous research on topics relating to this study. In the first section I explore the central issues discussed in public library research in the UK during the decade following the financial crisis. The second section focuses on previous research on the perception of public libraries and librarians in the press, both in recent history and today. In the third section I explore earlier studies that examine how libraries are represented in author texts.

2.1. Public Libraries in an Age of Austerity

Since the financial crisis and the subsequent implementation of the austerity programme, there has been an attempt within the field of Library and Information Science to examine the impact of these developments on the public library service. This examination centres on three key topics: the impact of austerity, the influence of neoliberal ideology and the Big Society agenda. What follows here is an outline of how these issues are understood and debated by some of the core voices in contemporary public library research in the UK.

The first topic relates to the role of public libraries during the recent recession. In an article entitled “Rising to the challenge: A look at the role of public libraries in times of recession” Christine Rooney-Browne (2009) looks back on the role that public libraries played in the UK during the period following the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008. The study concludes that public libraries, through their commitment to free and equal provision of materials, information and services, defended their position as an essential public service during the recession. Despite this, she accurately predicts that public libraries will not be spared major budget cuts, which may have severe consequences for the future of the service. She concludes:

It has taken a global financial crisis for public libraries to receive the credit that they so rightly deserve for the invaluable role that they play in society. It is hoped that high profile advocacy campaigns, positive stories in the press and renewed public appreciation will save public libraries from the threat of budget cuts and closures and encourage ongoing investment and development in what is clearly a vital public service.

Rooney-Browne 2009, p. 348

A few years later, Reetu Child and Anne Goulding (2012) reach a similar conclusion in their study “Public libraries in the recession: The librarian’s axiom”. Here, they examine the validity of “the librarian’s axiom”, which states that public libraries

perform well during periods of economic decline (James 1986). The main findings of the study confirm that public library usage increased during the recession, particularly in relation to career advice and free training courses. However, the continuing cuts to services may also be an indication that local and national politicians lack an understanding of the services that public libraries provide (Child & Goulding 2012).

Moreover, in his article “Public library closures in England: The need to Act?” David McMenemy (2009) emphasises the need to update the 1964 Public Libraries and Museum Act to fit the current challenges faced by libraries in the 21st century. The Act is often referred to in the public debate as it stipulates that the Secretary of State is responsible for the adequate provision of public library services. In light of recent events, however, McMenemy argues that a new Act is in order. “We need an Act”, he writes, “that considers the totality of services provided by the modern public library if the vital role they play is to be protected from cuts” (McMenemy 2009, p. 559). He concludes that the Act should also stipulate the proper procedure for closing or merging service points in a way that does not violate the rights of the community.

The second topic relates to the influences of neoliberal ideology on public libraries and the turn towards market adaptation. In an article entitled “Public libraries as impartial spaces in a consumer society: Possible, plausible, desirable?” Christine Rooney-Browne and David McMenemy (2010) wrestle with the question whether public libraries should conform to market adaptation and how this might impact on their role as alternative spaces in society. The article is written in response to the suggestion that many of the traditional functions of public libraries could be fulfilled by the private sphere. Subsequently, efforts have been made to transform and modernise library buildings, find ways to generate revenue and increase digitisation.

However, Rooney-Browne and McMenemy, argue that the possibilities of developing new services in the current economic climate are small and that seeking alternatives to public funding is necessary to meet the needs of future users. Simultaneously, they express a concern that the immediate benefits of pursuing commercial opportunities could potentially undermine what libraries are trying to achieve in the long term. They remind us “that the role of the public library is to provide a space promoting community knowledge, citizenship, personal growth, democratic access to information, building trust and challenging preconceived ideas” (Rooney-Browne & McMenemy 2010, p. 462).

Another article on this topic is “The emergence and impact of neoliberal ideology on UK public library policy, 1997-2010”, in which Margaret Greene and David McMenemy (2012) examine the influence of neoliberalism on UK public library policy prior to the general election of 2010. Through a critical reading of the central policies produced during this period, they identify two dominant neoliberal narratives that relate to the shift towards the deprofessionalisation and commercialisation of the public library service. They argue that the examined documents have a tendency to paint the picture of the library as an elitist institution in a state of decline. This leads the authors to conclude that the adoption of private sector jargon, aimed at political leaders, risks undermining the role of the public library as a democratic welfare institution (Greene & McMenemy 2012).

In his article “Income generation in public libraries: Potentials and pitfalls” Hartwig Pautz (2014) also examines the controversies surrounding income generation in relation to what he refers to as the “public library ethos”, which identifies libraries as a free public service (Pautz 2014, p. 561). He also compares the current development in libraries to the international public library manifestos and the national code for practice that are all centred around the principle of free and equal access. Pautz argues that it is possible to detect a division within the contemporary research field between those who argue that service charges are acceptable as long as it is possible to distinguish between basic and optional services and those who believe that the introduction of fees risks turning public libraries into private ventures. Pautz concludes that the debate surrounding income generation is one of the most ethically contentious issues in public libraries today.

The third topic relates to the impact of the Big Society on public libraries in the UK. Set against a backdrop of closures and cuts, Anne Goulding (2013) examines the effects of the Big Society programme on public libraries in England in a study entitled “The Big Society and English public libraries: Where are we now?”. Goulding argues that the current development in public libraries incorporates three of the core ideas of the Big Society, which include “public service reform”, “community empowerment” and “social action” (Goulding 2013, p. 481). “Public service reform” refers to the instances where libraries have been transferred from the local authorities to, for example, community groups. “Community empowerment” involves transferring the power from the state to the community, allowing people greater control in local decision making. Finally, “Social action” relates to the question of library volunteers and is perhaps the most disputed issue surrounding the impact of the Big Society programme on public libraries.

According to Goulding (2013), the use of volunteers in public libraries can be divided into the “involving model”, where volunteers provide additional value, and the “devolving model”, where volunteers take over the running of the service. Until recently volunteers have been used for additional value but there is now an increasing concern that volunteers are, in fact, replacing paid staff. This is particularly relevant in relation to community managed libraries, which can be run with or without the involvement of the local authorities. This, in turn, raises questions about the accountability and efficiency of libraries as a public service. Another key question is whether less affluent communities have the capacity to run libraries or if the Big Society is viable only for the well-to-do. Returning to her initial question, Goulding concludes:

The analysis above suggests that public libraries are indeed delivering the Big Society agenda at grassroots level but at the core of the apparently irresistible tide of community managed libraries lies a drive for austerity and the localism rhetoric has become a convenient smokescreen for local councils for withdrawal from public library service delivery.

Goulding 2013, p. 480

The equity of service provision is also raised by Claire Bynner (2012) in her article “Equity, austerity and access to public services”. Here, she investigates the accessibility and provision of public libraries in an ethnically diverse low-income area. Through interviews with patrons and staff Bynner argues that the public library

plays an important role in these communities, particularly as a local meeting point and a source of information and connection. Though more informal networks play a crucial role, Bynner rejects the Big Society agenda as it is evident that these networks alone are not enough to sustain struggling communities during periods of economic distress.

Bynner also provides an insight into why certain groups struggle to access public services, which relates both to their own ability and inclination and to the way that services ration and adapt their provision. Firstly, she argues that public services such as libraries are often more protected in affluent communities, where people are better able to articulate their needs and rights. Secondly, she suggests that these services often operate on professional adjudication, which refers to the tendency to divide users into categories of “deserving” and “underserving” based on moral and social judgements. An example of this was how many of the library staff in the study expressed a preference for patrons who visit regularly and use the library to borrow books and are thus perceived as “true patrons”. Bynner concludes that the implementation of austerity risks exacerbating these tendencies:

These vulnerabilities are sensitive to processes of rationing, and are likely to be intensified by the indirect effects of austerity on perceptions of deservingness and eligibility. Resource uncertainty increases pressure at the front-line, resulting in the greater use of bias to differentiate between clients, and to manage the service.

Bynner 2012, p. 22

Finally, in their study “Issues of quality and professionalism of library volunteers: Reporting from a qualitative case study” Bidy Casselden, Geoff Walton, Alison Pickard and Julie Mcleod (2017) examine the issue of quality and professionalism with regard to library volunteers from the perspective of patrons, staff and volunteers. The investigation suggests that library patrons find it hard to separate paid staff from volunteers, which could have a negative impact on the professional status of librarians. Moreover, despite the fact that the volunteers – in terms of their educational background, their commitment to the cause and their connections – are considered an asset to the service, staff also expressed a number of concerns. The most notable, perhaps, is that many choose to volunteer because they have a “strong past association” with public libraries, which could mean they have a “pre-determined view” of what a library does (Casselden et al. 2017, p. 212). Another similar point is made by a library manager in relation to community managed libraries, which she claimed are not libraries but book exchanges (Casselden et al. 2017).

2.2. Public Libraries in the Press

The first example of studies that examine the representation of public library in the press is taken from a Sweden. In her doctoral dissertation, *Det föreställda folkbiblioteket: En diskursanalytisk studie av biblioteksdebatter i svenska medier 1970–2006 (The Imagined Public Library: A Study of Library Debates in the Swedish Press between 1970 and 2006 using Discourse Analysis)*, Åse Hedemark (2009) presents an overview of the three most dominant discourses in the debate surrounding

public libraries in the Swedish media and how these have changed over the past decades.⁴ Firstly, there is “the book discourse” that focuses on the traditional role of the library as a provider of high-quality fiction for popular education, which is a recurring theme throughout the period (Hedemark 2009, p. 170). Secondly, there is “the community centre discourse”, which gained momentum in the 1970s when there was a call for libraries to support a wider range of cultural and political activities (Hedemark 2009, p. 170). Thirdly, there is also “the information mediation discourse”, which appeared in the 1980s and has since become the most influential discourse as it emphasises the impact of information communication technology on public libraries (Hedemark 2009, p. 172).

Among the participants in the debate, Hedemark identifies authors as the “foremost protagonists” (Hedemark 2009, p. 176). She then goes on to explain the correlation between the prominent position of the authors and the dominance of “the book discourse” within the debates. Firstly, it is possible to attribute the significance of this discourse to the fact that it is upheld by a cultural elite, consisting primarily of male authors of a certain generation. Secondly, it is also possible that the authors are able to direct the debate because they represent this particular discourse, which in itself is powerful. Thirdly, it is also common for the media to strategically limit the conversation to a few high-profile participants in order to ensure quality and maintain public interest (Edin & Widestedt). Hedemark concludes that a consequence of this dominance is that other key functions of public libraries are omitted and that librarians themselves are largely excluded from the debate.

Finally, it is interesting to note the many similarities between what Hedemark refers to as the “Save the Library” debate in Sweden in 1992 (Hedemark 2009, p. 172) and the ongoing debate in the UK today. This author-led campaign also took place during a financial crisis when libraries were perceived to be under threat from right-wing government policies. Hedemark notes that when required to defend libraries, the authors adopted a more pragmatic attitude and emphasised the role of public libraries in society at large. As such, it became more common, particularly within “the book discourse”, to refer to libraries’ roles in safeguarding marginalised groups and “directing and guiding” children (Hedemark 2009, p. 174). In a time of recession and rapid change, many authors stressed the symbolic value of the public library as a constant presence in an ever-changing social reality. However, Hedemark asserts that these arguments may be interpreted as nostalgic and ultimately self-serving.

The second example is more recent and focuses on libraries across Europe, including many relevant findings from the UK. In her book, *Libraries and Public Perception: A Comparative Analysis of the European Press*, Anna Galluzzi (2014) examines the public perception of the future of libraries through a comparative textual analysis of newspapers in Europe from 2008 to 2012. She argues that the perception of being at a turning point in library history is not only prevalent in the library environment but has also become the topic of a larger public debate. Galluzzi identifies key areas of development that impact on libraries and librarians today, relating to the digitisation

⁴ The translation of both the title and the quoted extracts is provided by Hedemark (2009) in the English language summary, pp. 167-176.

of society, the emergence of the knowledge economy and the impact on the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 and the subsequent demise of the traditional welfare model.

Galluzzi explains that in the current climate the role of libraries has been challenged, which is evident from the number of libraries that are currently facing increased budget cuts and forced closures. For this reason, she continues, “it is time to look at libraries from the outside and to wonder about their future from the point of view of society as a whole” (Galluzzi 2014, p. 5). The book identifies the key topics in the library debate and how they have changed in the years following the recent financial crisis. As such, Galluzzi provides an insight into how the value of libraries is perceived by national communities, which, in turn, offers an excellent background to the study of author responses to the perceived crisis of libraries in the UK.

In her book, Galluzzi looks at articles published in *The Times* and the *Guardian*, where the discourse is heavily centred on issues surrounding budget cuts and library closures due to the austerity programme. Closely linked to this issue is the discussion regarding the role of volunteers in libraries, which was prompted by the launch of the Big Society. With regard to the role of libraries the discussion focuses mainly on three topics: the library as a meeting place and the need to modernise services, technological innovation and digital libraries and, finally, the role of libraries during the recession. The debate is described by Galluzzi as “lively and deep” and not always in agreement (Galluzzi 2014, p. 54). It also inspired a great deal of comments and opinions from its readership. The *Guardian*, in particular, has been reporting on the public library situation since 2009, when the threats to library services gained recognition in the national press. Since then the newspaper has reported frequently on the campaigns and protests aimed at defending public libraries by staff, patrons and authors. Notably, Galluzzi emphasises that the authors’ “contribution to the campaign by publicly stigmatising cuts and closures of public libraries” has been given much attention (Galluzzi 2014, p. 64). Thus, it could be argued that these findings confirm the need for a further investigation into the author response.

Finally, there are two examples of recent research that examine the representation of librarians in public discourse. The professional image of librarians has long been a concern within the library sector, since it is seen as crucial for the status and survival of the profession. In “Librarians, professionalism and image: Stereotype and reality”, Abigale Luthmann (2007) explores the image of the librarian in library professional literature, the press and popular culture in both a historical and contemporary context. Luthmann argues that the traditional stereotype of a librarian as an old, white spinster has been largely abandoned in the public imagination, where librarians are often portrayed as heroic and daring, but remains present in the professional community due to a “lack of workforce diversification” and a “sensitivity over self-image” (Luthmann 2007, p. 775). Furthermore, in “Representations of librarianship in the UK press”, Leah Shaw (2010) investigates the portrayal of librarians in articles published in *The Times* and *The Mirror* from 1998 to 2008, focusing on perceived skills, duties and behaviours. Shaw concludes that majority of the articles were “largely positive and focused on professional rather than clerical duties or negative traits” (Shaw 2010 p. 565). In terms of numbers, however, Shaw suggests that there is a distinct lack of representation of the profession and that the role of the librarian is generally overshadowed by the value of the public library itself.

2.3. Public Libraries in Author Texts

It can be concluded that authors are ardent supporters and defenders of public libraries. Despite this, their contributions are not always met with enthusiasm by public library researchers. In their book *Libraries in a World of Cultural Change* Liz Greenhalgh, Ken Worpole and Charles Landry argue that the perception of the public library in British intellectual culture is laden with “misrepresentations”, “mythologies” and “metropolitan myopia”, and they suggest that it is high time for public librarians to acquire new allies (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, p. 139). Drawing on extracts from opinion pieces, primarily written by older male authors and columnists, Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry propose that the texts primarily represent an effort to evoke a world that has been lost.

A common trope, they explain, is for these writers to compare the provincial libraries of their childhood to the new diversified libraries and communities in London. As such, the researchers argue that the authors’ critique of the modern public library is merely an expression of “their own sense of dislocation and disillusionment” (Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry 1995, p. 141). However, this group of rather homogenous authors is quite different from the authors in my study, who are more diverse in terms of their age, gender and race. As such, it will be interesting to note if this new generation of authors provides a different account of the public library through their writing.

Furthermore, the central importance of the childhood library in author texts is also explored by Petra Glans (2016) in her master’s thesis, *Barndomens bibliotek: En kritisk diskursanalys av görandet av barndomens bibliotek och barndomens läsupplevelser i medietexter (Childhood Libraries: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Makings of Childhood Libraries and Childhood Reading Experiences in Media Texts)*.⁵ In this study of texts written by Swedish authors between the years 2006 and 2016, Glans identifies two prominent discursive figures, referred to as “childhood libraries” and “childhood reading experiences” (Glans 2016, p. 2). Through a rhetoric analysis of the texts her study shows how the authors use ethos to convey the role the library played in shaping their identity as children and, subsequently, as highly regarded authors; pathos to transport the reader back to the childhood library through emotionally charged memories and rich use of metaphor; and, finally, logos to argue for the importance of libraries in society.

Glans also utilises the concept of generation from the discipline of childhood studies, where childhood is seen as a construction from the point of view of the adult, to show how the author narratives anchor the public library to the past. Glans concludes that the representation of the public library in the author texts is not consistent with the current library research that assumes the perspective of children in society today. Considering that many of the authors in my own study write predominantly for children it will be interesting to note if this has an impact on their representations of the public library service.

⁵ The translation of both the title and the quoted extracts is provided by Glans (2009) in the English language abstract, p. 2.

Hence, author representations are often looked upon as misleading or even harmful to the public perception of libraries. However, in their article “The library as heterotopia: Michel Foucault and the experience of library space”, Gary P. Radford, Marie L. Radford and Jessica Lingel (2014) offer further insights into how these representations can be understood in reference to the particular qualities that the physical library possesses as a site of play, creativity and adventure in childhood and beyond. They argue that libraries, regardless of size and function, have the capacity to evoke powerful and memorable responses.

These experiences are explored by applying Foucault’s concept of heterotopia to author texts on libraries – both autobiographical and fictional. Notably, one of the sources that they use is the author anthology *The Library Book*, which was published in 2012 as response to funding cuts to public libraries in the UK and is also used in my own study. Heterotopia, unlike utopia, refers to a real place that is characterised by a duality “where one is neither in one place or another, but where one has the potential to experience multiple places at once within the same physical space” (Radford, Radford & Lingel 2014, p. 736). The library in the authors texts is described as a space that is simultaneously finite and infinite. On the one hand, it is a mundane everyday place, but on the other, it is a gateway into other worlds.

Another key concept related to the library as heterotopia is serendipity. Serendipity refers to the notion that the “order that is embodied in the physical library” enables “the disorder and the creativity of the imagination” (Radford, Radford & Lingel 2014, p. 742). They go on to show how this paradox is inherent in the arrangement of the library, in the way that it enables users to make unexpected discoveries, for instance, whilst browsing the shelves. These discoveries act as portals that constitute an example of how serendipity can be understood as “the mechanism through which heterotopia operates” (Radford, Radford & Lingel 2014, p. 744).

A final dimension of the library as heterotopia is the impact of the experience of the library on the self. Radford, Radford and Lingel refer to two quotes by Foucault where he writes: “The main interests in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning”, and “there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (Foucault cited in Radford, Radford and Lingel 2014, p. 745). The relationship between the public library and the self is only briefly touched in this article, but is a central focus in my own study of the author texts.

In “Shelving Books?: Representations of the library in contemporary text”, Margaret-Anne Hutton (2017) offers a more literary perspective on libraries in author texts. Applying the notion of the “archival turn”, Hutton explores the role of libraries in fiction in a digital age. The “archival turn” can be seen as a reaction to the dematerialisation and reconceptualization of the archive. Judging from the recent outpouring of popular scholarly works on libraries, Hutton argues that libraries might be subject to a similar movement. Drawing from a large body of recent transnational literature, the article shows how this body of fiction “offers a particular vision of the library, representing it both in its relation to digital technology and as an affective, nostalgic construct” (Hutton 2017, p. 8).

Hutton argues that when examining these fictional libraries it is necessary to separate the tangible “library-as-place” and the more abstract “library-as-idea” and that these representations are both present in the author texts (Hutton 2017, p. 15). She further suggests that the authors convey a “nostalgic construct of the library” (Hutton 2017, p. 16). These fictional libraries, she suggests, return to a state not only before digitisation but also before public libraries were subject to diversification and commercialisation. As such, Hutton identifies three familiar tropes referred to as “the universal library”, “the library destroyed” and “the library as memory” (Hutton 2017, p. 17).

Hutton also identifies another dimension to the author texts that relates to the library as a site for family dramas and a threshold between childhood and adulthood. For this reason, she argues, libraries are often portrayed as “psychic second homes” (Hutton 2017, p. 23). She also argues that the representations, with their strong emphasis on the library as a safe space full of physical books, could be interpreted as “nostalgic, perhaps unconscious, gestures towards a lost era, but also a lost childhood” (Hutton 2017, p. 24). Thus, within the texts, the library represents a counterforce to the anxiety of the modern world. Hutton concludes:

But the texts do more than look longingly to an irretrievable past. Part of the digital era, they acknowledge the reality of new technologies, sometimes with humour, sometimes with a view to reminding us that each age has brought and will bring its own changes to the library and its contents, and sometimes in order to flag up some of the very real risks associated with digitization now and in the future. These texts are first generation works produced in the digital age. As such they provide the most recent page in a history of library fiction.

Hutton 2017, p. 24

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I reflect on the epistemological assumptions of this study and present the theoretical framework used for the interpretation of the author texts. Here, the author texts are understood as representations of the public library service, an approach which is inspired by the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997). These representations appear in the current debate surrounding public libraries that, in turn, is explored using the concept of field conflicts drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theories have previously been adapted for public library research by, for instance, Geir Vestheim (1997), Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Henrik Jochumsen (2003), Anne Goulding (2008) and Lisa Hussey (2010). The overarching structure for the analysis is provided by the four-space model created by Henrik Jochumsen, Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Dorte Skot-Hansen (2012).

3.1. The Author Texts as Representation

The epistemological assumption and theoretical approach of this study is based on the idea of language as representation associated with the work of Hall (1997). Here, language is viewed as a representational system in which we employ signs and symbols to “stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings” (Hall 1997, p. 1). The act of representing is understood as a cultural practice in which we give meaning to people, objects and events through the “the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the way we classify and conceptualize them, the value we place on them” (Hall 1997, p. 3). Hence, despite the fact that representation relies on common interpretation, a single topic can simultaneously produce a myriad of meanings, interpretations and representations, which also makes language a site of competition and conflict (Hall 1997).

As such, the remembered or imagined libraries in the author texts are understood here as representations of the UK public library service. This, then, is similar to what Hedemark refers to as “The Imagined Public Library” (Hedemark 2009, p. 167). From this point of view, the focus of the analysis is not primarily on the object itself – the public library service – but on the ideas and imagination that surround it and how these representations are shaped and reshaped through writing. This examination is centred on how the author texts construct and represent, for instance, the value, purpose and direction of the public library service, the role of librarians, the identity of library patrons and the events that shape recent developments in libraries. Another key assumption in this study is that these representations impact on the public perceptions of libraries and are thus an important consideration for public library scholarship (Hedemark 2009).

Furthermore, representations as described by Hall are not restricted to certain texts but can cut across different contexts and genres. Thus, unlike much of the previous research that uses texts from similar sources (Hedemark 2009, Glans 2016, Hutton 2017), I include a greater variety of sources. Literary scholar Mary Talbot refers to this notion as “discourse-mixing”, which is centred around the tracing of a single discourse in a variety of different texts (Talbot 1995, p. 18). This interpretation is supported by literary theorist Jonathan Cullers who argues that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction texts is not “an urgent theoretical matter” and that these texts can be studied together (Cullers 1997 p. 18). Talbot suggest that in the same way that fiction contain a great deal of non-literary fragments, non-fiction texts are equally reliant on narrative construction. In the context of my study this means that, for example, opinion pieces are heavy reliant on narrative construction in the same way as novels may contain “non-literary varieties of language” (Talbot 1995, p. 18).

Finally, since the representations in the author texts predominantly come in the shape of stories, it is also relevant to consider the correlation between narrative and ideology. Talbot (1995) attributes this idea to literary and political theorist Fredric Jameson (1981) who argues that narratives can be understood as ideological productions. Another key focus in this study, therefore, is to consider the ideological content of the author texts. In order to unveil this content Talbot suggests paying particular attention to, for instance, “imaginary resolutions of real contradictions” and the intertextuality of literary and non-literary components within a single text (Talbot 1995, p. 6).

3.2. The Public Library as Social Field

The concept of representation shares many common features with field theory, which is associated with the work of Bourdieu and used here to explore the author texts in the public library debate. The benefits of the application of field theory within Library and Information Science is described by Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Jochumsen:

With the social field concept, Bourdieu has developed an analytical instrument that can be used to uncover important features of a given societal area including the relations, which exists between different individuals who are to be found in within the area. In order to be able to talk about a social field, there has to be an idea or common consciousness about what belongs to the field and what belongs outside.

Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Jochumsen 2003, p. 84

This captures the essence of the current debate surrounding public libraries, where the authors along with other established stakeholders come together not only to defend the public library but also to legitimise their particular representation of it. Representations, Bourdieu might argue, are products of habitus, which describes the disposition and outlook of the individual person. Moreover, positions within a field are similarly determined by the capital that the individual possesses (Hussey 2010). As such, it could be argued that prominent position of the authors within the field can be explained by their large symbolic capital. This is supported by the previous

research that describes authors as influential and sometimes even dominant in public debates on libraries (Hedemark 2009, Galluzzi 2014, Glans 2016).

It is also interesting to consider the public library as a place where one can attain capital. Anne Goulding (2008) examines Bourdieu's three categories of cultural capital in relation to public library use. Firstly, there is embodied cultural capital, which refers to the development of cultural skills that one may require from using the library. The second is objectified capital, which is contained in cultural object such as books or other materials. Thirdly, there is also institutional capital, which can be accumulated through, for example, academic qualifications. Goulding writes:

Cultural capital can be viewed, therefore, as a set up cultural competencies needed for the effective understanding of and participation in those cultural activities which are recognized and rewarded by the education system, giving access to social and economic advancement and so reproducing existing class divisions.

Goulding 2008, p. 235

A critical evaluation of the nature of cultural capital in relation to public libraries will be undertaken in the analysis.

Moreover, as an established social field the public library sphere also has its own doxa, which refers to the fundamental assumptions of the field that are taken for granted by its members. This is similar to what Black (2000) and Pautz (2014) refer to as the "public library ethos". According to Vestheim (1997) the public library doxa is centred around three core assumptions: firstly, that libraries are essential to a democratic society; secondly, that reading and knowledge have intrinsic as well as public value; and thirdly, that library provision should be free of charge. Vestheim (1997) also argues that public libraries belong to a wider social field of institutions associated with ideas such as democracy, enlightenment and welfare provision and thus also places such as schools, museums and public spaces. This is central as this association is likely to shape our understanding of the institution and guide the public discourse.

Finally, following the recent developments in libraries in the UK it is evident that the public library sphere has become a field in crisis, which has forced the participants in the debate to question some of the prevailing ideas that have previously guided the service. Drawing from Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis, a term that describes the dislocation of habitus and field, it could be argued that changes to the field condition are forcing the participants to either defend or alter their habitus in order to secure their position within the field, which consequently alters the field itself (Hardy 2014). A crisis often divides the field between conservative forces that wish to preserve the status quo and those who favour change. These will henceforth be referred to as the orthodox and heterodox forces in the debate, respectively.

3.3. The Five Dimensions of the Library

Despite many attempts to define the central function of public libraries no single model is able to capture every aspect of the service. Nevertheless, for this study I use the four-space model for public libraries which was developed by a group of Danish researchers during a period of library closures and cuts, with the aim of creating a new vision for the public library that can keep pace with societal development. This vision, they argue, involves a “transformation from a more or less passive collection of books and other media to an active space for experience and inspiration and a local meeting point” (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 588).

The reason for selecting this particular model is that it cuts across other common and more static categories, such as the library as “cultural centre”, “knowledge centre”, “social centre” and “information centre” (Andersson & Skot-Hansen 1994). This more fluid model divides the public library into four overlapping spaces or dimensions, referred to as “inspiration space”, “performativity space”, “meeting space” and “learning space” that all encompass both the physical and virtual library (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 590). For my analysis the four spaces are adapted to suit the UK public library context and the focus of the author texts. I have also chosen to add a fifth dimension, which I refer to as “the librarian”, since the role of the librarian is largely omitted in the original model. Hence, the model used in this study will henceforth be referred to as the “five-space model”.

The “inspiration space” is described as a space for “experiences that transform our perception” through, for example, stories or art (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 590). The purpose of this space is to move us beyond the familiar into the “irrational, emotional and chaotic”. This description is similar to the concept of heterotopia and serendipity (Radford, Radford and Lingel 2014). The public library, the researchers write, has always been a place for inspiration related to “education, enlightenment and social mobility” (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen 2012 p. 590). Today, however, they argue that the inspiration space also needs to respond to the “quest for experiences” that is crucial for “the development of identity” and “consumption of culture”, which is the basis of the so-called experience economy (Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 590).

In the original model the “performativity space” is a space where users can come together with others and have “access to tools that support their creative activities” (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 593). In this space, the user is treated as a creator of material rather than a passive consumer. This, the researchers argue, is particularly important in relation to “digital natives”, a term used to refer to the generations that were born into a digital society and are used to producing as well as consuming culture. This generational shift is to some degree related to what Black (2000) refers to as the “modern self” and the “postmodern self”. However, instead of focusing, as the original model does, on the public library as a space for creative activity, I extend the definition to incorporate the very creation of the individual person. This idea is supported by Glans (2016) who argues that the authors in her study describe the public library as a place where one can make oneself.

The “meeting space” is defined by Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen (2012) as “an open public space and place between work and home where citizens can meet other people, who are both like them and differ from them” (p. 592). In this sense, the meeting space embodies qualities that bring together Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere⁶ and Ray Oldenburg’s concept of third places⁷. This idea is supported by Ragnar Audunson (2005) who argues that in a segmented society – characterised both by multiculturalism and rapid digitisation – public libraries serve a vital role as physical meeting places, which he explains using the concept of high-intensive and low-intensive meeting places. The former, he writes, relates to “arenas where we can live out our major interests and engagements together with people who share them” and the latter to “arenas where we meet and are exposed to people with a quite different interests and values” (Audunson 2005, p. 436).

The “learning space” is defined as “the space where children, youngsters and adults can discover and explore the world and thereby increase their competence and possibilities through free and unrestricted access to information and knowledge” (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 591). Information in relation to the public library service is often described in democratic terms as “the right to know” (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, p. 114). Another aspect of the learning space relates to how public library learning should be defined. On the one hand, libraries are strongly associated with recreational learning that is dictated by individual needs and wishes. On the other hand, there is an increasing emphasis on the role that public libraries play in regard to life-long learning and the knowledge economy (Goulding 2006).

The final dimension of this framework relates to the role of librarians within the four spaces of the public library. In this sense the librarian is understood here as inter-dimension that acts within all four dimensions. The perception of librarianship has long been a professional concern within Library and Information Science and has become acute in the UK following the large number of staff redundancies and the influx of volunteers in public libraries. The focus within this space is on how librarians are represented in the author texts in terms of their roles, skills, behaviours and appearances. An important question is which of the other four spaces the librarian is most strongly connected with in the author representations.

⁶ The public sphere is a concept associated with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. It is used to describe the realm of public discourse (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995).

⁷ The third place is a term attributed to the sociologist Ray Oldenburg and his book *The Great Good Place* (1989). It refers to a communal space separate from both the home and work environment.

4. Method and Material

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an insight into the methods and materials used in this study, as well as an outline of the research procedure. It should be noted that the methodology of qualitative text analysis is guided to a great extent by the theoretical framework and the sensibility of the individual researcher. Nevertheless, this chapter provides a clarification of the relationship between the theoretical framework and the methodological approach employed in the reading of the author texts relating back to the three central research questions.

4.1. Methodological Approach and Procedure

The methodological approach for this study is centred around a qualitative reading of the author texts, which is reliant on theme identification (Ryan and Bernard 2003, Kuckartz 2014) combined with an analysis of field conflicts and field conditions (Lindberg 2017).

When identifying the central themes in the material I combined an inductive and deductive approach for constructing the central categories (Kuckartz 2014). The process began with an initial proofreading of the texts where I highlighted the key words and phrases in each text, which later enabled me to identify reoccurring topics in the complete material. Based on these findings I selecting the five-space model which provides the central categories for the analysis. In this sense, the four-space model can be understood as an a priori theme, that is, a theme chosen based on “prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Ryan & Bernard 2003, p. 88). Yet, the model was simultaneously chosen based on its compatibility with the author texts.

After selecting the five-space model, I performed a second reading of the texts centred on selecting the most important passages relating to each of the five spaces. This procedure thus provides a way of locating the representations in the author texts within the theoretical landscape of the public library. Once the extracts had been assigned to their respective dimensions, I examined the texts in order to identify subthemes. Within each space I also centred the analysis on key concepts such as “community” or “learning” to examine how they were described in different texts and if there were any signs of contradiction or conflict (Ryan & Bernard 2003). This offers an insight into what norms and rules that thread through the representations.

In order to fully engage with the central research questions for this study it was also important to be able to link the representations within the five dimensions to the wider context of the public library debate. For this, Lindberg (2017) suggest

examining the relationship between “field-specific ideologies” and “comprehensive socio-political ideologies”. The former refers to systems of partial domains or fields within a society such as education, healthcare or indeed the public library sphere, as outlined in the previous chapter. An example of this is the public library doxa as defined by Vestheim (1997). The latter describe systems of ideas that “suggest an institutional and cultural configuration for the whole of society” (Lindberg 2017, p. 91).

This examination was conducted by highlighting instances where the field doxa was either defended or attacked, which gives an indication of the struggles that exist between opposing forces within the field. Through this I was able to identify the orthodox as well as heterodox forces within the debate. Once this has been established the next task was to explore the correlation between “field-specific ideologies” and “comprehensive socio-political ideologies”. Here, I considered how the texts deal with topical issues such as austerity or the Big Society in relation to the public library service. The interpretation of the author texts also entailed a more subtle reading of the presence of grand narratives such as changes in the ideological climate or the shift from modernity to postmodernity. Another important consideration was to identify instances of hysteresis, that is, when changes in field conditions cause the participants to alter their positions within the field.

4.2. Material Selection

As mentioned previously, the term author texts refer to a large body of written sources that are drawn from a variety of different contexts. It should be noted that some of the authors are more prolific in their writing and more involved in the public library protests whilst others have only contributed a single text. Regardless of their form, origin and quantity, however, these texts are all considered to be part of the public library debate.

For the sake of presentation, however, it is possible to divide the texts roughly into two main categories. The first category constitutes opinion pieces published in the national newspapers, which could be described as the main battleground of the public library debate. The second category is made up of fictional and non-fictional works that include a variety of different texts such as anthologies, memoirs, novels, short stories, poetry and picture books that offer a subtler but nonetheless relevant perspective on the current situation. It should also be noted the boundary between these two categories is frequently blurred as several of the individual works have been reviewed in the press or republished in media campaigns in reference to the perceived dismantling of the public library service. Similarly, many of the opinion pieces that were originally published in the newspapers have later been included in anthologies or cited in some of the individual works. This serves as evidence for the strong correlation between the individual author texts within the context of the public library debate.

The opinion pieces were selected from the four national newspapers the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Independent* and the *Daily Telegraph*. These newspapers were chosen because they represent a variety of political leanings and thus allow a greater range of

representations. I chose not to include local papers as I am primarily interested in the national debate. The search was undertaken through the database LexisNexis by entering the key word “librar*”, which encompasses the words “library”, “libraries”, “librarian” and “librarians”. This search term was later combined with “author*”. I also performed additional searches to compensate for any inconsistencies in the database. This search process generated a large number of articles. Lindberg (2017) emphasises the importance of exploring a variety of sources in order to capture different aspects of the debate and, if possible, including several texts by the same author. The complete material was then read through carefully and later winnowed down to a manageable amount of texts based on their relevance to the research questions. The selected pieces are written by some of the most prominent authors in the UK and provide a mixture of direct commentary on the public library situation and personal stories of libraries.

The selection process and criteria for the remaining source material, such as individual works of fiction or collections, was guided by library catalogue searches and my own prior knowledge of contemporary literature. The selection criteria varied slightly. An obvious place to start was by exploring the works of authors that have been involved in the various campaigns aimed at safeguarding libraries. Certain authors have been very open about their own interpretation of their work as being directly related to the public library situation. Some works were very evidently relevant as they are set in the present and depict an austerity-stricken library service. Other works are set in the past but become relevant through being published and read within the temporal focus of the study and by featuring topics that resonate with the current debate.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

What follows here is a reflection on the key ethical considerations that relate to the selection, representation and reading of the author texts. As the authors are public figures who publish their texts through official channels, the use of the material is perhaps less problematic with regard to ethical considerations. There is also a high transparency to the study as all the texts are easily traceable and the selection process has been described in detail above. The material was selected through a comprehensive search, aiming to incorporate a wide range of voices and ideas. I have also tried to limit the study to texts written directly by the authors as opposed to second-hand accounts by, for example, journalists. However, on the few occasions where second-hand accounts are included it is clearly indicated in the text. Moreover, although the theoretical and methodological approach I have chosen is likely to steer the selection and representation of the author texts in a certain direction, I have attempted to give a representative sampling of the material. I am also careful to avoid quoting extracts out of context by presenting an extract in full as far as is possible. Finally, as the study also includes fictional accounts I have been careful not to attribute the ideas expressed in the texts to these authors. The reading focuses entirely on the subtexts of the individual works, which may not reflect the intentions or opinions of the author.

5. Results and Analysis

What follows here is a presentation of the central findings of this investigation into author texts on public libraries in the UK in an age of austerity. The key focus is on how the public library service is represented and defended as an institution and an idea within the aforementioned five dimensions of the library. This chapter also provides an interpretation of how the author texts relate to the wider socio-political context of the public library debate.

5.1. Inspiration Space

In this dimension I explore how the public library is represented as a space for inspiration. Inspiration and imagination are central concepts in the author texts and are primarily connected to the experience of the physical library and the access to books and reading experiences, particularly in childhood. As such, the texts share some common features with what Hedemark (2009) refers to as the “book discourse”, Glans (2016) as “the childhood library” and “childhood reading experiences”, Radford, Radford and Lingel (2014) as “the library as heterotopia” and Hutton (2017) as “the library destroyed”.

Moreover, the representations within this dimension are closely related to two of the core characteristics of the public library doxa, where reading and knowledge are perceived as having intrinsic value to the individual person and to society at large and should, therefore, be provided to the public free of charge. In the original four-space model, however, there is an emphasis on the shift from collection to connection and the importance of keeping pace with the experience economy (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012). Thus, another key consideration is how the texts deal with the changes and challenges faced by the public library today.

It has been established that public debates surrounding libraries have a tendency to focus on the library as a “powerful symbol of the past” rather than as a “landmark for the future” (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, p. 6). As Glans (2016) suggests, childhood is a key theme in author texts on libraries. Lucy Mangan, for instance, laments the loss of the childhood reading experience:

I still believe, deep in my heart, that if I wake up at the right moment one night, I, too, will be able to step out of this world and all its inconsolable longings and run wild forever in the gardens of the past. But the best I can do is live there again for a while. Which is, almost, enough. After all, if you are as close to something as you were in childhood, then you have your childhood back again, don't you? Time no longer.

Mangan 2018, p. 226

Yet, although many of the representations are indeed anchored in the past and laced with nostalgia, it is interesting to note the features that reoccur in the texts regardless of time and place, particularly as the texts represent a diverse set of experiences. Some narratives are set in predominantly white rural areas and others in ethnic inner-city neighbourhoods. Some are characterized by poverty, knowledge scarcity and a sense of destitution, whilst others are described as comfortably middle class. The characters that inhabit the textual body also represent different generations.

Still, it appears that the current austerity agenda oftentimes evokes memories of childhood poverty. In many of the texts the library is represented a place to escape to and lose yourself in. Sometimes, Andrew Griffin suggests, “Libraries represent one of the only kinds of escape that people can find” (Griffin 2016). This is true for Johanna in Caitlin Moran’s novel *How to Build a Girl*, who finds refuge in her local library in Wolverhampton in the 1990s that “looks like something bad happened to it” (Moran 2014, p. 22). Moran herself also remembers how the implicit promise of a book provided a contrast to the outside world: “Simply knowing I could have it in my hand was a comfort, in a place so very far from anything extraordinary or exultant” (Moran 2012, p. 211). Similarly, in another library in the Midlands, the abused boy Bobby in David Whitehouse’s novel *Mobile Library* escapes from a town that is “somehow futureless, but also without history” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 26). Here, the notion of escape takes a literal turn when Bobby and his friend Val, the cleaner on the mobile library, and her daughter Rosa highjack the vehicle when the council announces the closure of the service and the three protagonists embark on a road trip across an austerity-stricken Britain.

The notion of escape, however, is not only linked to the library space but also to the reading experience. Matt Haig makes this connection when he writes: “I always make this comparison, but if you think about it a library is like a book in building form. It is somewhere we can escape inside and get enriched by” (Haig 2013). Similarly, Anita Anand describes the library as “A labyrinth of shelves where you could lose your mother and then lose yourself in a book” (Anand 2012, p. 5). Neil Gaiman also emphasises the importance of reading, because it “opens a door, shows the sunlight outside, gives you a place to go where you are in control” Gaiman (2013). In her love letter to the library A. L. Kennedy stresses the sense of freedom that a library can provide: “Thank you for giving my friends who were in prison a way of being free and staying free” (Kennedy 2014). As such, Moran concludes: “A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination” (Moran 2012, p. 211).

Thus, if the library is a place where one can escape, it is the reading experience that provides the windows and doors, which are common metaphors in the author texts. “The shelves were supposed to be loaded with books”, Moran writes, “but they were, of course, really doors: each book-lid opened up as exciting as Alice putting her gold key in the lock” (Moran 2012, p. 211). Similarly, Whitehouse writes:

He dreamed of closing himself inside the mobile library and bolting the doors shut. He could see in the darkness. There were no windows, yet there were thousands of windows, in every book on every shelf.

Whitehouse, 2015, p. 70

The idea of the library as a portal into other worlds also takes a physical form in Joseph Coelho's (2017a) picture book, *Luna Loves Library Day*, where the central character spends the day reading in the library with her father. The book Luna reads is inserted into the original picture book, so as the reader turns the page they are thrown into the world of *The Troll King and the Mermaid Queen*, in which Luna herself appears as one of the characters in her imagination. It is also present in an extract from China Miéville's (2012) novel *Un Lun Dun* about Deeba who enters the land of UnLondon through some magic booksteps in the library. As such, these doors, windows and steps allow an entrance into other worlds. Nicola Davies writes:

When I walked into the library I felt I was walking across the tundra or the steppe, into the jungle or under the sea. I could roam the shelves, choose whatever I wanted, and find out about anything. I could live inside any story. It made me feel powerful and free.

Davies 2017

A very similar account is given by Jackie Kay in her poem "Dear Library":

that took me tae anither world
awthegither fu o' characters an creatures, auntie lopes,
big broon bears, loins and tigrs, new wurd

an anythin an aw'thin I wants tae ken about
the moon, stars, sea, the hale galaxy, the wide wurd
wiz at the tip o my fingers in ma locall library.

Kay 2014

As Radford, Radford and Lingel (2014) suggest, this is library as heterotopia. These descriptions capture the key characteristics of the inspiration dimension as a space for "experiences that transform our perception" (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 590). The value of reading is explored in report based on the accounts of adult readers undertaken by Usherwood and Toyne (2002). The report confirms that reading imaginative literature is perceived as a unique activity that satisfies a multitude of needs. Two of the central functions highlighted in the study are escapism and instruction. The former refers to reading as a form of emancipation as it has the power to transform the place one is in – both physically and mentally. The latter refers to the development of literacy and language skills but also the way in which "reading forms and informs the developing self" (Usherwood & Toyne 2002, p. 40).

Furthermore, in the texts escapism is not construed as a passive pastime but is often described as an act of rebellion. Griffin writes: "They're dangerous books, and perhaps more dangerous are the librarians that dare to give books out to children too poor and uncultured to know not to take them seriously. Libraries make people

powerful – and we’ll be weaker in untold ways without them” (Griffin 2016). This idea is echoed by Gaiman:

Fiction can show you a different world. It can take you somewhere you’ve never been. Once you’ve visited other worlds, like those who ate fairy fruit, you can never be entirely content with the world that you grew up in. Discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different.

Gaiman 2013

Hence, in the author texts the public library is represented as a subversive space in society. Griffin argues that “Libraries represent one of the happiest accidents of British life – that somehow, across the country and outside of view of people who would otherwise shut it down, people managed to create communities unspoilt by the requirement that everything makes money” (Griffin 2016). As mentioned previously, two of the most central assumptions of the field doxa are that reading and knowledge hold an unattested value and should thus be provided free of charge. This right is ardently defended in a majority of the texts and also appears to be a prerequisite for inspiration. Kennedy writes: “Thank you for being the first place I realized how beautiful books were, how many books there were and for teaching me that they should all be available to me, that I could learn whatever I wanted and go wherever I wanted to in my mind. Thank you for opening the world for me” (Kennedy 2014). Similarly, Moran writes: “The room was full, and my head was full. What a magical system to place around a penniless girl” (Moran 2016, p. 305). Polly Ho-Yen concurs: “We didn’t have any pennies back then and you know what, we didn’t need a single one either” (Ho-Yen 2016). As such, these voices represent the defenders of the field doxa.

The doxa, which is similar to what Pautz (2014) refers to as “the public library ethos”, is intimately linked with the identification of the library as a public service. This idea is firmly rooted in the author texts, where libraries are often contrasted with commercial enterprises. According to Kay libraries “represent what a public service is truly, libertarian” (Kay 2014). Or as Kate Atkinson states, the library’s “underlying municipal truth is that it isn’t a shop” (Atkinson cited in Smith 2015, p. 57). According to Galluzzi the UK “is one of the countries where austerity has been most widely applied, and where social and cultural welfare has been the most extensively called into question” (Galluzzi 2014, p. 23). This, she argues, is a break from its previous Social-Democratic model based on universalism and decommodification as outlined by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990). Here, it is interesting to note how the appeal of the library as a space for inspiration is intimately linked with the public library ethos (Pautz 2014). Philip Pullman writes:

I love the public library service for what it did for me as a child and as a student and as an adult. I love it because its presence reminds us that there are things above profit, things that profit knows nothing about, things that have the power to baffle the greedy ghost of market fundamentalism, things that stand for civic decency and public respect for imagination and knowledge and the value of simple delight.

Pullman 2011

The following author text additionally contains a number of references to the history of the public library. Jeanette Winterson states:

.../ the Labour party had a vision for postwar Britain, and education, art and culture for everyone were at the heart of that vision. A national theatre, free entry to museums, the expansion of the BBC. The Arts Council's first slogan in 1946 was 'The Best for the Most'. So we should ask ourselves questions about austerity budgets and what Britain can or can't afford.

Winterson 2012

This account clearly situates the public library in the wider social field of institutions associated with ideas such as democracy, enlightenment and welfare provision as suggested by Vestheim (1997). Hence, these author texts constitute examples of the orthodox forces within the field.

Yet, as the field conditions alter and the field faces a crisis it is also common for heterodox voices to emerge and break the silence by forcing the underlying field assumptions to the surface. An example of such an author voice is Seth Godin who argues that free provision of books is no longer a critical matter in the new information society:

Post-Gutenberg, books are finally abundant, hardly scarce, hardly expensive, hardly worth warehousing. Post-Gutenberg, the scarce resource is knowledge and insight, not access to data. The library is no longer a warehouse for dead books.

Godin 2012, p. 47

Terry Deary, whose popular horrible history series are frequently borrowed by young readers in the library, also caused a stir in the debate by arguing that public libraries "have had their day". He reasons:

Because it's been 150 years, we've got this idea that we've got an entitlement to read books for free, at the expense of authors, publishers and council tax payers. This is not the Victorian age, when we wanted to allow the impoverished access to literature. We pay for compulsory schooling to do that.

Deary cited in Flood 2013

Deary argues that books are not public property but products of the entertainment industry. He further dismisses the author campaign as sentimental and wonders "Why are all the authors coming out in support of libraries when libraries are cutting their throats and slashing their purses?" (Deary cited in Flood 2013).

The need to generate profit is also highlighted in Jenny Colgan's novel *The Little Shop of Happy-Ever-After*, in which the librarian Nina opens a book shop in an idyllic Scottish village after being made redundant in a Birmingham City Council restructure. In the beginning of the story, Nina is told by the library manager that "austerity was something they just had to get used to" (Colgan 2016, p. 2). But Nina decides instead to "rescue" the discarded library books and sets up her own business. When she arrives the villagers are curious about the new enterprise:

‘Is this the new library?’ said an older woman with a pull-along trolley. ‘We need a new library.’
Lots of older ladies nodded approvingly.
‘I’m afraid not,’ said Nina. ‘It’s going to be a shop.’
‘It’s a van.’
‘I know. A bookshop in a van.’
‘I miss that library.’

Colgan 2016, p. 109

Yet, the villagers warm to the idea of the book shop and as sales pick up Nina reflects: “And she took that one too, and found that actually taking the money and handing over the change wasn’t a problem at all” (Colgan 2016, p. 167). Unlike Deary, Colgan’s novel still expresses the inherent value of books but, as is evident from this next passage, this value is not necessarily connected to the public service ethos:

After years of working in public service, it had come as a bit of a surprise to her how genuinely interested she was in running a business; seeing what worked, looking at stock and, of course, matching the right book to the right person. It was the same joy she had felt at the library, but somehow, watching people leaving with books they could keep for ever was even more profound.

Colgan 2016, p. 211

Yet, not everyone in the village is able to pay for books. One of them is a neglected boy called Ben who Nina agrees to lend books to. Colgan writes: “He had also caused her to break her most adamant rule; the one she had sworn never to be moved on: to never, ever lend a book” (Colgan 2016, p. 287). This fictional narrative is a good example of what Talbot refers to as imaginary resolutions to real-life contradictions (Talbot 1995). As the title indicates Nina gets her “Little Shop of Happy-Ever-After” and the sceptics are converted. This is in contrast to *Mobile Library*, where Bobby asks Val: ““Does this story have a happy ending””, to which Val replies: ““There is no such thing as a happy ending”” (Whitehouse 2015, p. 119). In the end Bobby, Val and Rosa are caught and Val sends the mobile library vehicle over a cliff. Whitehouse writes: “Bobby and Rosa watched the flames burn, letting ice cream melt over their finger. Charred book pages twirled through the smoke, and endless snowfall of cinders fluttering around them” (Whitehouse 2015, p. 272). These two novels can be read as examples of different imaginary resolutions to austerity narratives.

Hence, in the author texts it is also possible to detect another theme which Hutton (2017) refers to as “the library destroyed”. This is sometimes expressed through allusions to warfare. Moran, for instance, states that “Libraries that stayed open during the Blitz will be closed by budgets” which is a reference to the German attacks on Britain during the Second World War (Moran 2012, p. 212). It is also present in Colgan’s (2016) novel where the librarian Griffin accuses the council of being book-burning Nazis. It is also tangible in an extract from Michael Morpurgo’s story *I Believe in Unicorns*, in which the librarian tells the children:

It was a time when wicked people ruled the land, wicked people who were frightened of the magic of stories and poems, terrified of the power of books. They knew, you see, that stories and poems help you to think and to dream. Books make you want to ask questions. /.../ So one day in

my town these wicked people went into all the bookshops and libraries and schools and brought out all the books they didn't like, which was most of them. And there in the square, soldiers in black boots and brown shirts built a huge bonfire of these books.

Morpurgo 2014

Thus, as much as these texts are a nostalgic homage to a childhood fuelled by imaginative reading in a pre-digital age, they can equally be read as a defence of universal provision and equity of access. It could be argued that in the age of austerity the library is represented as a symbol of the possibility of imagining a different future. As Susan Cooper states: “libraries are the frontline in the war for the imagination” (Cooper 2013).

5.2. Performativity Space

In the original model, the “performativity space” is used to explore the public library as a space for creative activity. Yet, as mentioned previously, I have chosen instead to look at the library as a place where it is possible to create oneself. As such, within this dimension I explore the public library as a space for self-discovery and self-creation. This is followed by an examination of how the selves that emerge through the author texts relate to the concept of the modern versus postmodern self. The modern self is described by Black as autonomous, rational and self directed, whereas the postmodern self by contrast is irrational, impulsive and fluid (Black 2000). I also examine central dimensions of identity such as sexuality, class, ethnicity and generation.

Black argues that there has always been an intimate connection between the public library and the self (Black 2000). This public library self, he argues, exists in the intersection between the dual function of the public library as an enforcer of social control and preserver of heritage, on the one hand, and a provider of individual freedom and opportunity, on the other. This duality, however, should not be regarded as contradictory, but as symbiotic, since it is the way in which patrons have “linked their own life projects with the historic accumulation of wisdom and the cultural record which library collections represent” (Black 2000, p. 8).

Selfhood and the public library is intimately connected in the author texts. Lori Beck simply states: “The only way I can express how important public libraries are is to tell you about my self” (Beck cited in Smith 2015, p. 125). It is common to express that one was “made by” or “saved by” the library. An obvious point is that the public library enabled the authors to become writers. As Kay suggests: “The library is the young writer’s first home” (Kay 2014). Yet, many of the texts also express a more integral connection. Bali Rai, for instance, declares that “Libraries have assisted each part of my development as a person” (Rai 2012, p. 122). Griffin states: “For all of this, blame libraries. They can take credit or blame for much of my existence” (Griffin 2016). Thus, through these accounts it is possible to get a sense of how the public library is represented as a place for becoming.

Furthermore, the heterotopian experience that characterises the “inspiration space” is also closely connected to the process of becoming. In the “performativity space”, however, it is evident that the library is not only a place to discover other worlds but also oneself and one’s place in the world. Patrick Ness writes: “I would wander into my local public library and there sat the world, waiting for me to look at it, to find out about it, to discover who I might be inside it” (Ness 2011). Similarly, Kennedy states: “Thank you for being somewhere I could learn about who I was and where I was from” (Kennedy 2014). Emily Wainwright also suggests that “Public libraries allow us to explore the self or the desired self in many forms” (Wainwright cited in Smith 2015, p. 125). The library, then, is represented as a place for becoming through the process of discovery.

Moreover, in the texts the notion of becoming is sometimes linked to dimensions of identity such as sexuality, ethnicity or class. Stephen Fry describes how the public library played an important role for him as a gay teenager growing up in a rural area.

For a gay youth growing up in the early ’70s a library was a way of showing that I was not alone. There was an element of titillation and breath-taking possibility, even the chance of a fumbled encounter, but there was vindication too. Some of the best, finest, truest, cleverest minds that held a pen in their hands had been like me.

Fry 2012, p. 69

Likewise, Rai recounts that it was through the public library that he became acquainted with writers with whom he could identify.

I thought writers had to be old and posh and white. Most times I read a book, the characters were white too. Actually becoming a writer seeing as I was the British-born son of Indian parents, seemed as remote as becoming an astronaut. So I continued to visit the library, to read and to dream.

Rai 2012, p. 120

Moran also explains how the library afforded her to make contact with other writers through time and space:

Everything I am is based on this ugly building on its lonely lawn – lit up during winter darkness; open in the slashing rain – which allowed a girl so poor she didn’t even own a purse to come in twice a day and experience actual magic: travelling through time, making contact with the dead – Dorothy Parker, Stella Gibbon, Charlotte Brontë, Spike Milligan.

Moran 2012, p. 211

As Black (2000) suggests the library is a place where the individual can connect their own self with the selves of the past. Mangan writes: “Stop awhile, the safe, solid brick walls seemed to say, like generations of a certain kind of seeker after a certain kind of pleasure have done before you” (Mangan 2018, p. 49). Or as Whitehouse puts it: “Every decision would be made with the hindsight of a thousand characters whose lives were contained within its walls” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 262). This, Black concludes, is why public libraries “have often been thought of as sacred places, sites of worship in the name of the modern self” (Black 2000, p. 8). This idea is expressed

by Anand: “The library became the cathedral where I would come to worship and the stories were as precious to me as prayers” (Anand 2012, p. 6).

As mentioned previously, the public library is traditionally understood as a provider of individual freedom and opportunity (Black 2000). This idea is present in Moran’s novel *How to Build a Girl*, where the central character Johanna grows up on a council estate in the Midlands during the Thatcher era of the late 1980s and dreams of escaping to London. Johanna explains that she must discard her old self and “build this new girl out of library books” (Moran 2014, back cover). “Lying in bed”, Johanna recounts, “I consider the chances of this scenario happening to the current Johanna Morrigan. They are blindingly small. I just don’t have the resources” (Moran 2014, p. 65). Here, Moran pokes fun at what Black refers to as the modern self – “the autonomous, rational self-directed person” (Black 2000, p. 7). Johanna muses:

‘A self-made man’ – not of woman born, but alchemised, through sheer force of will, by the man himself. This is what I want to be. I want to be a self-made woman. I want to conjure myself, out of every sparkling, fast-moving thing I can see. I want to be the creator of me. I’m going to begat myself.

Moran 2014, p. 66

This account again brings to mind the necessity of inspiration and imagination for the process of becoming, which, like Johanna suggests, also requires resources. In this sense the public library can be understood as a place where one can acquire cultural capital, as explained by Goulding (2008). In the age of austerity this notion is fiercely defended in the author texts. Moran writes: “As a home-educated, part-feral child, nearly everything I was collated from books. I read myself a new brain, and then a new life – I venerated books like others venerate jewels, or land” (Moran 2016, p. 301). Here, it is interesting to note the comparison between books and commodities that suggests a contrast between cultural and economic capital. This idea is also expressed by Ho-Yen:

I remember those days so clearly. My sister and I burrowing into the shelves as though we were mining for gold, dreaming about the kind of life we wanted to lead, the jobs we wanted to do, the kind of people that we wanted to be. Each book was so much more than the paper it was printed on; they were doors, possible pathways into our future, and by just being there in the library, we had all the keys.

Ho-Yen 2016

Hence, in the author texts books represents the highest form of objectified cultural capital. Visiting the library and reading can thus be understood as a way of attaining embodied and institutional capital through the “early immersion in a world of cultivated people, practices and objects” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 67). According to Bourdieu this is often characteristic of children who grow up in a bourgeois environment. Yet, as Zadie Smith states:

/.../ like a lot of kids in this country, if you don't have middle-class, educated parents you need to find ways to get books. A lot of people don't have books on their shelves. The library was the place I went to find out what there was to know. It was absolutely essential.

Smith cited in Flood 2012

Smith states that her main aim as a child was to become middle class, which she equated with personal freedom and an ease of life that her own family had not known (Smith cited in Flood 2012). Smith relates: "My own family put a very high value on education, on bookishness, but it happened that they did not have the money to demonstrate this fact in a manner that the present government seems able to comprehend" (Smith 2012, p. 143-144). As such, she argues that public libraries are essential to social mobility and a prerequisite for equal opportunities. Yet, Black makes the point that there is perhaps a difference between "equality of opportunity" and "*equality of outcome*" when he writes:

The public library is widely viewed as an institution which has consistently displayed liberal credentials of emancipation and inclusion. This said, in respect of *social class*, the public library is an institution which has under-performed in relation to its liberal ideals. The public library has always found difficulty in attracting users from the very lower social groups.

Black 2000, p. 148, 145

He argues that much of the lower and working classes do not perceive the public library as a space for improving themselves (Black 2000). As such, the selves in the author texts present an interesting contradiction, as many of them are from lower- or working-class backgrounds.

Moreover, these accounts are further called into question by the heterodox voices in the debate. Deary, for instance, questions the role of literature in society today. "Literature", he argues, "has been something elite, but it is not anymore", and he suggests that libraries are used by "an ever-diminishing amount of people" (Deary cited in Flood 2013). This echoes the narrative of the public library as an elitist institution in a state of decay as noted by Greene and McMenemy (2012). Deary's statement can also be read as an attack on the habitus of the other authors. In this sense, the image of public libraries still presents a contentious issue, particularly during a time of large public spending cuts and rising poverty. The public library philanthropist Andrew Carnegie famously said: "Man does not live by bread alone" and "It is the mind that makes the body rich" (Carnegie cited in Winterson 2012). To this Winterson responds: "He was wrong about that – the underclass that possesses no money and nothing else either is the most destitute on earth" (Winterson 2012). In the age of austerity, it is possible to see how the status of the public library as a social good is called into question.

Another critique focuses on the viability of book reading as a means of social mobility in a digital age. Many authors concur with Val McDermid when she writes: "I would not be a writer if it were not for the public library system. Books were a luxury we could not afford when I was growing up, but the working-class culture of my time and place was that education was the way you escaped your history" (McDermid 2012, p. 51). Yet, there are also authors who dismiss the idea of book

reading as a vehicle for social mobility. Godin writes: “We all love the vision of the underprivileged kid bootstrapping himself out of poverty with books, but now (most of the time), the insight and leverage is going to come from being fast and smart with online resources, not from hiding in the stacks” (Godin 2012, p. 48). Godin, therefore, calls into question the value of the particular form of capital that is defended in the other author texts. Hence, it could be argued that many of the texts are defending not only the public library but also the habitus and capital of the author.

Galluzzi (2014) argues that the conditions for social mobility are changing. She explains that public libraries emerged during a time of knowledge scarcity and earned their place as a public service by “reinforcing the pact between the state and the lower classes, which little by little turned partially into middle classes” (Galluzzi 2014, p. 4). Yet, in the new knowledge economy the solid, conservative middle class is giving way to the flexible and fluid knowledge worker. These changes, she argues, are acutely felt by public libraries. “Librarians”, Galluzzi writes, “are perfectly well aware that libraries are pressed in the middle between the expansive role of the Internet and the shrinking role of national and local authorities in providing public services” (Galluzzi 2014, p. 4). Hence, a key priority for public libraries today is to come to grips with the changing conditions for social mobility.

These changes are, however, largely ignored in many of the author texts. As Glans (2016) highlights, author texts on libraries have a tendency to be backwards glancing in a way that disregards the experiences of different generations. Cooper, for instance, confidently asserts that “Children aren’t a different species; they are us, a few decades ago” (Cooper 2013). However, when looking at texts that exist on the periphery of the debate it is also possible to detect a higher degree of uncertainty. In her memoir Mangan writes about coming to terms with the fact that her son does not share her love of reading. “A generation on”, she writes, “things are different for my son because he is a different child from me, in a different time” (Mangan 2018, p. 204). This parental concern is shared by Moran: “I worry they will not manage without it. That books are *needed*. That they will *suffer* without books. That it will *ruin* them” (Moran 2016, p. 408). For, she continues:

‘Reading saved us. We’d be nothing without books.’ And this is true, because we were odd children – working class, a little bullied, a little lonely – and books were like a combination of a map, weapon and ladder to climb out of our bad years, and into the happy adults we became. And not only were they our survival kit, but also our greatest joy. We had the library. Endless books for free, stacked up around our beds like piles of money in a treasure house. Why do our children not need *or* want, our carefully collated inheritance – slowly yellowing, and dust-furred, in the book case?

Moran 2016, p. 409

This account again indicates the changing nature of capital and is a good example of the of social mobility of previous generations (Galluzzi 2014). Here, Moran takes a critical stance and questions whether these happy, well-adjusted children, who through the Internet have the world at their fingertips, are truly deserving of her pity. “Perhaps”, Moran writes, “I am a monkey, pitying a man” (Moran 2016, p. 409).

This, then, could be read as an example of the aforementioned hysteresis, where changing field conditions force the participants in the debate to either defend or abandon their positions. Moreover, it is possible to make a connection between what Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (2012) refer to as digital natives and what Black calls the postmodern self. “The public library”, Black writes, “is perhaps much more accustomed to serving the predictable than the unpredictable self” (Black 2000, p. 162). Though it would be erroneous to speak of a strict distinction between the two, it is possible that the earnest belief in the power self-direction expressed in many of the author texts is perhaps more reminiscent of what Black refers to as the “predictable self”.

In this sense, the original four-space model can be viewed as an attempt to reinvent public libraries in the postmodern age. Black, on the other hand, is more inclined to emphasise continuity by replacing the notion of postmodernity with late modernity. He writes: “Conceptualising modernity as an ‘unfinished project’ – a ‘new’ modernity – means that self-realisation /.../ within the context of social progress and justice, remains, as they were in classic modernity, crucial to the formation of the self in the late-modern age” (Black 2000, p. 159). As such, this calls for a discussion of how the public library can continue to be a place of equal opportunities and self-realisation for a new generation of patrons. This requires a critical and ethical consideration of the meaning of social progress and justice and thus a decision about when to adapt and when to stand firm. In *How to Build a Girl* the author voice argues that all a person can really do is build oneself up and then tear oneself down over and over again. Perhaps this is also true of the public library. Thus, the following advice, originally directed to children and parents, may also apply to librarians:

They build you with all they know, and love – and so they can’t see what you’re *not*: all the gaps you feel leave you vulnerable. All the new possibilities only imagined by your generation, and non-existent to theirs. They have done their best, with the technology they had to hand, at the time – but it’s now up to you, small, brave future, to do your best, with that *you* have. /.../ And so you go into your world, and try and find the things that will be useful to you. Your weapons. Your tools. Your charm.

Moran 2014, p. 320

5.3. Meeting Space

In the “performativity space” I showed how the public library is perceived as a place where one can encounter oneself. In the “meeting space”, I explore the library as a place for meeting others. In an age characterised by rapid digitisation and social polarisation the role of the library as a meeting place has come sharply into focus (Audunson 2005). The central issue in this dimension is how the public library is represented as a space for meeting in the author texts. This examination is undertaken with Audunson’s concept of high-intensive and low-intensive meeting places in mind. Another important consideration is how the idea of community is dealt with in the author texts and how it relates to the Big Society.

Many people think of the library as a public space – a term commonly used to describe parks, squares, streets and other places in society that inspire a sense of

collective ownership (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995). Helen Clyne, for instance, argues that “the important thing about the notion of a public library now is that it’s the one place you can just turn up to, a free space, a democratic space where anyone can go and be there with other people, and you don’t need money” (Clyne cited in Smith 2015, pp. 57-58). Similarly, Smith states: “A library is a different kind of social reality (of the three dimensional kind), which by its very existence teaches a system of values beyond the fiscal” (Smith 2018, p. 12). It may be suggested that this function is particularly prominent in the age of austerity as many public spaces such as swimming pools and parks are being closed down or sold off around the UK (Goodman 2018).

Alan Bennett argues that in the current public library debate “not enough stress has been laid on the library as place, not just facility” (Bennett 2012, p. 42). In many of the author texts, however, the public library is represented as a second home, which is similar to Oldenburg’s (1989) concept of the third place. This idea is expressed by Moran: “As me and my siblings were taught at home, the local library was the extra room in our home: it was our school house and our playground” (Moran 2012, p. 210). Similarly, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett describes the library as a “a big, cosy living room into which everyone is invited”. She continues:

Regardless of class background, libraries plug us into our communities, reminding us that there is life beyond our living rooms, that there’s more to our daily existences than work and coming home, and the same again tomorrow. We are not all atomised in front of our glowing screens. Libraries don’t just mean us, they mean other people too.

Cosslett 2017

Moreover, it is also common to describe the library as a sanctuary. This is not unique to the author texts, as the library is thought of by many as “a place where one may sit, read, browse, sleep and remain unharassed; nobody is judged and therefore nobody is found wanting” (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995 p. 52). Kennedy writes: “Thank you for being somewhere peaceful and familiar that I could go to when I needed to get away and my parents were fighting” (Kennedy 2014). Another similar account is given by Damian Barr:

Newarthill Library is where I hid when things were tough at home. I sat cross-legged on the floor between shelves where nobody else could see me and did my homework or devoured the latest Stephen King novel because I couldn’t take it out with my children’s card. It was the only place where the bullies who called me ‘poof’ wouldn’t follow, the book dust in the air was fatal to them – or maybe it was the librarian staring them down.

Barr 2016

Hence, in these texts the library is represented as a safe and protective space for children. Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry (1995) make an interesting case for the symbolic value of the children’s library card. They argue that the initial library membership provides one of the first links between the child and society. They also suggest that the library provides a place that is neither home nor school, which again is the definition of the third place (Oldenburg 1989). This, they stress, “*allows children a presence in the public domain in which they are neither cast as potential*

victims – or as threats”, which makes the library an embodiment of the “wider social and public realm” (Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry 1995, p. 91).

There are also accounts in which the library is described as a place to spend time with friends and family. Smith writes that, in her youth, the public library was a place “to meet various love prospects of whom our immigrant parents would not approve, under the cover of that all-purpose, immigrant-parent-silencing sentence: I’M GOING TO THE LIBRARY” (Smith 2012, p. 141). Similarly, Coelho writes: “I lived just around the corner from it and spent my evenings and weekends among its wooded shelves: took part in the summer reading schemes, did my homework there, bought incomplete encyclopedias from its constant book sale, met a girl I was too shy to talk to, and laughed like a hyena with my friends” (Coelho 2017b). “I truly believe”, Coelho continues, “that it is only in such spaces that we can support our children and families and heal our communities” (Coelho 2017b).

Cosslett (2017) also argues that libraries provide a “backdrop for bonding rituals with parents and aunts and grandparents”. Mangan (2018), for instance, remembers visiting the library with her very quiet father. Similarly, Luna loves to sit and read with her dad “on the big library chair, as soft as a teddy’s hug” (Coelho 2017a). Kennedy writes: “Thank you for being there today at the bottom of my street with film shows some evenings and people having fun and being part of somewhere good and kids playing and finding out how wonderful you are – just the way I did” (Kennedy 2014). Here, the library is represented as an intergenerational space. There are also several accounts of returning to the library as a parent or older relative. Anand writes: “The library is a different one now, and I cannot claim to be as ‘deep’, but I love taking my son to our local. We choose our piles with great care and excitement” (Anand 2012, p. 7-8). Similarly, Ho-Yen writes:

A few weeks later, visiting my nephew again, I took him to his local library and we registered for his library card, just a few weeks shy of his first birthday. It felt like the most important thing that we had done together since he arrived in the world. It was a priceless gift I was passing onto him.

Ho-Yen 2016

In *Luna Loves Library Day* “Dad finds a history book about where he grew up, where he used to play and the library he used to go to” (Coelho 2017a). These accounts, then, provide an interesting insight into how the library is represented as a space for intergenerational bonding rituals.

These accounts portray familial encounters that resemble high-intensity encounters. However, among the author texts there are also examples of low-intensity encounters. Hardeep Singh Kohli recalls meeting his first punk in Langside Library in Glasgow in the early 1980s and finding it strangely comforting that he, “the brown, fat kid in the bottle-green uniform and matching turban was, for once, not the strangest looking person around” (Singh Kohli 2012, pp. 17-18). Singh Koli recounts how the punk, by stating that he had never before met a “Paki⁸ Scottie”, was in a roundabout way the

⁸ “Paki” is a derogative term used to refer to British Pakistanis.

first person to confirm his Scottish identity, since people normally assumed that he was not Scottish at all. He writes:

I thought about the library and how it had managed to let two such different people from two such different worlds collide. It took a visiting cockney punk to allow me, for the first time, to have my Scottishness expressed and accepted. And it happened in a library.

Singh Kohli 2012, p. 20

This story serves as a good example of a low-intensity encounter. Similarly, Ann Cleeves writes that libraries should be “places of debate and disagreement” seeing as they are “safe and democratic spaces for people to come together” (Cleeves 2012, p. 127). This, then, provides an example of how the library is also represented as a part of the public sphere.

Furthermore, some texts emphasise how the public library embodies a connection between the individual and the local community or society at large. With regard to the local community it is quite common to come across some variation on the theme “the library is heart of the community”. Yet, though this theme is present in some of the author texts it is possible that many refrain from expressing such sentiments in the current political climate. In a speech from 2010 on the topic of public libraries the Secretary of State for Culture Ed Vaizey stated: “Libraries also have a home at the heart of the Big Society where communities have more of a role in determining the shape of the public service and what it delivers” (Vaizey 2010). The idea of the Big Society is viewed by suspicion by many of the participants in the public library debate.

A decade earlier Black directed a critique of what he refers to as the “romanticising of community” in contemporary public library jargon (Black 2000, p. 170). He argues that invoking the community function of libraries often serves other purposes than those stated. This is perhaps an astute early observation with regard to the current critique of the Big Society being “a smokescreen for public service cuts” (Mycock & Tonge 2011, p. 56). Smith echoes this critique: “They now call what used to be called public libraries ‘community libraries’. This is an ameliorating way of saying volunteer-run and volunteer-funded” (Smith 2015, p. 97). Mangan is also sceptical of the recent developments. She jokingly suggests that she, in the spirit of the Big Society, intends to relocate the local library in Lewisham to her own flat:

The time has surely come to add a second string to my bow, and give something back to my community, even if I have no idea who that community might actually be. But I’m sure you’re out there, and if you ever see me waving, do say hello, won’t you?

Mangan 2010

Here, it is possible to detect a certain scepticism about the meaning of community today. Mangan also rages against the idea of cohabitation, that is, the contemporary practice of merging libraries with other services such as gyms, which has caused much debate in recent years:

Vaizey's favourite example of successful cohabitation is the George & Dragon pub in the Hudswell, North Yorkshire, which disgorges books as well as pints. Fortunately, the perceptive souls in charge of Lewisham's biblioservices appear to have noted the potential pitfalls of reproducing this particular arrangement in the less idyllic surrounds of – ooh, let's say, almost anywhere else – and have decided to stick to working more closely with neighbouring boroughs to try to save money.

Mangan 2010

This is similar to Goulding's remark about the disparity between different communities in the UK and the question of whether the Big Society is a project reserved for the wealthy (Goulding 2013). This question is interesting to consider in relation to the librarian Nina in Colgan's novel who moves from the noisy and urban setting of Birmingham to an idyllic village in Scotland. Colgan describes the moment when Nina first beholds her new book shop: "Nina stared, amazed. It was as if her dream had come to life and was standing in front of her, with the fields behind them, the meadow butterflies fluttering amongst the daisies and an owl hooting somewhere in the distance" (Colgan 2016, p. 147). In the novel, the shop becomes the heart of the village and Nina a pillar of the community. Despite her ardent claim that she is no longer a librarian, Nina continues to run storytime sessions, lend books to poor families and even recruits a volunteer for the shop. In this sense, the "Little Shop of Happy-Ever-After" embodies many of the core ideas of the Big Society. With a mix of entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to her community Nina could be seen as the poster girl for the Big Society agenda.

Moreover, it is interesting to consider the significance of the shift of location that takes place in the novel with regard to Mangan's (2010) earlier remark. Back in Birmingham Nina's former colleague Griffin longingly recalls the pre-austerity library service:

It was lovely. People coming in to share stories about books or things they liked. Now it's people coming in because they're desperate. They're cut off from the world because they don't have the internet or their benefits have been taken away and they can't make ends meet, and nobody is left out there to care because they cut and cut and cut. I'm a librarian, and now I'm an IT support worker with a side order of psychology, addiction counselling and social work.

Colgan 2016, p. 221

This could be read as a critique against diversification and what Galluzzi refers to as the "the role of libraries as softeners of the economic crisis' impact" (Galluzzi 2014, p. 67). In Scotland Nina muses: "She was amazed, truly, how much she wanted the Little Shop of Happy-Ever-After to work now that she had seen it could, now she knew that there were people – people everywhere, who cared about and loved books as much as she did" (Colgan 2016, p. 179). This brings to mind Bynner's earlier argument about staff attitudes and the contentious notion of "deserving" and "undeserving" patrons (Bynner 2012). Like the librarians in Bynner's study Nina and Griffin do not embrace their new role as library social workers.

However, there are also examples of how the perceived library crisis and subsequent protests have brought communities closer together, which perhaps relates to the sense

of collective ownership that places like libraries often inspire. Tim Lott writes: “Community action is a liberating and powerful experience. David Cameron has talked of his desire to encourage this kind of activism in local communities – but he may not realise just what genie he is letting out of the bottle” (Lott 2011). This point was also made previously by Goulding, who suggests that the will of the people is readily ignored if it goes against the Big Society agenda (Goulding 2013).

Nonetheless, it should also be noted that the individual remains central in many of the author texts. Some public library researchers emphasise the nature of the public library as a private public space – a space where one can be alone but at the same time surrounded by people (Black 2000, Hutton 2017). Smith gives voice to this idea when she recalls how she and her friends came together to study in the library: “We sat next to each other at the long white tables and used the library computers and did not speak” (Smith 2012, p. 141). She continues: “It was a community of individuals, working to individual goals, in a public space” (Smith 2012, p. 142). This idea is also expressed Singh Kohli:

To reduce a library to simple architecture, bricks and mortar is a mistake. Similarly, to suggest a library is defined by the books on the shelf is erroneous. Libraries are very special spaces, spaces where people come together in separate but joined pursuits of knowledge, of learning. Libraries are the heartbeats of communities.

Singh Kohli 2012, p. 20

Here, the communality of the public library takes a different shape that is perhaps more similar to the idea of the library as a space for self-creation as outlined in the “performativity space”. Yet, Smith also argues that libraries, as a public service, also embody the connection between the individual and society and also the individual and the government:

Community exists in Britain, and no matter how many individuals opt out of it, the commons of British life will always be the greater force, practically and morally. Community is a partnership between government and the people, and it is depressing to hear the language of community – the so-called ‘Big Society’ – being used to disguise the low motives of one side of that partnership as it attempts to worm out of the deal. What could be better, they suggest, than handing people back the power so they might build their own schools, their own libraries? Better to leave people to the already onerous task of building their own lives and paying their taxes. Leave the building of infrastructure to government, and the protection of public services to government – that being government’s mandate, and the only possible justification for its power.

Smith 2012, p. 145

Hence, in the author texts the public library is represented as a space for both intimate encounters and individual and collective pursuits. There is also a sense that the library embodies the social contract between the individual and society and the individual and the government. Thus, the texts provide an insight into the struggle over how the idea of community should be understood. Here, it is perhaps possible to detect an underlying ideological conflict between the previous Social-Democratic model for the running of public libraries and the more recent Neoliberal model. It is evident from the author texts that the concept of community has become a contentious idea in the

current political climate. In this sense, it may be necessary for public libraries in the UK to rethink and rephrase their role as a meeting place in a contemporary context.

5.4. Learning Space

In this dimension I explore how the public library is represented as a space for learning and information seeking. As mentioned previously, the first public libraries were created in an effort to educate the masses. Yet, through the exploration of the various spaces it has become evident that libraries have taken on a multitude of functions and meanings for its patrons. In recent years, however, there has been a drive for libraries to support their patrons with a range of activities such as digital literacy, job seeking and life-long learning in order to keep pace with the rapid digitisation of society and the development of the knowledge economy. As such, the focus in this space is what forms of learning are represented and defended in the author texts and what potential conflicts can be detected relating to the changes that are taking place within public libraries today.

According to Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry (1995) public libraries are built on the ideals of the Enlightenment tradition. From this perspective, even the smallest community library can be perceived as a repository of the knowledge and wisdom of the past. This idea is present in many of the author texts and is related to what Hutton (2017) refers to as “the myth of the universal library” and “the library as memory”, which is often represented by the historic library of Alexandria. Haig, for instance, writes: “A library is a symbol for a healthy civilization. After the ancient library of Alexandria was burnt down it took a full millennium to regain the knowledge that was lost” (Haig 2013). In a similarly grand historical comparison, Mangan recalls the duck-egg blue dome in the ceiling of her childhood library that she did not realise was an homage to the reading room in the British library (Mangan 2018). Thus, even though public libraries today have very little in common with these historic libraries in terms of their function and purpose they still inspire an association. As Sophie Mayer states: “I believe that within every library is a door that opens to every other library in time and space” (Mayer cited in Smith 2015, pp. 76).

Moreover, Hutton argues that libraries take on a symbolic importance in an age of rapid change and digitisation as they, through their buildings and collections, represent something physical and permanent (Hutton 2017). Rai writes: “Technology has its place, but it would not even exist without books and libraries. I love the feel and smell of libraries” (Rai 2012, p. 123). In some texts it is also possible to detect a perceived conflict between books and computers. Alexander McCall Smith writes: “So many libraries today have become sheds for computers, with books being edged out, put away” (McCall Smith 2014). This issue is keenly felt in some of the author texts and relates to the theme described by Hutton as “the library destroyed”. In his short story *The Defence of the Book* Julian Barnes imagines a dystopian future where the welfare state has collapsed under the rule of the “National Coalition”. Barnes imagines that the libraries that were saved during the protests of 2010 are now being burnt to the ground. Before this could happen, however, the libraries were emptied and the books were saved and became part of an underground library movement. Barnes writes: “Later, much later, this famous Defence of the Book was regularly

compared by historians to the way in which culture and learning were kept alive by monks during the Dark Ages until better, safer times returned” (Barnes 2012, p. 13). This story can be read as a thinly veiled allegory of the current developments in public libraries in the UK. The story points, perhaps, to contemporary examples of social action where libraries have indeed been emptied by its patrons when under threat of closing. The story also expresses a strong discontent with current societal developments and a desire for a new beginning.

A similar theme is the disintegration of the childhood library, which has previously been highlighted by Glans (2016). Here, some authors recount stories of returning to their childhood library and finding it altered:

My own Carnegie library in Accrington is still open. I visited recently. There are far fewer books. The lovely separate children’s library has been closed. There are no longer classical music concerts or lectures – Pitman Painters’ style. There are computers of course and plenty of people coming in and out. The library is doing its best according to its remit of being a community centre with books. What the library isn’t any more is the place of unassailable knowledge I encountered as a kid.

Winterson 2012

Although Winterson emphasises the need to “reinvent our local libraries” (Winterson 2012), she contradicts herself here by repeatedly referring back to the library she remembered from her own childhood. A similar account is given by Moran:

I went up and saw some of the austerity last month. I hadn’t intended to – I was just visiting my old home town – but I ended up in my local library: the one I lived in between the ages of 5 and 15. And there, in the library, was some austerity. A visible thing. Something you could mark on a map, with a pin.

Moran 2016, 304

To suggest that these texts express a certain nostalgia for an irretrievable past is not unfounded. However, it is also necessary to consider that many of the authors grew up during or after what Moore (2004) refers to as “the golden age of public libraries” and that there has indeed been a slow but considerable decline in the service in terms of the quality and range of the book stock in recent decades. This, in turn, suggests that the critique expressed in the author texts cannot be completely dismissed. Furthermore, these accounts also entail an implicit critique that the diversification and commercialisation of libraries has entailed a dumbing down of the service. Germaine Greer argues that librarians today are turning into “all-singing, all-dancing social entrepreneurs” (Greer 2010). Similarly, Winterson writes:

When we look back at the latest cuts in Newcastle, we can see where this confusion starts – ‘Libraries, leisure and culture’. But culture is not leisure – though you need leisure to peruse culture – and libraries are not leisure in the way that a sport centre is leisure. Libraries began with the highest purpose in mind, to educate through the agency of the book. The first public libraries were aspirational and proud. Libraries were not community centres with books in the way.

Winterson 2012

This, then, is similar to what Hedemark refers to as the conflict between “the book discourse” and “the community centre discourse”, which stemmed from the efforts to diversify and popularise the public library service in the 1970s in Sweden (Hedemark 2009). The following quote from Moran relates to the much-debated issue of what constitutes high-quality literature:

But do we need libraries to be clever? What is wrong with a room containing only light modern fiction about mercenaries, and submissive sex? Can the working classes not have their rooms of cheap pleasure? What’s wrong is this: it will not survive. If you take the intelligence and knowledge out of a library – if you take the purposefulness, the *usefulness*, so that it is filled only with sugary treats – then when the next round of austerity cuts come in, that library will die. No one will fight for it – no one will fight for a room like that.

Moran 2016, p. 306

This can be read as a critique of the commercialisation of library services and the efforts to provide a more popular selection of literature in order to maintain higher levels of issues. The nature of change is also present in Colgan’s novel when Nina describes the current restructure that is taking place in the Birmingham library service:

Cathy Neeson had explained that they were going to compress the library services into the centre of town, where they would become a ‘hub’ with an ‘multimedia experience zone’ and a coffee shop and an ‘inter-sensory experience’, whatever that was, even though town was at least two bus trips too far for most of their elderly or buggied-up clientele.

Colgan 2016, p. 3

This can be construed as a critique of the effort to modernise public libraries and also a parody of the way in which local councils are increasingly adopting business-like jargon. Similarly, Nina’s colleague Griffin rages over the changes made to the service:

Griffin snorted. ‘Have you seen the plans? Coffee, computers, DVDs, plants, admin offices, and people doing cost-benefit analysis and harassing the unemployed – sorry running “mindfulness workshops”. There isn’t room for a single book in the whole damn place.’ He gestured at the dozens of boxes. ‘This will be landfill. They’ll use it to make roads’.

Colgan 2016, p. 5

Yet, there are also author texts that welcome the changes that are currently taking place in public libraries. Johanna Trollope writes: “The notion of a library being a hushed and dusty accumulation of outdated books housed in an Edwardian mausoleum presided over by fierce martinets is long gone. The library of the present – and, more importantly, the future – is something else altogether” (Trollope 2014). The critique is also met by Mangan who pokes fun at the group she refers to as “anti-hubbers”. She writes: ““Oh GOD,’ say all of us who instinctively recoil from the

⁹ The term anti-hubbers is used here to refer to participants in the public library debate who oppose the diversification of public libraries.

notion of modernity, commerce and especially, y’know, modern commerce. ‘Must we?’”. Yes, Mangan continues, we must because “‘we’ are not those who actually use libraries, let alone depend on them” (Mangan 2014). Here, it can be suggested that both Trollope and Mangan are making an effort to adjust their argument to fit the current field conditions. Yet, it is also interesting to note that some years later Mangan appears to have changed her mind:

The notion of libraries as special is lost. A sacred, silent space free for all is lost, and with it the implicit promise that the life of the mind – the life of any mind, of your mind – is important disappears into the ether. Things begin to fragment, and the people whose lives are already chaotic get lost. And none of it comes back.

Mangan 2016

Thus, it can be concluded that there is a tangible uncertainty about the change that is taking place in public libraries today. It is also worth noting that, within the debate, the idea of commercialisation and diversification have a tendency to get tangled up as libraries are trying simultaneously to update their image in order to appeal to non-users and, at the same, reach out to disadvantaged groups. This, in turn, may reflect a certain ambivalence about the purpose of the library service and how its usefulness should be understood and measured. It could also be argued that the recent round of austerity measures has called into question the belief that it is possible for the public library to be a space for culture, leisure and social support in equal measure and that priorities will have to be made.

Indeed, when looking at the current public library research it is evident that most researchers are keen to emphasise the social usefulness of libraries during periods of economic distress. It may be, as Black (2000) sought, that public libraries are finally living up to their liberal ideals. Yet, the strife for political legitimacy is not without risks as the library may lose its overall legitimacy in the eyes of its patrons if it strays too far from its perceived role (Michnik 2018). For, despite the many efforts to reinvent the service, book lending and the range and quality of the stock is still considered the most valuable service for both young and old library visitors (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council 2010, Mears 2018).

In the material it is also possible to detect a conflict between recreational and instrumental learning. As mentioned previously, this conflict has been present since the formation of public libraries and has perhaps been further enforced by the rise of the knowledge economy and the increased pressure for libraries to translate their activities into measureable outcomes. In many of the texts the value of public library reading is understood through its richness and randomness. Moran writes: “I learned *everything* there. Sex, witchcraft, baking, butchery, geography, navigation” (Moran 2016, p. 304). Mangan also emphasises the range of learning experiences that a library provides:

What is it you’re looking for? An hour’s escapism? A quick explanation of a DIY problem that foxed you? A history lesson? A long investigation into some of the weightiest moral and philosophical issues that men have wrestled with down the ages? We’ve got them. And good radiators too.

Mangan 2018, p. 49

This idea is also expressed by Haig:

It is an island full of unexpected treasure. Amazon tells us that if we like such-and-such we might also like such-and-such. Fine. But sometimes we want eclecticism. We want to just hit upon something unexpected, pull it from the shelves and start reading. That kind of randomness is important.

Haig 2013

This again brings to mind the aforementioned serendipity of the library reading experience as highlighted by Radford, Radford and Lingel (2014). Griffin concludes that “Getting rid of libraries is an expression of a fact that should already have been plain: the only kinds of knowledge that really matter today are as useful and as general as possible, with little interest on minor or local events or stories for their own sake” (Griffin 2016). Hence, these voices represent the defence of the library as a space for recreational learning.

Yet, it is also common to think of libraries as an addition or an alternative to formal education. This relates to Vestheim’s (1997) argument that libraries are closely associated with the social field of education. Julia Donaldson writes: “Libraries are great places for doing research. You can do your homework there or find out about almost anything, as there are so many non-fiction books and also computers there” (Donaldson 2012b). Smith makes a similar case for the importance of the library as a space for education:

It’s short-sighted to think that all our goals were bookish ones – I happened to be in a library in the hope it would lead me to other libraries, but my fellow students were seeking all kinds of futures: in social work, in education, in engineering, in management. We all learned a lot of things in Willesden Green Library, and we learned how to learn things, which is most important.

Smith 2012, p. 142

This idea is also expressed by Kennedy: “Thank you for teaching all of my friends who weren’t taken care of in school and who didn’t make it to university. Thank you for letting them start at A and move on” (Kennedy 2014). Moran concurs: “Home educated and, by seventeen, writing for a living, the only alma mater I have ever had is Warstones Library, Pinfold Grove” (Moran 2012, p. 210). In these author texts the public library is represented as the poor man’s university.

There are also examples of texts that adopt a middle position by suggesting that there is a strong correlation between reading for pleasure and educational or professional achievement. Mangan argues that being a bookworm gave her an easy life at school and university, as well as an advantage when applying for jobs (Mangan 2018). Malorie Blackman also makes an argument for the importance of libraries in relation to early learning:

Libraries are they best literacy resource we have. For children they provide an equaliser that allows everyone access to books, story-telling sessions, homework clubs; expert librarians who give non-partisan assistance and advice regarding books; and warm and safe environments within

which to discover and explore the world of literature. Libraries switch children on to a love of reading, with all the ensuing benefits, and can make them lifelong readers. Without them, literacy may increasingly become the province of the lucky few, rather than the birthright of everyone.

Blackman 2013

In an open letter to Secretary of State for Culture Maria Miller, Donaldson puts forward a more instrumental argument for the preservation of public libraries:

Illiteracy leads to lower skills, greater social problems, higher crime rates, and a country less able to prosper in the global jobs market. So cutting libraries is a false economy. They are the best literacy resource that we have.

Donaldson 2012a

Here, it is interesting to note that Donaldson strategically adjusts her argument to fit her audience. Furthermore, in their defence of the public library many authors also show an awareness of the necessity to define the role of the service in a digital age. Here, some authors argue that libraries serve a democratic function as they protect access to free information. This, again, relates back to one of the core assumptions of the public library doxa (Vestheim 1997). Mayer, for instance, argues: “I believe libraries are essential for informed and participatory democracy, and that there is therefore an ideological war on them via cuts and closures, depriving individuals and communities of their right to knowledge and becoming on their own terms” (Mayer cited in Smith 2015, p. 76). Kay simply states: “A library card in your hand is your democracy” (Kay 2014). Lott also emphasises the role that libraries play in minimising the digital divide between the information rich and the information poor (Lott 2011). A similar argument is put forth by Gaiman, who argues that libraries are about more than just books:

But libraries are also, for example, places that people, who may not have computers, who may not have internet connections, can go online without paying anything: hugely important when the way you find out about jobs, apply for jobs or apply for benefits is increasingly migrating exclusively online. Librarians can help these people navigate that world.

Gaiman 2013

Hedemark argues that the authors in her study were more prone to raise these arguments during periods when libraries were under threat (Hedemark 2009). Likewise, Glans (2016) identifies similar statements as logos arguments. It is also interesting to note that the authors in my own study are quick to adopt contemporary library terminology. This may indicate an awareness of the necessity to phrase arguments in politically functional terms and can thus be read as a response to changing field conditions.

Thus, these accounts offer an insight into the variety of learning experiences that libraries provide and how many of them overlap and interlock. It is also possible to detect a struggle over how library learning should be defined and defended. Some authors are more prone to defend traditional book reading whereas others are willing to engage with contemporary technological developments. Black argues that “One of

the great strengths of the public library, indeed, has been its historic ability to accommodate both utilitarian and idealist perspectives” (Black 2000, p. 158). As such, one of the key challenges for public library professionals and researchers is to find ways to promote the unique role that public libraries play as learning institutions in society today.

5.5. The Librarian

As mentioned previously, I have chosen to add a fifth space to the original four-space model that encompasses the role of the librarian. Here, the librarian is understood as an inter-dimension that acts within each of the four other spaces. The deprofessionalisation of public libraries did not begin in the austerity years but has been an ongoing development for several decades. The professional status of library staff easily creates confusion, both in terms of what qualifications and skills are required to do the work and who it is the patrons encounter when they use the service. Hence, the central issue in this dimension is how librarians are represented in the author texts in terms of their roles, skills, behaviours and appearances. Another important consideration is to which space the librarian most central in the material. I will also examine the author response the the contemporary use of volunteers in public libraries in the UK.

Looking at the previous research it is evident there has been a shift away from the more stereotypical representations of librarians (Luthmann 2007, Shaw 2010) Yet, through examining texts that exist on the periphery of the debate it is possible to see how some stereotypical images still linger. In Sean O’Brien’s poem “The Beautiful Librarians” the author voice laments the loss of the librarians he remembers from his youth:

The beautiful librarians are dead,
The fairly recent graduates who sat
Like Françoise Hardy’s shampooed sisters
With cardigans across their shoulders
On quiet evenings at the issue desk,
Stamping books and never looking up
At where I stood in adoration.

O’Brien 2015, p. 28

The poem was featured in the *Guardian* as “poem of the week” and described as “A nostalgic homage to the glory of libraries and librarians” with reference to the current funding cuts (Rumen 2015). In the poem the librarian is viewed through a male gaze and featured in a traditional fashion performing passive clerical tasks. Here, the librarian becomes a symbol of a bygone time.

Furthermore, Colgan’s novel *The Little Shop of Happy-Ever-After* also provides four different representations of librarians. First, there is the main character Nina, who in the beginning of the novel finds out that she must reapply for her job following a restructure of the library service. Colgan writes:

And Nina Redmond, twenty-nine, bookworm, with her long tangle of auburn hair, her pale skin with freckles dotted here and there, and a shyness that made her blush – or want to burst into tears – at the most inopportune moments, was, she got the feeling, going to be thrown out in the cold winds of a world that was getting a lot of unemployed librarians.

Colgan 2016, p. 3

Nina is described as introverted and bookish and is not offered a new job in the restructure as she fails to show sufficient enthusiasm for the new vision for the library service. Nina complains to a friend that the library will be staffed by volunteers, which is deemed unacceptable as the volunteers do not have the appropriate knowledge of books and the ordering system (Colgan 2016). Here, the knowledge and skills of the librarian are represented as predominantly connected to literature promotion and clerical tasks. Another librarian featured in the novel is “Old Rita O’Leary, who should probably have retired about a decade ago but was so kind to their clientele that everyone overlooked the fact that she couldn’t see the numbers on the Dewey Decimal System any more and filed more or less at random” (Colgan 2016, p. 4). There is also Griffin who has “a long, unpleasant scrawny beard, and a scornful attitude towards people who didn’t read the books he liked” (Colgan 2016, p. 5). These representations, then, shed a negative light on the public library profession. A critique of the contemporary work force has previously been issued by Luthmann (2007). Furthermore, these three librarians are contrasted with the library manager Cathy Neeson, who is portrayed as the executioner of the old library service and can be read as a critique of the turn towards managerialism within local councils in the UK:

Cathy Neeson, with her stiff too-blond hair, and her thin mouth and her spreadsheets, who was right at this moment standing in a corner, watching the room with a grim expression, after delivering to the small team Nina was a member of a speech filled with jargon about how there were cutbacks all over, and Birmingham couldn’t afford to maintain all its libraries, and how austerity was something they just had to get used to.

Colgan 2016, p. 2

Moreover, it is also interesting to note that becoming a business-owner is a transformational experience for Nina. One of her new friends in the village comments on this change by suggesting that Nina has lost her “metaphorical cardigan” (Colgan 2016, p. 247). Within the context of this narrative, the librarian is represented as a disempowered figure. This contrasts starkly to the portrayal of librarian identity in *Mobile Library*. In the beginning of the novel Bobby asks Val, who works as a cleaner on the mobile library service, if she is a librarian. She replies: “I wish.” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 58). Yet, when Val takes charge of the mobile library she gradually starts to refer to herself as “the librarian” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 147). By contrast to Nina, the librarian identity gives Val a sense of authority and pride. Thus, within the context of this narrative, the librarian is represented as a powerful and active figure.

For the most part, librarians are described as vital to the library service in a majority of the author texts. Kate Mosse, for instance, writes: “The fight is not only about the principles of free and equal access to books for all, internet access in the form of the

People's Network, but also about the people who run the service" (Mosse 2010). Moreover, many texts also harbour a critique of the current use of volunteers in the UK public library service. Davies writes:

Community libraries can be wonderful places, and volunteers do tremendous work stepping up to preserve them in the wake of government cuts. But libraries are a public service. They must be properly funded, properly resourced and properly staffed, with trained and expert full-time librarians. Councils cannot assume that they can threaten libraries with closure and then rely on volunteers to keep them open.

Davies 2017

Here, Davies defends both the public service status of libraries and the professional status of the librarian. Similarly, Pullman writes:

Is the job of a librarian so empty that anyone can step up and do it for a thank you and a cup of tea? And who are these volunteers? Who are these people whose time spreads out in front of them like the limitless steppes of central Asia, who have no families to look after, no jobs to do, no responsibilities, and are yet so wealthy they can commit hours every week to working for nothing?

Pullman 2011

Pullman questions the viability of volunteer-run libraries, which has been highlighted previously by Goulding (2013). However, one issue that remains unacknowledged in the author texts is that long before the advent of volunteer-run libraries many services choose to replace librarians with library assistants which compromised the effectiveness of the workforce (Moore 2004). This development remains a largely unrecognised stage in the deprofessionalisation of the public library workforce.

Pullman also queries if it is, in fact, possible for anyone to do the work of a librarian, which leads us on to the question of how the skills of the profession are represented in the author texts. In a majority of the texts the primary skills represented relate to books and reading promotion. Gaiman writes: "They were good librarians. They liked books and they liked the books being read" (Gaiman 2013). This relates, perhaps, to the somewhat old-fashioned notion of librarians as the fearsome gatekeepers of the book collection. Davies also highlights the importance of curatorship:

Librarians are far more than stackers and cataloguers. They are creative curators of their book collections. They review and renew their flocks of books, adjusting what they have to fit their readers, highlighting certain sections and topics to reflect the world. They are on hand to guide and encourage, to foster relationships between books and people.

Davies 2017

Thus, despite her effort to highlight the unique competences of librarians Davies only captures a small part of what most librarians today would consider their core skills.¹⁰ Similarly, Mosse writes: “Helping reluctant or returning readers to get back to reading, advising and guiding their book choices, is an essential and skilled service that volunteers, however passionate and committed, cannot deliver” (Mosse 2010). Though reader development is, of course, one of the most central activities in public libraries, these accounts neglect many other core roles of the profession.

It is also interesting to consider the fictitious librarian Nina with regard to this issue. When asked by her manager how she can anticipate the needs of her non-readers, Nina is unable to respond. To her, the most important job of a librarian is simply to pair the right reader with the right book (Colgan 2016). This can be seen as an example of hysteresis, where the field conditions have altered and there is a dislocation between the field and the habitus of the librarian. Yet, Nina seizes the opportunity that arises from the changed conditions and finds her place in the new order, though this is not within the library service. Additionally, it can also be concluded that the narrative resolution in story is that there is no place for a bookish librarian in the contemporary public library service.

Furthermore, the role of the bookish librarian is also highlighted by Cleeves:

Some say that the Internet has taken the place of the library. We can browse the web, read bookish blogs, tweet bookish tweets. But we can't pick up the book. We can't take it away and read it for free. And there's something sadly solitary and second-hand about the electronic experience of choosing books. It needed Mrs Macgregor, with her grey hair and her magician's smile and her vicarious enjoyment of my reading adventures, to capture my imagination and set me on my way.

Cleeves 2012, p. 128

In this account libraries and the Internet are represented as polar opposites. There is no suggestion that librarians could have a role in curating digital collections or be a force for inspiration in a digital age. Yet, there are other examples of representations that highlight the potential role of librarians in the age of the Internet. Ness states:

They are tour-guides for all of knowledge. Knowledge and information – and by which I do very much include the internet – is a forest. And true, sometimes it's fun getting lost, sometimes that's how you learn some surprising things. But how much more can you discover when someone can point you in the right direction, when someone can maybe give you a map.

Ness 2011

¹⁰ The expertise of library and information professionals has been outlined by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals as follows: “organising knowledge and information, knowledge and information management, using and exploiting knowledge and information, research skills, information governance and compliance, records management and archiving, collection management and development, literacies and learning, leadership and advocacy, strategy, planning and management, customer focus, service design, marketing and IT and communication” (CILIP 2013).

Haigh writes: “Librarians are just like search engines, except they smile and they talk to me and they don’t give me paid-for advertisement when they are trying to help. And they actually have hearts” (Haigh 2013). This is similar to the argument that public libraries have an important role to play as “impartial public spaces free from commercial influence” (Rooney-Browne and McMenemy 2010, p. 455). These accounts provide an insight into how librarians are also considered providers of non-partisan advice. Finally, an alternative vision is put forth by Godin:

We need librarians more than we ever did. What we don’t need are mere clerks who guard dead paper. Librarians are too important to be a dwindling voice in our culture. For the right librarian, this is the chance of a lifetime.

Godin 2012, p. 49

Hence, with a few exceptions, in the author texts the librarian is primarily represented as a book-loving and compassionate ally to the young aspiring writer. This means that the role, function and value of librarians are most strongly linked to the “inspiration space” and the “performativity space”. There are also accounts that emphasise the librarian’s role within the other dimensions, in terms of being a welcoming and protective presence in the “meeting space” and a teacher and guide in the “learning space”. Yet, there is an overall sense that many of the core skills of librarians remain largely invisible.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The results and analysis of this investigation indicate that there is much to be learnt from looking at how author texts represent and defend the public library in the UK in an age of austerity. Here, I discuss these findings with regard to the three central research questions of this study. This chapter also reflects on the limitations of the study and offers some recommendations for future research directions.

6.1. Discussion

The first research question relates to how the public library is represented and defended in the author texts. This examination was conducted by situating the texts within the five dimensions of the library.

In the “inspiration space” the public library is represented as a place that fuels the imagination and provides an escape from reality. This is described through the experience of the physical library and the practice of reading imaginative literature. It is interesting to consider how the public library, despite its utilitarian origins, has in some sense been hijacked by its patrons and used for a myriad of purposes that it was never intended for. It is perhaps for this reason that Griffin describes the public library as “one of the happiest accidents of British life” (Griffin 2016). Hence, as much as this study is an investigation of the current debate surrounding libraries, it also provides a cultural history of the institution from the point of view of multiple generations who grew up with the public library service. It should also be noted that many of the author texts return to a time prior to the advent of the Internet and that a majority omit the potential role of the Internet as competing space for inspiration. Thus, it could be argued that the challenge that lies ahead for public libraries is to come to terms with what it means to be a space for inspiration and a window to other realities for patrons today. Although the means through which we escape may have altered, there is a strong chance that the need to escape remains the same. For, as much as the author texts provides a homage to the library service that was, it is also possible to read these accounts as a defence of every person’s right to free access to experiences beyond the realm of their circumstances. At present, this must be understood as a considerable challenge for public libraries in the UK considering the reduction in funding paired with the increased expectations of patrons.

Through the “performativity space” it is possible to get a sense of the intimate connection between the public library and the self. It shows how the library is perceived as a place for becoming through the accumulation of various forms of capital that enable social mobility. Perhaps this is especially true for those who have made themselves through the process of reading and writing, but it is nevertheless a

valuable insight into the very personal nature of the relationship between the library and its patrons. This could explain why so many people have come out in defence of the service even during a time when many other essential services are under threat. Yet, though the majority of the texts express a great certainty regarding the ageless appeal of the library, it is also possible to detect an uncertainty about the changing nature of the process of becoming today. This stems from the gap that exists between different generations and the subsequent questioning of whether that which worked well for the older generation is going to do so for the next. The examination also highlights the altered conditions of social mobility and the value of bookishness as a form of capital in the digital age. Though literacy and the associated benefits of reading are still considered absolutely vital, it is evident from the debate that the role of the library as a provider of reading materials has been called into question. Hence, an important consideration for public libraries is what it means to support self-creation and social mobility in society today.

The “meeting space” provides an insight into how the public library is represented as a place to meet others. It is evident that the relationship between people can be understood on many different levels in the context of the library. Some describe it as a place for intergenerational bonding rituals, which is interesting to consider in relation to the gap that exists between generations as highlighted above. Others describe the library as a public living room and a place to meet friends or study. There are also examples where the library is represented as a place to encounter strangers that brings to mind Audunson’s (2005) concept of low-intensity meeting places and a few that highlight the function of the library as an embodiment of the public sphere. Yet, it should also be noted that, even within the meeting dimension, the individual remains central, and to many the library is understood simply as a place where one can be alone in the company of others. In other texts the library is described as the heart of the local community. It could be argued, however, that “community” has become problematic term to use, as there is a growing concern that the community library has taken on a new meaning in the realm of the Big Society. Perhaps this is why some authors choose instead to highlight the notion of a national community and the social contract that exists between citizens through the collective effort of welfare provision. Hence, it is possible to detect a high degree of complexity relating to the nature of the public library as a meeting place, which prompts a further discussion about how this function should be defined.

The “learning space” has made it possible to explore what forms of learning are represented and defended in the author texts. In the material it is possible to detect a slight tension between recreational and instrumental learning, which has been an ongoing conversation throughout the history of the public library. Moreover, some texts express a concern that computers are replacing books in the library, whilst others are more open to the idea of the library as a digital space. It is possible that this disparity is exacerbated during times of financial restraint when services are forced to make priorities. Furthermore, some texts also express an opposition to the diversification and commercialisation of public libraries. As mentioned previously, there also appears to be some general confusion about the dual effort to modernise the service in order to appeal to non-users, on the one hand, and to diversify the service in order to reach disadvantaged groups, on the other. This again shows the unique complexity of the public library as an institution stretched between several social

fields and the subsequent fragmentation of the public image of the library as described by Evjen and Audunson (2008). Hence, it is vital for public libraries to be able to define and communicate their identity as a learning institution in a convincing and congruent way.

With regard to the role of the librarian within the four dimensions of the public library, it is possible to conclude that librarians are most strongly connected with the “inspiration space” and “performativity space” in the author texts. A majority of the texts can be read as a defence of the professional status of the librarian and a critique of the current use of volunteers, particularly in relation to volunteer-run libraries. Despite this, however, the role of the librarian is heavily interlinked with the physical book collection in a way that does not reflect the education and professional skills of librarians in a contemporary context.

The second research question relates to how the representations in the author texts reflect the wider societal context of the public library debate. Looking at the debate in its entirety it is possible to perceive how many of the central assumptions that have previously guided public library practice have been called into question. As such, the public library doxa as outlined by Vestheim (1997) is no longer uncontested. The author texts, with a few exceptions, can be read as a defence of the field doxa. It should be noted that many of the texts show a keen awareness of the historic identity of the public library as an institution anchored in modernity, Enlightenment ideals, professionalism and print culture, in agreement with Black (2000). However, as Glans suggests, by constantly gazing backwards the author texts have a tendency to defend the library that was rather than engaging with the challenges that lie ahead (Glans 2016). There is, consequently, a need for visions of the public library as a “landmark for the future” (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, p. 6). However, it is also important to consider that the childhood library, in the light of current societal developments in the UK, also represents something more than a nostalgic homage to the past. In the author texts the public library is clearly situated in close proximity to other social fields and institutions associated with ideas such as democracy, enlightenment and welfare provision as suggested by Vestheim (1997). Thus, it is also possible to read the author texts as an ardent defence of universal provision. It could be argued that within the greater political struggle taking place in the UK in the age of austerity public libraries become a symbol for the “benevolence” of the welfare state. Thus, part of the nostalgia is for the provision that was offered during childhoods characterised by poverty and a lack of opportunity. Thus, a central issue for public libraries is how to engage with change whilst maintaining a certain continuity with its historic identity. As libraries move away from municipal control there will be a strong need to maintain a shared vision and a coherent identity throughout the sector.

The third research question focuses on how the author representations of the current situation compare and contrast with contemporary public library research. Here, it should be noted that the author texts are heavily centred around the “inspiration space” and the “performativity space”. There is a strong emphasis on the public library as a cultural institution, the physical book as a medium and the strife of the individual person. Thus, the author texts attribute much value to the particular form of cultural capital that libraries have long been associated with and may be associated

with still. By contrast, the contemporary public library research focuses instead on the role of the library as an information centre or a community hub, emphasising in particular its important role during the recent recession. This may be indicative of a certain self-consciousness of library professionals and a desire to shake any prevailing images of the library as an elitist and out-dated institution. It may also be viewed as an attempt to rectify the past failure of libraries to reach out to marginalised groups, as suggested by Black (2000). Despite this, however, both the authors and the researchers perceive a conflict between the field-specific ideologies that govern public libraries and the comprehensive socio-political ideologies that prevail today. Both are sceptical of the dual forces of austerity and the Big Society and are wary of the consequences that they anticipate for public libraries today and in the future. It is also interesting to note that some authors are fast to adopt contemporary library jargon, which indicates that the recent events have nevertheless enabled a deeper understanding between the participants in the debate compared to previous studies of a similar nature (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995, Hedemark 2009, Glans 2016).

6.2. Limitations

In this section I reflect on the limitations of this study, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical and methodological approach used for the reading of the authors texts.

One obvious limitation is that I have attempted to capture a public debate focusing primarily on one group of participants. It may also be suggested that this particular group has already received a disproportionate amount of attention. There are examples of studies that encompass these debates in their entirety, such as the ones undertaken by Hedemark (2009) and Galluzzi (2014) that both have provided an important complement to my own investigation. Yet, it could also be argued that the central position of the authors within the debate warrants a more careful consideration as their representations of the public library may have a significant impact on the way that the service is perceived. This, on the other hand, leaves out vital perspectives of patrons and library staff.

In the reading of the author texts I combined field theory with the five-space model for public libraries. It would also have been possible to employ other common approaches for textual analysis such as discourse analysis. However, I believe that field theory and other key concepts associated with Bourdieu capture many of the central issues in public library research. Through exploring the concept of habitus it has been possible to examine how our worldview impacts on how we perceive the value, purpose and direction of the public library. It can also be concluded that the value of various forms of capital changes over time, which affects the legitimacy of the services that libraries provide. Moreover, exploring the debate in relation to the field doxa provides a link between the historic identity of the library and the central topics of the current debate. Finally, the concept of hysteresis gives an indication of how changes in the field conditions have, in a sense, dislocated the authors within the field of the public library. The statement that public librarians should acquire new allies (Greenhalgh, Worpole & Landry 1995) clearly indicates that the symbolic

capital of the authors is no longer considered a definitive asset within the field. Field theory, then, captures the struggle over how public libraries should be represented and defended during a time of rapid societal change.

The five-space model has made it possible to examine how the central functions of the public library are represented and defended in the author texts. The model has proved compatible with the material, but has also imposed some limitations on the extent to which some topics may be explored. Hence, it would also have been possible to examine the author texts using themes outside of the public library sphere, such as focusing purely on topical issues such as austerity and the Big Society. Additionally, the study has contributed to developing the original four-space model by adding the presence of the librarian. The central findings of this study also question some of the core assumptions that underpin the original model. In the presentations of the model the book collection is described as “passive”, a notion refuted by the author texts that suggest that collections have long been a place for connection. Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen (2012) are keen to orchestrate a break with the historic identity of the public library when it is perhaps more fruitful to think of development in terms of a continuation of the legacy of the institution (Black 2000).

Furthermore, unlike many of the previous studies on author texts (Hedemark 2009, Glans 2016, Hutton 2017), I have chosen to combine various textual expressions. Though this approach somewhat diverts the attention away from the debate surrounding public libraries in the national press, it is also possible to see how the opinion pieces and the fictitious accounts work together to provide a deeper insight into the front- and back-stage of the debate. It is interesting to consider how novels, short stories and poems equally touch on the central conflicts relating to the representation and defence of the public library service today.

6.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Finally, I will suggest some recommendations for future research. Firstly, I would recommend an investigation into public library activism from a grassroots perspective. This could be achieved by conducting interviews with patrons and communities who have taken action against library closures or by exploring the social media response to these events. This topic is perhaps particularly noteworthy during a period when many another essential services are under threat as the public library appears to have a unique power to inspire a sense of collective ownership, which is worth further consideration. This may serve as a form of empirical evidence for the strong support that libraries elicit, which is not always reflected in public policy. Secondly, I would also recommend exploring the public library as a space for inspiration in relation to the next generation of patrons. The author texts make a strong case for the unique space that the public library embodies. Yet, there is also a sense that the advent of the Internet and changes in lifestyles and consumer patterns are putting pressure on libraries to reinvent themselves for a new audience. A key consideration is how the inspiration and performativity function of public libraries should be understood in a contemporary context.

6.4. Conclusion

As Mangan suggests: “Few victims of austerity have been so fiercely mourned as libraries” (Mangan 2014). The author texts provide an insight into the deeply personal connection that many people experience in relation to public libraries. Smith writes: “I think for most people it’s emotional. Not logos or ethos but pathos. This is not a denigration: emotion also has a place in public policy” (Smith 2018, p. 12). To this extent, the author texts do not offer a comprehensive public defence of the public library service in an age of austerity, but rather glimpses of what the library has meant to them and to others.

Nonetheless, the texts still provide a valuable insight into the ongoing struggle over the conceptual borders of the public library and how this struggle, in turn, relates to social, economical, political and technological change in society at large. Hence, one of the main conclusions of this study is that libraries, as much as they exist in the manifestation of physical places, also embody ideas and symbols that stretch far beyond any of their individual functions. Yet, as can be concluded from recent developments, public libraries are also politically governed institutions that are heavily reliant on external funding. Thus, it must be down to library professionals and researchers to provide the ethos and the logos to the pathos that characterises the debate surrounding public libraries. It is our prerogative to interpret and translate the information we receive from our central stakeholders into concrete goals and aims that will ensure and sustain public libraries today and in the future. Black argues that librarians should, therefore, aspire for a higher degree of social awareness and adopt a sociological approach to their work. This, he continues, will involve listening to the public, not as consumers but as citizens (Black 2000). Thus, we must manage the delicate balance between what the library has been and what it will be and work to rebuild it over and over again for new generations of patrons. I conclude this study with the words of the British public library researcher W. J. Murison:

One aspect of British public library objectives has remained constant: the enhancement of the individual, the free opportunity for people to improve themselves by education or recreation as they have seen fit, without external pressures to this or that point of view. Because it is easy to accept the ready-made opinions pressed on the community by experts, real or self-appointed, of the mass media, the library is an important defence of the individuality of each person in the community, leaving him or her free to contest or confirm these views, to assess the things which matter.

Murison 1988, p. 242

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