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Loving Books at the End of the Millennium

My current book manuscript explores a contemporary cultural phenomenon and aesthetic practice that I call „bookishness", wherein, in the moment of the book's foretold obsolescence due to digital technologies, we see the proliferation of creative acts that fetishize the book. From cellphone covers crafted to look like books to decorative pillows printed with beloved book covers, furniture made out of old books to earrings, rings, and necklaces comprised of miniature books, from store windows that use old books as props to altered book sculptures exhibited in prestigious collections to novels about books as objects, books are everywhere. They are things to love, own, and fetishize… not just to read. Bookishness is about loving books in the digital age, but its formative years are the period of this conference's focus: 1980s-90s.

The emergence of the Web, changes in book publishing, political events and literary discourse propelled anxieties about literature (what Kathleen Fitzpatrick calls „the anxiety of obsolescence") and the medium associated with it: the book. „Every generation rewrites the book's epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit", Leah Price reminds us. Yet, the particular epitaph that emerged in the 1990s, with the emergence of digital technoculture, laid the foundation for twenty-first century concerns about books, literature, and literariness—and its expression in bookishness.

In this talk, I trace bookishness back to this cultural, literary, and discursive period to understand the historical cornerstone that set the foundation for loving books at the end of the millennium.

Key words: Bookishness, Fetishize the book, Book in digital era.

Manuscripts chained to lecterns in medieval monasteries symbolized political control and served and as means of enforcing it. For the first few centuries after the invention of the printing press, books remained expensive and designators of class and privilege. Libraries were precious and private, and thus centers of political communities and power. Books have been used to symbolize social status and political identity. Books have also, of course, been used to censor, to shame, and condemn. Books are as much media of colonization and oppression as they are tools for liberation and enlightenment. The history of the book is long and complex, and for the purposes of this article, I rely on book history to make the following point: the book is not a neutral object, symbol, or medium. It has been made to serve diverse political purposes and predilections, and that is why discourse *about* books – about loving them and lamenting their demise – is also always political.

Rhetoric about the death of books proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s, the period surveyed by this conference. Such rhetoric, such language and its usage, was not just about media obsolescence. It was always--and remains always – also about something "supplemental" (to invoke Derrida), something social, economic, and certainly political.

For the last decade I have traced the emergence of a cultural phenomenon and aesthetic practice that I call "bookishness," which is about loving books in a moment when we no longer need them. We have computers, the cloud, e-readers, etc. as media for reading, writing, and archiving. Yet, in the moment of the book's foretold obsolescence due to digital technologies, we see something strange and perhaps even paradoxical, but certainly poetic: the proliferation of creative acts that fetishize the book as object and artifact.

From cell-phone covers crafted to look like books, to decorative pillows printed with beloved book covers, furniture made out of old books to earrings, rings, and necklaces comprised of miniature codices, from store windows that use old books as props to altered book sculptures exhibited in prestigious collections to novels about books, books are really everywhere. They are things to love, own, post to social media, and otherwise fetishize… not *just* things to read.

The word "bookishness" comes from "bookish," and the word "bookish" describes an identity founded upon a *nearness* to books. In its most common parlance, the adjective "bookish" describes a person who reads a lot and derives an identity from this relationship to books. But that is *not* how it means when coupled with "ish" and "ness." The first listing of "ish" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that it derives from Old English, wherein "ish" served chiefly to form adjectives from national names: British, English, Scottish. So, "ishess" is about identification, even nationalism. It is about subject formation through relationality, about locating and identifying subjects *in* contexts. The descriptor "bookish" suggests that objects rub off on us. They affect us and impact us. "Bookishness" is about the identity we extract from our nearness and attachment to books, particularly in our contemporary age. It is about the "ishness."

For centuries, the word "bookish" has registered Enlightenment ideals about the liberal human subject – an individual in possession of himself, a tabula rasa or white page open to education and social uplift via access to books. Bookish is part of Western culture, identity, class formation, and, politics. So, what happens when the book goes digital?

The transformation of the book into e-readers and downloadable PDFs, scanned and searchable on Google Books, is not just an issue of media change but also of cultural and epistemological shift. The ways in which we read, learn, and know are changing along with the ways in which we identify and express the value of knowledge and also who has authority over it. Bookishness signals and facilitates these changes while also providing a solution to a dilemma of contemporary literary culture: how can we maintain nearness, attachment, and affiliation to books – and to being bookish – in a digital age?

Bookishness is a result of the digital, but its formative years were the period of this conference's focus: the 1980s-90s. That time period is one of great political change and challenge. The call for papers for our conference identifies this time period as distinguished dues to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the division of political monoliths into autonomous states. It also identifies synchronous and perhaps resulting literary aesthetics – postmodern poetics like fragmentation, non-linear hypertext, reflexive meta-fiction, and more. In addition, it should be noted, this period was also a cornerstone for the emergence of digital culture.

The 1980s-90s saw the popularization of computers, especially in the United States. The Altair 8800 was dubbed "the first personal computer" when it hit the market in 1975, and the first Apple appeared the following year. But it was the Apple II in 1977 that really changed things. With its color display and keyboard case, this computer was ready to run right out of the box and is popularly known as the first "user-friendly personal computer." Then, the introduction of software and word processing software in particular lead to the signal moment in 1980: the Commodore 64 with its affordable price-tag ($299) and user-friendly design. This bit of media history should remind us that the 1980s were the period in which computers entered homes (at least, again in the United States), and the rest is not only history but importantly also forgotten history.

Digital history is hard to know because it happens so fast; the blitz-like uptake of new technologies, practices, and social processes challenges the study of the contemporary. Just think of the Internet. Most people were introduced to the Internet in the 1990s with the emergence of the Web. It is easy to forget what the Web was like before Web 2.0 before Google, social networking, and the rest. Yet, in order to understand contemporary bookishness we need to return to that pre-Y2K moment.

Back then the Web was different. It was text-based; it was also imagined to be an open and utopian, a cyberspace for exploration and a realm full of promise. Media scholar Wendy Chun reminds us: "the image of the Internet has shifted radically from the mid to late 1990s, when it was seen as 'cyberspace,' an anonymous and empowering space of freedom in which no one knew if you were a dog, to the mid to late 2010s, when the

Internet was commonly conceived of as a space of total surveillance or as a privatized space of social media".*

The Web we know is rather new. Web 2.0 emerged around 2004 as a participatory network and corporate marketplace. Its emergence converged with the introduction of Google (taking off in 2000), Wikipedia (2001), Facebook in 2004, Google Books (2005), Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010. The social uptake of these technologies has been fast and far-reaching. Today, the general acceptance of constantly-connected mobile devices dramatically transforms our everyday lived experience; we live in a culture of "always on." The default option is "yes" and "accept," meaning that any sense of anonymity that once marked the early days of the Web is now gone. We are in a different medial, historical, and cultural moment than the 1980s and 1990s.

In this moment, we use the image of the book to express and alleviate concerns about techno-cultural and socio-political change. That is why bookishness is so important and so important to study. Consider how the image and vocabulary of books serves digital use: the remediation of a bookshelf on an Apple screen, the turning of a page on a digital tablet, even the language of web*pages* where there are no pages, spines or codexical covers. These skeuomorphs facilitate our uptake of new media. They also positioning the digital in a register aligned with books—those things that we love, feel comfortable around, and that we have, frankly, forgotten to consider as political objects. It is relevant and revealing, then, to place in context the emergence of digitality with the contemporary love of books and bookishness.

The years preceding the turn of the millennium witnessed dire concerns about the death of book at the hands of the digital. These fears included ontological, technological, and social concerns about shifting the human record from physical books to digital databases. Such fears may seem wild and far off now. We are two decades into the twenty-first century, when people seem all too willing to trust their personal data to the unseen but significantly-named "cloud" and to submit to corporate privacy-setting policies in exchange for faster online service and sleeker

* Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (MIT Press, 2016): ix.

apps. But Y2K, as the year 2000 was called, laid bare primal fears about the transition to a digital culture.

These fears were grounded in questions of power and control. What would happen to Wall Street and even to streetlights when the digital clock transferred from 1999 to 2000? What would happen to other infrastructures of power? For example, when participatory culture allows amateur writers and reviewers to gain followers online and corporate influence, what happens to traditional literary authority?

In 2019, we are no longer worried about the data blackout of a Y2K clock, but we are still grappling with how digital culture challenges traditional modes of authority – from political revolutions supported by Twitter to revolutions in the structures of literary production, distribution, reception, and value. Yet, we can look back before 2000 to see the seeds this change. In the 1980s-90s, the emergence of digital technologies coupled with changes in book publishing, political events, and literary discourse propelled what Kathleen Fitzpatrick has called "the anxiety of obsolescence" – fears about the death of the book and the art form associated with it: literature.

Rhetoric about the death of the book is not new. As literary scholar and book historian Leah Price reminds us, "Every generation rewrites the book's epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit."* History shows that fears about new media killing older ones says more about the changing social contexts and power structures than about actual readers, books, or literary practices. We fear changes in readership (i.e. who gets to read and who reads what). We fear changes in literacy (i.e. what qualifications counts as "literate"). We also fear changes in authority and authorial copyright, and of course changes in the class boundaries and relationships mediated through books (i.e. what counts as the canon?). All of these issues are entwined with books and their cultural image, and all propel rhetoric about the death of the book. Anxieties about the death of the book thus express concerns about the status quo.

Digital media have certainly changed the status quo. We have new authorial voices accessed through new modalities of content production and distribution. We have new markets and business models for the literary,

* Leah Price, "Dead Again" *The New York Times* "Sunday Book Review" (August 10, 2012).

and even new types literature and college courses to address them. In our mobile, cloud-computing world, work and leisure are no longer separate. So, if there is no designated leisure time, when exactly do we get to sit down and read a novel? Even more transformative is the fact that our Web 2.0 world depends upon unpaid, often exploitable labor, such as reviewing books for Amazon and other kinds of "playbor" – as theorists call the gamification of culture.*

So, what do we do when faced with the feeling that we cannot escape the world of always-on, networked, and constant crisis? We fetishize the thing that has historically symbolized privacy, leisure, individualism, knowledge, and power. We produce ways of curling up with books in and through digital culture. Bookishness is an aesthetic and cultural response to the contemporary condition of global capitalism, digitality, and participatory culture. It operates through nostalgia-– that affect and aesthetic that Svetlana Boym argues "is not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion."**

The historical emotion exemplified by bookishness is not just about literature or reading but about emergent changes to the institutions that govern and mediate our relationships to all that books represent. Recognizing how loving books at the turn of the millennium is both poetic and political prompts us to asking a few big questions. What does recognizing bookishness teach us? What are the payoffs of focusing our attention here – on bookishness? Let me offer three quick responses, tailored to the practice of literary criticism.

First, **bookishness reminds us that books are objects, artifacts, and media.** They have histories of use and abuse, and these histories matter to our understanding of the role of books in the present. For example, much rhetoric about the death of the book at the turn of the millennium swirled around the idea that digital technologies promote hyperlinked skimming rather than deep attention.

One of the most famous of such laments was Sven Birkets's *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* (1994). "My core

* See Trebor Scholz, ed. *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (Routledge 2013).

** Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2002): 12.

fear is that we, as a culture, are becoming shallower," Birkets writes.[*] Later cultural pundits echoed this rhetoric of shallowness. In 2009 Nicolas Carr famously wrote an article for *The Atlantic* that went viral, and was tellingly titled "Is Google Making us Stupid?" In it, he writes: "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski."[**] In both accounts, Birkets and Carr present digital media as promoting the wrong kind of reading: not deep, linear, and immersive but instead shallow, hyperlinked skimming. Hear the depth metaphors at work. Associated with literary criticism since Freud, the depth-model of reading understands good, serious reading to be an act of excavating subtexts and hidden meaning. It is, following Fredric Jameson, a radical act of uncovering the "political unconscious."[***] For both Birkets and Carr, computational culture produces a shift from reading as deep diving to just skimming the surface. The results, as our representative hand-wringers note, are bad.

Yet, there are problems with the rationale posited by Birkets and Carr (and many others). First, they yoke the book medium to a particular method of use (i.e. to reading and specifically linear reading) and also to a particular value (i.e. good and educational). However, scholars of book history remind us that assumptions such as book=literature and reading=good are ahistorical and ideological. Ted Striphas states, "In the end, claims about the decline of books and book culture probably tells us more about the gaps in book history that need filling or about popular culture's proclivities toward crisis discourse than it does about the health of books in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."[****]

This takes me to my second point about the payoff of studying bookishness:

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[*] Sven Birkets, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* (Faber & Faber, 1994): 228.

[**] Nicolas Carr, "Is Google Making us Stupid?" The Atlantic (July/August issue 2008) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/ Carr's essay became the cornerstone of his book T*he Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010).

[***] See Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981).

[****] Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (Columbia University Press, 2009): 188.

Recognizing that the book is a thing whose history matters, illuminates the history of our love for these things. Such histories attachment should be taken seriously by literary criticism.

In *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*, Deidre Lynch provides a history of that which seems ahistorical: loving literature. She shows that the cultural experience of being bookish, developed in the eighteenth century in the very moment when the term "literature" became a recognizable field. An "affective economy" emerged, she argues, due to "a heightened awareness of books as affective objects and book collecting as a practice that could delimit a space of privacy."* In other words, the ability to possess and touch books propelled the cultural experience of being able to love literature. Objects matter, as do feelings, and both are part of the history of the literary. Affections and attachments are getting renewed attention by literary scholars and theorists these days, in part due to the work of American scholar Rita Felski who urges critics to adopt a stance of attachment rather than detachment and objectivity. "What is needed, in short, is a politics of relation rather than negation, of mediation rather than co-option, of alliance and assembly rather than alienated critique."**

Bookishness promotes such practice and perspective because the objects involved in the contemporary literary sphere are *not just* words and texts but also kitschy bookish things and the digital metatags and programmatic hyperlinks that enable your search engine to call them forth. All are connected and attached. One cannot separate text from paratext in the digital network, and this fact has significant implications for literary studies.

When you type "Jane Austen" into Google, you might get a link to places to purchase *Pride and Prejudice*, but you might also encounter leggings or a duvet cover printed with text from the canonical novel. These connections are newly programmed but are part of the history of books and the literary. Austen scholar Janine Barchas reminds us that Austen was used to sell soap in the nineteenth century.*** In our online, digital

* Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago University Press, 2015): 108.

** Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago University Press, 2015): 147.

*** Janine Barchas, "Sense, Sensibility, and Soap: An Unexpected Case Study in Digital Resources for Book History" in *Book History* (Vol. 16, 2013): pp. 185-214.

culture, books and bookish stuff are connected conceptually and programmatically, and these connections create connections amongst us humans. Bookishness fosters bookish identities and communities even in the absence of real books.

Which takes me to a third and final point about the importance of studying bookishness. **We live in a networked world, and literary criticism needs to adapt in order to analyze it**. Literary scholars need to take networks seriously as objects of study and methods of study. A focus on bookishness demands both, and it supports rethinking our activities as literary scholars – what do we study, why, and how?

These questions are themselves political, as Sara Ahmed has shown. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues that we only recognize those objects to which we have been previously oriented – those for which we have vocabulary, value, etc. "When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach."* For literary critics, this means that we miss whole areas of study by following only on certain lines of inquiry: say, on text, author, genre, etc. Bookishness invites us to reorient ourselves within the networked field of digital culture – to see connections and attachments between the diverse objects that constitute the contemporary literary – from the avant-garde to absolute kitsch. Bookishness also prompts us to reflexively consider our own orientations – and the politics behind them. These are the positions, perspectives, and attachments that not only bind us to the literary but also help to comprise it.

Loving books at the end of millennium is very serious indeed.

* Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006): 15.