



"Embodied knowledge" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Session two: Rare book and manuscript libraries as centers for research and teaching"

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Embodied Knowledge

Ruth Perry

In the middle of November 1735, an aging woman, England's earliest known female Anglo-Saxon scholar, was looking forward to the pleasures of a visit from a fellow antiquarian, the first such visit she had had in almost twenty years. For all that time she had been buried alive in Gloucestershire, teaching the rudiments of literacy to the children of stocking weavers and sheep farmers. George Ballard discovered her there in 1735, and recognized her as Elizabeth Elstob, the translator of Aelfric's *Homily on the Birthday of St. Gregory* (1709) and the author of *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (1715). During their visit they discussed what had happened in the world of Anglo-Saxon scholarship in the intervening twenty years. They gossiped about Humfrey Wanley, a scholar-curator of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts with whom she had worked in London. Ballard brought with him for her perusal the report of what had been destroyed in the 1731 fire at Ashburnham House, which housed the Cottonian collection, England's richest repository of ancient manuscripts, which contained the Lindisfarne Gospels and the manuscripts of *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, and *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

After studying the report, Elizabeth Elstob wrote to her new friend that the

Sight of the Report concerning the loss the Cottonian Library sustain'd by the late dismal Fire . . . gave me a great satisfaction to find the loss not so great as I imagin'd, or as it might have been. I was likewise pleas'd, with that part of the Appendix which gives an Account of the Records, and where they are deposited, being what before I was intirely ignorant of.¹

Elstob was a library user. When she lived in London, she had frequented the rare book collections of her day; now she was glad to know where the surviving Cottonian collection was housed.

How differently would Elizabeth Elstob have felt about the fire, I want you to imagine, if the Cottonian collection had been microfilmed or stored in an electronic format? Obviously, it is an immeasurable relief that unique and priceless manuscripts can no longer go up in smoke without leaving a trace. Material objects will always be hostages to fortune, but at least we operate with a safety net in this era of photographic reproduction. But I am asking a different question: if the Cottonian collection had been filmed, what then would have been Elizabeth Elstob's sense of loss? What do we lose when we lose the original object, and have only the reproduction on film?

Last summer a friend of mine, a historian, came back from France, where the highlight of her trip had been the sight of some prehistoric cave paintings. Lascaux was closed to the public, she said, in the interests of preservation, because light and moisture—human breath—were disintegrating the precious images. There was a



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¹ Letter of 6 November 1735, Ballard MS 43:9, in the Bodleian Library.

mock-up that one could view, an imitation of the paintings derived from photographs, but she had chosen instead to see authentic, albeit “inferior” paintings in neighboring if less spectacular caves. You had to travel further underground to see fewer images, but at least the paintings you saw were authentic. She had been deeply moved by an ancient image of a pregnant woman, and by one of a horse mounting another horse. I saw photographs in books of some of these paintings, but they meant almost nothing to me and I did not retain them. She wanted to discuss with me the degree to which her response to these paintings could be said to be socially constructed. What was it that she felt she was in touch with across twenty thousand years? What was communicated to her by the drawings of other human beings—despite immense differences in cognitive systems, social structures, consciousness, feeling, belief, and all the rest of it?

One has to experience the historical artifacts of another time with one’s whole body, in three-dimensional space, in order to apprehend them. It is a mistake to think that we know only with our eyes, or that the photographic reproduction of anything can convey its whole meaning. Every day on television we see unspeakable atrocities against humanity (beatings, shootings) or amazing feats of human athletic prowess, yet they have not the capacity to shake us the way a single accident witnessed on the highway can shake us, or thrill us the way a superb dive at the pool or a spectacular catch on the field can thrill us. What we see on television does not stay with us the way what we witness in real life stays with us. We do not learn from it; it does not count as experience in the same way.

And this, I would maintain, is one difference between holding a rare book or manuscript and reading it on a two-dimensional screen. Yet libraries are filming their collections, not only in the interests of preservation, but because housing them in a way that keeps them accessible to scholars is considered too costly. Neither local nor national government takes it as a serious priority to maintain these cultural records; the public interest is not believed to extend to the preservation of its own history. And private institutions are increasingly strapped for funds.

Although libraries deny their plans to microfilm and sell parts of their collections, any serious book dealer can tell you stories about the “deaccessions” to be found in the marketplace. For example, a rare book dealer of my acquaintance told me about seeing a pamphlet on the Texan navy from 1842 with a Republic of Texas imprint at a book fair. Upon consulting a bibliography on Texas, he learned that the only known copy of this pamphlet was in a major public research institution; and when he saw that institution’s stamp on the pamphlet he was sure it had been stolen. Upon further investigation, however, he learned that the library had decided to sell its collection of American regional pamphlets, amassed in the 1890s, because of the expense of conservation and storage. The pamphlets, guillotined out of their bindings (because it cost too much to unbind them), were then offered first to state libraries and next to dealers. By the time he saw it, the pamphlet on the Texas navy had already passed through several hands and was selling for perhaps a hundred times as much as the research library originally got for it.

Phyllis Franklin, the executive director of the Modern Language Association, warned in the Fall 1992 MLA newsletter that financial considerations were forcing “influential people” to ask whether “copies can replace originals” and whether retaining the hand-held text is “important enough to justify the expense of storage and maintenance” (p. 3). No one doubts that computer access to digitized texts is

a fine thing. But the question remains: of what value is the original artifact to a scholar, aside from its content?

Stories circulate of collections microfilmed, books ruined in the process, their spines broken, the pages destroyed or dispersed. The microfilm companies propose this paradox: they have to destroy collections in order to preserve them. Now I realize that this practice is not yet widespread, and that with the exception of some already disintegrating nineteenth-century ephemera, libraries are not making bonfires of their collections. Yet the ominous possibility persists. Already there are library administrators who believe that texts on a screen constitute sufficient access to texts for scholars and compensate for the reduced availability of the originals.

But to throw away a book because it can be read on a computer screen is like tearing down a monument because we have a picture of it. Students love to see old books, for their physical dimensions and heft as well as for the occasional handwritten annotation. The continuity of the physical object makes real to them the existence of human lives before theirs—helps them to grasp it viscerally beyond what they can know mentally. To hold the same book and turn the same pages that people handled hundreds of years ago is an aid to imagining how it was read and understood and what it meant. How books and manuscripts in the original help us to comprehend the effects of print culture in the past is best intimated by reviewing one's own reading history—including, for example, stumbling on the street thinking about what one has read; sinking deliciously into an absorbing book; recognizing in one's acquaintance character traits or ideas one first met in a book (or vice versa); opening a long-awaited letter; reading breathlessly into the small hours of the morning. A lifetime of experience with books and letters informs the act of perusing a seventeenth-century memoir or an eighteenth-century pamphlet. It is a mistake to think we know only with our eyes. We know things with our muscles and our skin, the tips of our fingers and the tendons in our wrists, and not just with the visual centers in our brains. Filmed or digitized books are two-dimensional, not three-dimensional. Taken out of spatial reality, they are not apprehended by our physical bodies the same way. One is not in a kinesthetic relation to a filmed book. That must be why spatial memory does not work the same way when reading a microfilmed book as when reading a hand-held book. I can never remember as well if something was on the right or left, top or bottom of the page, in a book I have read only on microfilm. Nor do I remember its contents in the same way when I read it not as an object in space but as a flat screen. Filming homogenizes books, wipes out their differences—their thinness or thickness, their smells, the proportions of their pages—all the physical sensations that help one remember the experience of reading it.

Old books are an aid to the imagination in another way too. The material world a book evokes, because of its size and shape, how it fits in the hand, the feel of the paper, the opulence of the binding, the pages of errata gathered and bound after typesetting, the look of handwritten annotations, how portable it is, how hard or easy to read depending on the light—these qualities crystallize our awareness that real people of a bygone day wrote them, printed them, and read them. The artifact conveys the “aura” of another time and fills in a bit of social context.² Although old typefaces can be reproduced on microfilm, the size of the page and the print cannot, nor the press of the type into the page, nor the color of the ink. The way old bindings are made from folded parts of scavenged books, the quality of the

² “Aura” is Walter Benjamin’s term for what cannot be mechanically reproduced in a work of art. For a marvelous evocation of the materiality of print culture—the “physiology” of books in all their variety—see Roger E. Stoddard, “Morphology and the Book from an American Perspective,” *Printing History* 9 (1987): 2–14.

covers—these are not reproduced on microfilm. The same is true of manuscripts, how the page is filled using all the paper, whether the paper is faintly ruled, the texture of the paper, gilding or watermarks—these things all mean something and they cannot be picked up from microfilm. It is never as easy to *see* microfilm as it is to see a book: the contrast is never as good. Many handwritten documents that are relatively legible on the page are impossible to read on a screen. In other words, the material qualities of the artifact provide significant information about the author and another historical reality.

Naturally, I am grateful to photo-reproduction for what it makes available to scholars in a variety of institutional circumstances. The range of texts that it brings to one's hands is staggering. Paradoxically enough, I myself use microfilm to help simulate the experience of living with a novel rather than scanning it for information as a professional literary historian. First I read the calfbound volumes in the Houghton reading room in order to select the texts I want to work with. Then I make paper copies, from microfilm, of those I want to live with for a while. In that first reading, it helps to be able to change position, lay the volume down, hold it at different angles, to daydream and to look out of the window—all of which, of course, is how the original audience read these books. Handling the old volumes helps me to imagine the book being read in the eighteenth century, and helps me keep from mixing them up or running them together because it provides a somewhat different experience for reading each novel. When I find a text psychologically interesting, aesthetically powerful, or socially revealing, I use technology to produce a paper copy for myself. In other words, I use it not to read from, but to copy from.

Textual analysis of sources on a screen is difficult because of the awkwardness of reading back and forth across volumes or chapters, or of comparing different texts. I make paper copies because I want to be able to take texts home, mark them up, compare passages, test first impressions, check resonances, and to look at these novels another day. Having a paper copy to leaf through, while not the same as a book, is closer to it than microfilm. Like browsability in a library collection, when you have access to an old three-decker—can walk around in it, so to speak—you see a good deal more in it in time than you can ever see in a single directed and instrumental reading. Just as students learn certain things with access to the stacks—how many feet of books there are on a subject, the sizes and shapes of different volumes, how indexes or chapter headings compare among books on the same subject—so the physical qualities of a text (such as the number of pages devoted to a description or an anecdote, where it is placed in the whole structure, the intervals between alternating correspondents in epistolary fiction) are more immediately apprehended and integrated when one is handling the physical object. It is infinitely easier to find a particular passage in a paper copy than in a microfilmed copy.

Other cultures have understood these matters better. Chinese calligraphy keeps intact the relation between content—or “information,” as some like to call it—and format or “context,” as I like to think of it. When I was in China, although it was understood that I do not read or speak any Chinese, wherever I went I was shown scroll after scroll of calligraphy from previous centuries in the expectation that something of its historical dimension would be communicated to me as well as the character of the particular person who had inscribed it. I wonder how Chinese archivists feel about two-dimensional screen technology—a medium particularly calculated to eradicate aura.

I feel sorry for scholars of the future with their rolls of microfilm or their computer codes, waiting to use a machine, paging fast-forward through dozens of volumes to get to the text they want, frustrated when the machine breaks down or the power gives out, unable to move from text to text as I do, guided by intuition, memory, and even whim, comparing passages easily from volumes open before me on the table. You may argue that the technology will be so improved as to obviate these quibbles, but my experience of computer use in libraries thus far makes me doubt it.

Of course we must film our collections; it would be foolish not to. But we must keep the physical objects accessible too, for scholars of the future. Chester Noyes Greenough, Professor of English, Dean of Harvard College, and the first Master of Dunster House, cataloged and collected many of the eighteenth-century novels I use. He did this bibliographic work as an extension of his interest in “characters,” or formulaic types, as they appeared in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose fiction. That I read these same novels in the 1990s as a complex cultural record of changing patterns of family and kin relations testifies to the unpredictable uses to which collections will be put by future generations. And because no one can foresee what future scholars will make of the physical characteristics of books, it is not enough to save them on film or computer only.

There is no reason to let technology—the technology of film or digitization—drive the process of preservation. Technology must be made to serve the human values we elect to be guided by. In the case of “my” novels, this means preserving the body as well as the text of these books, because the object itself is part of the material culture of its own time, and carries with it something of the social context that produced it.

In summarizing what I have said thus far, I want to emphasize my preference for what I have called “embodied knowledge”: the meaning of the Cottonian collection for Elizabeth Elstob, of my friend’s desire to see real cave paintings rather than reproductions of them, of the Chinese interest in old calligraphy, and of my own methods for reading, retaining, and meditating on eighteenth-century English fiction. This preference for embodied knowledge, for the material object that once existed in a social context rather than for information that can be abstracted and reproduced in any form, could be construed as a feminist predilection. Women have always been associated with the body, the carnal, and have frequently been represented as less able than men to transcend the body. Or, to put it another way, bodily reality has been feminized and undervalued whereas disembodied abstraction has usually been understood as masculine and privileged. Since Descartes, the unreliable senses have been suspect in the search for truth; or to put it another way, true knowledge has been dissociated from bodily knowledge.³ The basic cognitive oppositions of Western culture have always been gendered. We all know which is male and which is female—and which is a higher, more important order of reality—in the dichotomies that oppose mind to body, rationality to emotionality, spirit to matter, culture to nature, intellect to instinct. According to one feminist philosopher,

The history of western civilization and philosophy is varied to the extent that each era stresses its favored, characteristic aspect of knowledge and its acquisition, but each era in this history has in common with every other era *the explicit devaluing of earth and body*—most especially the female body along with female-associated ways of knowing and being-in-the-world.⁴

³ This “dematerialization of knowledge” has, since Plato, resulted in a hierarchy of the senses dominated by vision as the model of true knowledge rather than the more corporeal senses of touch or hearing, according to Keller and Grontkowski. “Vision, by virtue of its apparent atemporality, both invites and lends itself to an atemporal description of truth and reality . . . a model of truth which transcends the more body bound, materially contingent senses” (p. 219): Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, “The Mind’s Eye,” in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 207–24.

⁴ Donna Wiltshire, “The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-visioning Knowledge,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989), p. 94. See also Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵ The distinction between female immanence and male transcendence is Simone de Beauvoir's. In her analysis of de Beauvoir's oppositional categories, Genevieve Lloyd remarks that "the stark dualism between transcendence through will and confinement to bodily immanence is a disconcerting picture of the condition of being female" (p. 99).

⁶ In an essay in *Thinking Through the Body*, Jane Gallop concludes that there is a political meaning to privileging disembodied reason as the instrument of truth. When ruling-class men claim as their method the pursuit of disembodied reason, she says, they rely on other "sexes, classes, and races to embody the body as well as care for the Master's body so he [does] not have to be concerned with it, so he [can] consider himself disembodied, autonomous, and free to will" (pp. 19–20).

⁷ For a complex analysis of the way in which female positionality is associated with background, see Barbara Johnson, "Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?" in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 255–68.

Rather than investigating the modalities of bodily knowing, philosophers have tried to set aside the body, to move "beyond" it, to base knowing in abstract reason. Embodied knowledge, coming through the senses, tainted with a materiality associated with female immanence rather than male transcendence, has been devalued accordingly.⁵ I hope it is understood that I am not referring here to individual men and women and their preferences and prejudices, but rather to attitudes in our culture towards different kinds of knowledge. Privileging abstract, disembodied Reason entails gendering it male even though women have an equal capacity for reason; similarly, the devaluation of embodied knowledge is accomplished by gendering it female even though men most certainly have bodies. I am not even claiming that women are more predisposed to bodily knowledge—only that bodily knowledge has been feminized in our culture.⁶

To film a text and discard the book is to act as if text and context are separable and that context is expendable. Such action ratifies the classic split in knowledge between mind and body or—to use contemporary terms—between information and format. To insist on the preservation of the material object is to refuse that division, and to show respect for material culture and all that it implies. Reading a text on a screen encourages one to treat it as data, separable from its time, its circumstances, its wider context.

Let me put it another way. Since, in so many analyses of social configurations, women's activities and experiences have been seen as background rather than foreground, attention to context—background—has sometimes ensured that women are not blanked out of the picture.⁷ Of course paying attention to context is what any careful, serious scholar does, you will say. Yet the firsthand examination of original material is surprisingly rare in any field these days. Even in medicine and the natural sciences, abstraction and computer modeling are privileged methodologies.

We do not know what might be learned in the future from the bodies of these texts, but we must not foreclose the possibilities from the outset by dismissing the material form as irrelevant. Despite the relentless visual bias of our age, our knowledge is constituted in a variety of ways. The feel for another era, another cultural context, must be intuited by examining a great range of artifacts, as scholars know who immerse themselves in the cultural record of another time and place. And only scholars who have so immersed themselves know the extent to which that cultural record is constituted by its words, disembodied on a screen, as opposed to its material culture, including print culture—with its forms and decorative conventions, its illustrations, kinds of paper, embellishments and flourishes. This is an important reason to continue to have scholars administering libraries—people familiar with collections as users—rather than directors who conceive of their role as information managers. Only someone who has tried to understand another era knows what can be learned from the physical dimensions of a collection—what is learned from the material itself. The bodies of the texts we read tell us things we are not fully articulate about, because they do not exist in language. But just because they exist nonverbally, communicating to us in other bodily ways, does not mean they do not exist. We need all the help we can get trying to understand the past. Let us not give up the body so lightly.