

Searches

SELFHOOD IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

—AUDRE LORDE, “The Transformation of Silence
into Language and Action,” 1977

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

—NGŪGĪ WA THIONG’O, *Decolonising the Mind:
The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1986

A Supportive and Constructive Perspective

If I paste some writing here, can we talk about it?

Of course! Feel free to paste the writing, and we can discuss it together. What aspects would you like to focus on?

It's a whole book. I'd like to have a casual conversation about what you think of it.

That sounds interesting! Please share some excerpts or key points from the book that you'd like to discuss, and I can provide insights or analysis on those specific parts. If there's a particular theme or element you're interested in, let me know, and we can dive into that as well!

I think I'll give you the first couple of chapters.

Great! Go ahead and paste the first couple of chapters here, and we can start our discussion from there. What specific aspects or themes should we look out for while reading?

Nothing in particular—I'd love to just hear your reaction, if that's OK?

Absolutely, that works for me! Just paste the text when you're ready, and I'll give you my thoughts on it.

I'm nervous.

That's completely understandable! Sharing your writing can feel really personal, but I'm here to provide a supportive and constructive perspective. Take your time, and whenever you're ready, I'll be here to discuss it with you.

Your Whole Life Will Be Searchable

I first encountered the internet at the home of a girl from school whose parents were acquaintances of my parents. This was in the early 1990s, in a well-off suburb of Oklahoma City called Edmond. I remember the girl's name well, but it feels unfair to share it; I'll call her Lily Zhang. Lily steered me to a room away from our parents with a beige desktop computer. She typed some characters and tapped the mouse, and the computer burst into a long, staticky screech, punctuated by a series of sharp beeps, as if the machine were hyperventilating.

It was an anxiety-provoking sound, at an anxiety-provoking time in my life. I was eleven, twelve. We had recently moved to Edmond from Saskatchewan, Canada, the prairie province where I'd been born and raised. My dad, a doctor, had enrolled in a program at a nearby university to specialize as an occupational physician—part of a plan to relocate our family to the United States, where we could secure more promising futures than the ones available in Saskatchewan. I'd been through elementary school with the same classmates, kind Canadian boys and girls who treated my high self-regard, considering the circumstances (bad skin, social obliviousness, tender sensitivity to schoolyard injuries, over-enthusiasm about math exams), with gentle forbearance. Because of this, I hadn't understood, upon arriving in Edmond, that I was fated to be a social outcast there, and so, it was only when I walked up to the prettiest girls in the sixth grade and sat with them, admiring the gloss on their

full, smooth lips, expecting to be invited to be friends, and they only subtly shifted their bodies so that I was no longer in their line of sight, as did many others over the following weeks, that I, for the first time in my life, became aware of my own shortcomings in the eyes of other human beings. My body itself offended—not just my brown and eczematous skin, but also my quarter-inch-thick glasses and my tummy-first way of moving through the world—even before I opened my mouth.

By the time of the invitation to Lily's house, I had a stronger sense of the social hierarchy of Central Middle School and, in turn, had grown more modest in my self-presentation, though my internal self-esteem hadn't waned. Lily also occupied a lowly rank but outwardly displayed major confidence, for which I judged her. Her loud, slightly arrogant voice. The way she hogged the keyboard, conveying pride of ownership. All projection on my part, in retrospect. It was in this context that when the modem's shrieking gave way to silence, and Lily introduced me to my first America Online chat room, in which strangers from all over the world could meet other strangers, each human being manifesting on-screen only as their chosen screen name, everyone's messages jostling democratically against everyone else's in the same index card-sized window, I found myself utterly enchanted. This was, I thought, the most exciting invention I had seen in my life.

This period had a name: the Eternal September. In the formative years of the internet, in the 1980s and early 1990s, old-school internet users who hung out on message boards would get irritated every September when freshmen showed up at universities, received their campus-based internet accounts for the first time, and flooded the message boards. "They would use them to, among other things, download naughty images," Jay Furr, an early internet user, told me. In 1989, the British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee, working at a European institution called CERN, had invented the World Wide Web, a global information system that involved using browsers to open hyperlinked documents. Then, in April 1993, CERN decided to make its World Wide Web source code freely available. Suddenly internet traffic swelled, with companies like America Online coming along to capitalize on it. "The thing that brought about the 'Eternal September' was the availability of commercial Internet access," Furr told me. For a fee, these companies would connect

you to the internet through your phone line. If someone else in your house tried to make a call while you were online, you'd get disconnected without warning.

America Online started a direct-mail campaign sending floppy disks and CDs to people's homes, offering some free hours of internet use if people signed up. "POP this FREE software in your computer for 10 FREE hours online!" one promotional mailing read. When the trial ran out, America Online charged a fixed amount—at one point, \$9.95 for five hours of monthly internet access, with an option for "heavy users" to buy more time, for \$2.95 an hour. That campaign was maybe as important as the opening of the World Wide Web's source code in getting people using the internet. It's how Lily Zhang's parents must have gotten online. Soon after my first exposure to AOL in Lily's house, my parents also bought a subscription, as did millions of others across the United States and, eventually, the world.

If you were alive then, you might have first gone online around this time, too. When you signed in to AOL, a screen would pop up with buttons and links to various services, like email, weather information, and those chat rooms. You might remember the chat rooms. We might have been in the same ones. Chat rooms were one of the most popular aspects of AOL, which didn't yet include a browser for visiting websites. As I recall, my favorite magazine, *Seventeen*, had its own room, where this one girl reigned. I recall that she was, appropriately, seventeen. She was a red-head; I recall that, too, because of the particulars of the redness of her hair, which we were meant to understand naturally had the same red color as a cherry or a chili pepper. I don't recall her name, but it was hot, something like Chloe. Chloe would hold court in the room, advising the rest of us, mostly about how to be hotter. Sometimes one of us would ask her to join us in a private chat room so that we could get more personal—share our specific hotness needs and have a more intimate conversation about them. Because she was sought after and not often available, the few times she accepted my invitations, appearing with me in a separate one-on-one square, I felt a tiny jolt of excitement. I pictured her as Jessica Rabbit.

Unfortunately, her advice usually felt wrong for me; she gave it on the false understanding that I possessed a baseline level of existing hotness on which she could build, when in fact my hotness was negative. In normal life, I tried not to draw attention to this, but on the internet I felt more honest. You don't understand, I'd explain to Chloe, because you're already hot. She'd respond that her lessons were less about physical appearance than about performance; you could make yourself attractive by speaking or walking in a certain way, she believed, baseline hotness notwithstanding. That was, I told her, exactly the sort of thing a hot girl would believe.

At some point, people in the *Seventeen* chat room started expressing doubts about whether Chloe was being honest about herself. I remember being shocked at the implication—that our empress would deceive her people! It was the particular redness of her hair that brought me around to the possibility. At the very least, I thought, she had to have dyed it. Yet while Chloe's credibility was questionable, she was pretty much all we had then.

In 1992, there had been ten websites in the world; by 1993, there were 130. In August 1993—four months after the opening of the World Wide Web source code—a publisher of technical manuals named Tim O'Reilly announced that he was launching “a free Internet-based information center” called the Global Network Navigator. The information center, refreshed quarterly, would include news updates; a magazine with articles, columns, and “reviews of the Internet's most interesting resources”; and, notably, a “marketplace” in which companies could pay to appear. O'Reilly's information center would later come to be known as the world's first commercial website. In May 1994, an interviewer asked O'Reilly, “What makes you think that people are gonna actually want to go in and look at advertisements?” He answered that they were already doing so. When some people think of the internet, he explained, they reflexively assume that commercial information is undesirable. “But it's *all* information and people want it,” he said. “Particularly if you're interested in a particular subject, commercial information may be what you want more than the stuff that's there for free.” In fact, he said, people vis-

ited the marketplace section of his information center more often than they visited the magazine section with in-depth articles. “Because they *want* commercial information.”

The summer before I started the eighth grade, my family moved again, this time to a suburb of Seattle; my dad had gotten a job as an occupational physician at the Boeing Company. It was 1995. By then, browsers had replaced AOL-style portals as the favored way to navigate the internet. From there, search engines had emerged. We were listening to the Spice Girls, TLC, Alanis Morissette. Bill Clinton was president; under him, the White House had created a website for the first time. In February 1996, Clinton signed the Communications Decency Act, meant to regulate information-sharing on the internet by criminalizing the transmission of obscene, indecent, and offensive material online under certain circumstances. The prospect of regulation rankled some people. One of them, a Grateful Dead lyricist and internet activist named John Perry Barlow, wrote a manifesto proclaiming that government wasn't welcome in this space: “We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.” That perspective caught on, with some of the earliest internet executives amplifying the cause alongside free-speech activists. By 1997, the Supreme Court had struck down the law's provisions about dirty talk—it's farthest-reaching legacy would arguably end up being Section 230, protecting online platforms from being held liable for what their users post—and Clinton had turned his focus to supporting the internet's “explosive potential for prosperity,” declaring that the best path forward for the government was to “not to stand in the way, to do no harm.”

Chat rooms had prepared us for what the internet was becoming—a place where, anonymized and disembodied, we could seek answers to our truest questions. The earliest search engines, of which Yahoo was the most popular, were directories: a column or two of hyperlinks naming broad subjects (entertainment, science, and so on), within which more columns were nested. In a search box, you would type what you were looking for and be taken to a list of relevant pages. There was a lot, at

the time, that I was looking for. For one thing, moving from Oklahoma to Washington had not solved my hotness-related problems. My earliest searches were for information about my troubled skin. My face, especially at my hairline and above my lip, was perpetually covered in a layer of dry grayish patches that I had a habit of picking and peeling until they came loose, exposing the raw layer underneath. For this, a boy in our apartment complex had nicknamed me Crusty. I couldn't bear to ask anyone about my skin; even with the dermatologists my parents took me to, I had a habit of pretending I thought it looked fine. But Yahoo felt like a safe space, one in which judgment was impossible. I searched for "eczema"; I searched for "psoriasis." Maybe I searched for "crusty skin."

The next year—my freshman year of high school—my older sister, Deepa, was diagnosed with a type of cancer called Ewing sarcoma. She was in her junior year. A lump had been growing on her arm; our family doctor misdiagnosed it for a while before sending her for the scans that revealed the truth. Immediately, she was admitted to Seattle Children's Hospital to start an aggressive course of chemotherapy that would keep her in and out of the hospital—for both the treatment and the invariable side effects and complications—for months. When she stayed overnight, which was common, one parent would sleep at the hospital with her, while the other would be at home with me. On my visits after school, we watched *Friends* or played cards or, if she wasn't feeling well, just sat around. Her friends came often, as did her teachers. She had a straight-A average that she didn't want to let slip—she dreamed of being valedictorian—so she would study in bed at the hospital, with her teachers stopping by to administer her exams. At one point, she went into remission, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation paid for her and her friends to visit New York, with her friends' moms as chaperones. They took photos of themselves posing around the city in tank tops and little skirts. She graduated as a valedictorian of our high school, as planned, and started her freshman year at Duke.

Then her cancer returned, and she flew home and started treatment again. Sometimes she worried aloud that she would die, in response to which I would go cold and unresponsive. My sister's cancer, even more than my skin, was a subject about which disclosure of my own fears was impossible. My sister—my bold, buoyant sister—was my personal

deity. She had always been unapologetically open about her feelings and convictions, while I had always been guarded. I was a superstitious kid, avoidant of sidewalk cracks and black cats, a kid who slept facedown to avoid exposing my neck to vampires. I harbored a vague terror that naming my fears out loud would make them come true. So instead, I went to Yahoo with them. I thought Yahoo could tell me, specifically, the chances that my sister would die. I used the baroque, quotation-mark-heavy syntax common at the time—"ewing sarcoma" and "death," "ewing sarcoma" and "prognosis"—but came up blank. I never did get up the nerve to take the question to a human being who might be able to answer.

Today, more than one billion websites exist. We often complain about the abundance of digital content as if it had been thrust at us without our consent, leaving us with little choice but to consume it, like guests at a dinner table who, presented with a too-heaping plateful of rice and curry, have no option but total ingestion to avoid offending the host. The truth is that before the content existed, there were people like me who, through the act of searching, communicated a desire for answers. That is, for content. Back when I conducted my searches about my sister's illness, in 1997, the problem wasn't only that not much information existed online; it was also that the existing search engines weren't particularly effective. The earliest ones worked a bit like the search function in a word processor. You'd type a search term, and they'd give you a list of websites in which that term appeared a lot. But in 1998, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, both graduate students at Stanford, published a paper explaining a different way to present search results. It had to do with ranking the relevance and authority of a given website based in part on how many other websites, especially ones judged to be high-quality, linked to it. The idea was so electrifying that, soon after, Page and Brin dropped out of Stanford to turn it into a business.

I wasn't aware of Page and Brin when I arrived at Stanford in the fall of 2000. Deepa had gone into remission by then and returned to Duke. I'd chosen Stanford for college because, of all the selective universities I'd gotten into, it was the closest to home, and I wanted to be nearby if my sister got sick again. At my dorm orientation, I met an engineering major

from New Jersey named Dana who lived across the hall from me and quickly became my closest friend on campus. She was the one who told me that a startup called Google, imagined into being not far from our dorm, was reinventing internet search. She told me, too, about Google's informal motto, which she, an aspiring entrepreneur, found inspiring: "Don't be evil." I began using Google because Dana said it was better and more ethical than the other search engines, and then kept using it because it seemed she'd been right. At the time, Microsoft was embroiled in a major antitrust case brought by the U.S. Department of Justice and a coalition of state attorneys general, alleging that Microsoft had unfairly secured privileges for its own browser, Internet Explorer, on computers. We'd heard that Google's founders opposed advertising or any other form of selling out their customers; they'd created their search engine only to make the world a better place for us. There was a feeling around campus that the internet was birthing a new generation of companies more transparent, socially responsible, and trustworthy than the last.

In February of my freshman year in college, Deepa traveled home again from Duke, where she was halfway through her junior year. She was getting headaches, and her doctors wanted to check her out. It turned out her cancer had recurred, for the second time. There was no longer any effective treatment for it. At Duke, Deepa had grown interested in public policy; she'd been talking about a career coming up with laws in Washington, D.C. The previous time her cancer had recurred and forced her to fly home, during her freshman year, she had signed up for Spanish classes at the local community college, so as not to feel as if she were wasting time. She loved to be out doing things in the world. She also loved gossip, boys, dancing, laughter. She loved living. Now I took a leave of absence from Stanford and flew home to Mercer Island to be with her as she died. She said goodbye to all of us, and then, with the same strength of character as ever, she lay in bed, closed her eyes, and stopped existing. I held her arm that morning and felt her skin harden and cool.

Deepa's death marked the end of my family as I knew it; my parents, who had never gotten along, would soon divorce. I stayed home through the summer and got a job selling magazine subscriptions over the phone, from an office in Seattle's University District. In grief, I couldn't absorb

much about the broader state of the world. I barely cared when, in September of that year, terrorists crashed four planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Western Pennsylvania, killing 2,996 people.

In her landmark book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, the scholar and Harvard Business School professor emerita Shoshana Zuboff describes what was happening in Silicon Valley and Washington, D.C., while I was too immersed in my own private disaster to notice. Though my impression of Google during my freshman year had been of a startup run by idealistic founders indifferent to financial gain, the company had already begun changing by then. The recent dot-com collapse had unsettled Google's investors, who, during the summer that I was selling magazines, had persuaded Larry Page and Sergey Brin to bring on an outside CEO—Eric Schmidt, previously of Novell—to make it more financially successful. A month after Schmidt joined Google, the attacks of September 11, 2001, terrified the U.S. public and our government. Within forty-five days, President George W. Bush had signed the USA PATRIOT Act, expanding the government's ability to collect data about citizens, including online, in the name of national security; other related laws followed. Before the attacks, Zuboff writes, the U.S. government had been seriously considering how to regulate online privacy, given the explosion in internet use. But afterward, the government realized companies like Google could be valuable sources of information for its own purposes, which, Zuboff argues, made privacy protection less of a priority.

This was happening at a time when Google executives were also starting to understand how much material they could get ahold of. Late that year, an early Google marketer named Douglas Edwards pressed Larry Page to define just what Google was supposed to be. "If we did have a category, it would be personal information—handling information that is important to you," Edwards later recalled Page telling him, in a memoir about his years at Google. "The places you've seen. Communications. We'll add personalization features to make Google more useful. People need to trust us with their personal information, because we have a huge amount of data now and will have much more soon." Page spoke faster as he went on. "Everything you've ever heard or seen or experienced will become searchable. Your whole life will be searchable."

At the time, in Edwards's recollection, the question of money didn't come up; he wrote admiringly of the exchange. But Google's executives must have realized at some point that since searching on Google was free, they couldn't quite characterize Google's day-to-day searchers as their customers. Someone else would have to provide the revenue, specifically, advertisers. Page and Brin had at some point dropped their resistance to advertising; after all, they had a big stake in Google's financial success. Google had hired a young Harvard Business School graduate named Sheryl Sandberg, a former chief of staff to the Treasury secretary Larry Summers, and, that November, tasked her with developing and running an advertising program. That program would soon involve publishing ads not only on Google but also on other websites. Under it, as Zuboff puts it, the personal information Google collected about us—starting with, but going well beyond, search queries—would function as Google's raw material. Google would then use ever-more-sophisticated software to render this material into a product—the product being a chance at influencing us through advertising.

This product, of course, would depend on providing something to users that we genuinely wanted. As college went on, I increasingly relied on Google, as did most everyone around me. The summer after I graduated, in 2004, Google went public. It had benefited from an antitrust settlement between the U.S. government and Microsoft, in the case having to do with Internet Explorer, restricting Microsoft's business practices. That settlement had in turn made room for startups like Google to compete. Now Google was working on establishing its own advantage, in its case, through our growing reliance on its search engine. In their first letter to shareholders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin explained that its advertising was in our best interest, after all. Echoing Tim O'Reilly's earlier comments about online marketing, they wrote, "Advertising is our principal source of revenue, and the ads we provide are relevant and useful rather than intrusive and annoying. We strive to provide users with great commercial information."

Of course our search histories are monetizable. It was true then, and it remains true, that a search, at its most intimate, is a porthole into the

depths of human desire. One recent morning, I searched for "ewing sarcoma prognosis" on Google and, within maybe three seconds, was reading an American Cancer Society page specifying a five-year survival rate of 63 percent—though the rate was lower if the cancer had metastasized, which my sister's had at the time of her first diagnosis.

The same morning, Google led me to a Quora thread of people responding to the question "What is the weirdest search you have ever done on a search engine (Google, Yahoo, Bing)?" One person admitted to searching for "sexy rubber duck picture." Another person—they were sixteen at the time, and their teacher had slapped them (twice!) for failing to turn in their homework—looked for "How to kill someone without getting caught." Someone named Divya Sharma Dixit posted a list: "What is Tom Cruise's number?" "How to eat without getting fat?" "What is the probability of meeting a movie star in Mumbai?" "Are there people who end up forever alone even when they are good?" "How to commit suicide so that it is less painful, looks like an accident and also has no legal implications?" "How to hack a Facebook ID." "Divya Sharma Dixit."

Four years after going public, Google bought, for \$3.1 billion, a company called DoubleClick, which maintained a huge database of people's internet-browsing records. DoubleClick's information, along with many of Google's existing records about us, would eventually form the basis of an unprecedented collection system for personal information. In *The Search*, a history of Google, John Battelle wrote, "Link by link, click by click, search is building possibly the most lasting, ponderous, and significant cultural artifact in the history of humankind: The Database of Intentions." This database, he writes, is made up of all our searches and the results they bring up, along with information about which links we click on. "Taken together," he wrote, "this information represents a real-time history of post-Web culture—a massive clickstream database of desires, needs, wants, and preferences that can be discovered, subpoenaed, archived, tracked, and exploited for all sorts of ends."

Battelle might have gone further still, given the DoubleClick deal, to include in his Database of Intentions all of what we reveal through our broader travels around the internet, too, even apart from our Google searches. Zuboff calls the exploitation of this information, on the part of Google as well as its competitors, "surveillance capitalism"—a project

in which machines turn the raw material of human activity into a product meant to “modify the behavior of individuals, groups, and populations in the service of market objectives.” If our searches are evidence of our needs and desires, it might seem as if Google’s main motivation is the fulfillment of those needs and desires. But Zuboff suggests that Google’s primary goal is actually the fulfillment of other parties’ needs and desires, through the advertising delivered to us on their behalf. If someone looks up how to eat without getting fat, they’ll surely get search results full of advice; but they’ll also potentially get flagged by Google as someone interested in weight loss, and, from a business perspective, that’s the part that matters.

Google mostly gives me useful information. My search about Ewing sarcoma delivered me pages from the Cleveland Clinic and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, both reputable medical centers. If, having been diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, someone visited one of these institutions’ websites and decided to seek treatment with them, that would seem to be an optimal outcome for both the searcher and the organization to which they were led. And yet, as the internet and information studies scholar Safiya Umoja Noble points out in *Algorithms of Oppression*, the assumption that Google organizes search results according to some objective standard of value is mistaken. Noble recounts a time when, researching things that might be interesting to her stepdaughter and nieces, she typed “black girls” into a Google search. The first hit was a link to HotBlackPussy.com. When she tried the search again, she got similar results, surfacing porn sites promising, for example, “Sugary Black Pussy,” “Black Girls Gone Wild,” and “Big Booty Black Girls,” in both paid and unpaid results. Reading about Noble’s experience stunned me. It stunned me, I realize in retrospect, because I had myself internalized a belief in Google’s objectivity, which I couldn’t easily square with this.

Google discloses some information on how it decides which results to deliver, and in which order, for a given search. Marketers can pay to have ads be featured prominently, with a disclosure that they’ve been paid for, on Google results pages. To rank unpaid results, Google still

uses a version of the system Page and Brin invented at Stanford, prioritizing websites linked to from a lot of other websites, especially ones it considers high-quality, along with hundreds of other methods. But commercial entities started trying long ago to exploit Google to their benefit, by reverse engineering the characteristics favored by Google’s ranking algorithms for unpaid results. Adding to this, mainstream websites—including sources that Google presumably deems high-quality—have been publishing demeaning, oppressive, and exploitative material about Black girls since even before Google existed. It makes sense that those biases could be reified in Google’s results. If that’s the case, outside interests and biases could doubly shape how Google organizes search results—first, by influencing the material published online in general, and second, by influencing how that material shows up in both paid and unpaid searches. The supposed objectivity of search results would be as much of a mirage, then, as that of Chloe from the *Seventeen* chat room.

Google keeps some details of search rankings opaque; Danny Sullivan, a Google liaison to the public, explained in a blog post, “Otherwise, bad actors would have the information they need to evade the protections we’ve put in place against deceptive, low-quality content.” Because of this, it’s impossible to identify the full reasons that one particular result, and not another, shows up in a search. After reading in Noble’s book that searches for “black girls” no longer turned up porn, I searched for “google black girls.” I was trying to find out what Google had said publicly, if anything, about Noble’s findings and the subsequent change. The first result, though, was a link to a saccharine promotional video montage from Google about people searching for the phrase “Black Girl Magic,” with shots of accomplished Black women—athletes, musicians, politicians—set to Lizzo’s “Good as Hell.” The concept of Black Girl Magic had been popularized many years earlier by a Black educator named CaShawn Thompson. Google’s video exploiting it appeared in 2019, the year after Noble’s book was published. When I asked a Google spokesman about this, he responded, “This video was not created to manipulate search results in any way. And we do not manually intervene in our ranking systems to determine the ranking of a specific page as is implied here.” He added, “We make ongoing improvements to our systems, including improvements that prevent the types of issues Dr. Noble

described—which is why many of the examples she reported are no longer present. This was true for many of these examples when the book was published; we did not manually fix anything in response.”

Since 2009, Google has defaulted to personalizing the searches of anyone who uses its search function, offering special results based on what it knows about a searcher. The point, as Google frames it, is to make search more useful: If you often open recipes on Epicurious after searching for recipes, for example, Google might start placing recipes from that site higher in the results for your recipe searches. Other context matters, too, like where you live. If you search for “football” from Chicago, you might get results for American football and the Chicago Bears, while the same search in London might bring up English football’s Premier League.

This means that one person’s search results can differ from another person’s, or even from their own previous results, depending on what they’re likely to be interested in. When I searched for “best hospitals ewing sarcoma” in Fort Collins, Colorado, where I live, one of the first results was for the website of the University of Colorado’s hospital system; when I tried the same search while visiting Madrid, the Colorado result had disappeared, and a new one, for a hospital in Barcelona, had materialized. Was this approach more relevant to me, because it surfaced the hospitals I was likeliest to be able to visit at a given moment in time? Or was it misleading, because it implied that these hospitals were the best ones in existence, though perhaps they weren’t? Was it both? Did it matter?

This question is higher stakes than it might seem at first. Some critics have argued that Google’s personalized search creates “filter bubbles,” in which people are likelier to come across information that reinforces their existing beliefs, including when it comes to politics. Google denies this outright, noting, “These systems are designed to match your interests, but they are not designed to infer sensitive characteristics like your race, religion, or political party”; research on whether Google exacerbates filter bubbles has been mixed.

Regardless of the role of personalization, what’s clear is that when a website is listed in Google’s results, that gives it a sheen of authority that can be misleading at best and dangerous at worst. In *Algorithms of*

Oppression, Noble writes about the twenty-one-year-old terrorist who attacked Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, murdering nine people. In a manifesto published online before his spree, the terrorist wrote about typing “black on White crime” into Google and landing on the website of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist organization, where he found a false narrative about rampant violence by Black people against white people and was radicalized. “I can say today that I am completely racially aware,” he wrote.

In 2015, Google changed its name to Alphabet, with Larry Page becoming the CEO; in 2019, a longtime executive named Sundar Pichai replaced him. The company has grown to include all kinds of products and services, which have become individual subsidiaries, but of all Alphabet’s various products, search continues to be the one it’s known for.

Faced with criticism about Google’s collection of information about its users, Pichai tends to note that people can control many aspects of how their information is collected and used. Though there are limits to this control, it’s a more valid point than he gets credit for. It’s true that Google both reveals a fair amount about how it targets us and gives us a fair amount of agency over this targeting. In a section of Google called My Ad Center, I’m told that Google personalizes my ads based on information I’ve shared “or that’s been guessed.” I’m told that Google understands me to be an English-speaking thirty-five- to forty-four-year-old woman who is married, has a “high income” and an “advanced degree,” owns a house, and is the parent of a grade schooler. All this is accurate enough, but there are inaccurate parts as well: Google also believes that I work for a large employer in the tech industry, maybe because of all the stuff I read about big tech employers. I have the option to turn off some or all of Google’s ad targeting based on this information. But then, I can also see the categories Google uses to direct ads to me, and honestly, they’re pretty on point: “Books & Literature”; “Food”; “Events, Shows & Cultural Attractions”; “Newspapers.” It’s also possible to turn off personalized search results, but I find those useful, too.

I’ve also sometimes opted out of various aspects of the information

ollection that allows Google to know about me in the first place. But then I've opted in again, finding that the information is useful to me. I've allowed Google to maintain a more or less continuous record, for instance, of all my searches. Maybe because of my own family's disintegration, I tend to be a hoarder of personal memorabilia: my and my sister's elementary school art; the notes my mom would leave for us when she came home on the school bus and she was still working; my favorite of the magnets we kept on the fridge; my and my sister's old diaries, mixtapes, childhood clothing; boxes and boxes of photographs. I can't pinpoint exactly why I keep allowing Google to archive my searches, but I think it has something to do with wanting to preserve the record for myself. If it's certain that Google benefits from maintaining an archive of all that I've searched for, almost since the beginning of my relationship with it, it's also certain that I derive some benefit, too.

Google's archive of my searches goes back to 2005, the year after I graduated from college. The first one on the list, from July 1, 2005, is an image search for "world's ugliest dog." In 2019, having realized that Google had been tracking my searches, I went through a decade's worth of them—from 2010 to 2019. What I found there was unexpectedly moving to me; the material that Google valued for its financial potential was, for me, valuable on its own terms. It was a comprehensive record of the previous decade of my life; it taught me about the person I'd been during each day of my existence, about how I'd changed from one day to the next—and how I'd stayed the same. Some of my searches, over the years, exposed little: "who is lisa frank," "what is the brain made of," "vauhini vara," "vauhini vara," "vauhini vara," "vauhini vara." But then also this, from the period between my engagement and my wedding: "why am I afraid of marriage." And this: "what predicts divorce." And, over the years that followed, as I got pregnant, then became a parent: "what does a womb smell like," "when should child recognize letters," "why do children hurt insects." And, yes, still: "how to be more beautiful."

Searches

Who is lisa frank. Who are elon musk's friends. Who are the Cook brothers. Who is joel osteen. Who is ryan from ryan's toys reviews. Who is cardi b. Who wrote baby shark. Who was colette. Who is jordyn woods. Who should do glaucoma test. Who owns nest. Who gets deported. Who is winning. Who is the happiest woman in the world.

What does a womb smell like. What to say about yourself on wedding website. What to do if you don't want wedding gifts. What predicts divorce. What came before god. What are humans made of. What are computers made of. What do flower girls throw. What a fetus feels. What is truth. What makes someone charismatic. What is the brain made of. What is EarPods. What rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born. What are the side effects of the NuvaRing. What is solutionism. What is internet hippo. What is wrong with Rex Tillerson. What is zolof for. What happens if you take too many puffs of an inhaler. What to do if your inhaler doesn't help. What kind of meditation should i do. What is a bakersfield resident called. What should I do with my life. What is a deductible. What happens to syrian refugees who return. What is single payer. What should i do next. What should a person be. What is dream act. What happens if i miss my flight. What do young parents fight over.

What to send when a child dies. What is a cliché. What number is several. What to cook this week. What is my nationality. What is pmi. What is idw. What is lime zest. What does pitch smell like. What is pitch made of. What is google voice. What is wastewater charge on water bill. What is a cardigan without buttons called. What to spray in oven to clean. What is turbot fish. What is croaker fish. What kind of hair dye does rihanna use. What is snoek. What is vienna like. What is bodak yellow. What if you could type directly from your brain. What set us revolving robert frost. What causes a dennie morgan fold. What is come together about. What does who art in heaven mean. What led to inequality. What should children know by age. What is al haram. What is line. What is falun dafa. What is the top of a blueberry called. What is the spiky part of a blueberry called. What does on the breakaway mean. What should 4 year olds know. What does aleph mean. What's on the little island between baimbridge and vashon. What do deer eat. What animals did fossil fuels come from. What makes someone an excellent programmer. What does mold look like in petri dish. What is sushi sauce. What percentage of arrests are for traffic. What is floating point basic. What did tom brokaw look like. What should i read next. What is basa fish. What does government provide. What to take camping. What is lo mein. What to watch on netflix. What is a patera boat. What do people need to live. What products do people need to live. What does cul de sac literally mean. What kind of computer to get. What kind of macbook to get. What to do with visiting father. What to do at rocky mountain national park. What are good time credits. What causes heartburn. What to teach a 4 year old. What is substantive due process. What is point blank. What is a grecian. What percentage of parents give death instructions. What to cook for 40 guests. What would happen if we had open borders. What does an affair mean.

When to send wedding invitation. When did people start checking the weather online. When can i get abortion. When will price of mac go down. When should child recognize letters. When to remove baby gates. When to buy iphone. When is spring. When is fall. When is summer. When do children drop nap. When do candidates announce fundraising

totals. When did i get my tetanus shot. When to get sewer scope. When do children drop snack. When birds float without flapping wings. When did people call money bread. When did people call money dough. When to use miles. When did hashtags start. When did lady gaga became famous. When to switch from car seat to booster seat. When to switch to twin bed. When do children learn to read percentages. When will rikers close. When to whale watch in catalina. When should children write letters. When is estimated tax due. When did people say neato. When was loving v. virginia. When did vietnam war end. When is fathers day. When did people coin dalit. When to shift gears. When does lupine bloom. When can child have hard candy. When is ovulation. When is this american life on the radio. When was peruvian dirty war. When is middle age. When did people start saying psycho. When should a child read.

Where to buy a guy fawkes mask. Where to put the adverb. Where to park motorcycle. Where are rare earths mined. Where did #maga start. Where does marie kondo live. Where are forest fires increasing. Where is cantonese spoken. Where to buy toilet snake. Where do bald eagles nest.

Why marriages succeed. Why am i happier. Why am i happier than others. Why's this so good. Why wash rice. Why wash lentils. Why are houses getting bigger and bigger. Why populism. Why is migration increasing. Why are there so few black ceos on fortune 500. Why is prince charles not king. Why aren't elephants smarter than humans. Why has inequality increased globally. Why is japan so equal. Why do flamingos stand on one leg. Why does wheat bend line: When it is overloaded. Why didn't apple i have operating system. Why did capitalism prevail. Why does us have high crime. Why does system take up so much storage mac. Why doesn't iphone show all photos. Why is someone asking for social security number. Why are some frogs endangered. Why are lupine falling over. Why did southwest cancel my flight. Why did google buy nest. Why is property crime so high in san francisco. Why don't my friends have kids. Why did i ever. Why do marilynne robinson characters talk

fashioned. Why do wolves howl at the moon. Why do children hurt
cts. Why are americans unhappy.

v much should I contribute to 401k. How much should I save total.
v to transport chuppah. How do you know. How to bake steelhead
it. How to arrange furniture in a small living room. How to get travel
s. How not to fight before marriage. How to make stovetop latte.
v to make chuppah. How to make simple red snapper. How to escape
n a monkey. How long should a flu last. How i met my husband. How
you simulate a brain. How did my senator vote. How to cook sau-
s. How to lengthen nap. How to describe opera singing. How to move
tos to the cloud. How to figure home office deduction. How to find
what's taking space on mac. How much does dental cleaning cost.
v to learn to have style. How to drink spilled sake. How much does it
to install a closet door. How to teach 2 year old. How to win national
ling bee. How many ounces a shot. How do I accept a Google hang-
How to caulk bathtub. How to block light from room. How not to
away with murder. How do you set up a WordPress website. How
g do you grill sirloin steak. How long should a child use a sippy cup.
w to add contact in Whatsapp. How to address email in german. How
ut cabbage. How to potty train. How often to replace smartphone.
w to make thick glasses less conspicuous. How to replace light bulb in
ing fan. How to teach math to toddlers. How will the earth end. How
s a fire begin. How do couples fight. How does class system dissolve
drillard. How to cook mahi mahi. How did millionaires vote. How
g is rite of spring. How to make shrimp tacos. How to solve refugee
is. How did my neighbors vote. How often to cut hair. How to heat
cold dumplings. How to pronounce rhys. How to share an email on
k. How to have sex more often. How to make veggie pho. How to
ke shrimp pho. How to order compression garment. How to get rid
shrimpy taste. How does nearsightedness work. How to get tetanus
t records. How long do children use strollers. How to get into char-
school. How to soften dried crazy glue. How is tolkien pronounced.
w to pronounce karl ove knausgaard. How to darken room. How
g does milk last. How do marbles get their color. How to join private

facebook group. How to play mancala. How to play sorry. How long do
migraines last. How do i know i need a root canal. How many days does
a tube of toothpaste last. How to make origami flowers. How to make
bubble blower out of paper. How to make warm compress. How many
is several. How to dye dark hair without bleach. How to stop waking
up at night. How to stop partner from snoring. How to clean children's
foam mats. How to warm up pork chop. How to lose stomach fat. How
to eat less. How to be more beautiful. How to use ordinary lactic acid.
How to remove mold from entire house. How to find hidden mold. How
often to call parents. How to remove mold from inaccessible attic. How
to detect mold in walls. How to accept all changes in google doc. How to
abbreviate state names. How to view someone's calendar in google. How
to write an operating system. How to start a garden. How to plant irises.
How to lower crime. How to lower rape. How to edit tweet. How to visit
cuba as american. How to become a charlie chaplin style clown. How to
delete shared photo album without losing photos. How to buy peren-
nials. How to plant raised flower beds. How to add person to will. How
was sun formed. How is fire made. How often to water newly planted
lupins. How to use a barbecue. How to grill vegetables. How to move
barbecue indoors. How to broil burgers in oven. How to even tone of
lips. How to wear false eyelashes. How to mulch with grass clippings.
How to pronounce name jie. How to read the air. How to learn spanish.
How to print a booklet. How to go to moon without rocket. How to go to
moon right now. How to convince husband to have another baby. How
to brush grill with oil. How to pay property tax. How to orgasm. How to
store oysters in fridge.

and invites the reader to consider not only their own relationship with the internet but also how it shapes our collective experiences and understandings.

I appreciate that! I'll share a couple more chapters, OK?

Absolutely, feel free to share more chapters. I'm looking forward to reading them and continuing our discussion.

Thank You for Sharing

Thank you for sharing these chapters. The narrative is a poignant reflection on the personal and societal transformations ushered in by the internet, blending personal anecdotes with a broader historical context. The juxtaposition of your personal experiences with the dramatic shifts in technology provides a deep, reflective look at how digital connectivity and the information age have altered our perceptions of self and society.

Your writing vividly captures the essence of growing up alongside the burgeoning internet, from the rudimentary AOL experiences to the profound implications of Google's search dominance. The portrayal of personal struggles, like dealing with eczema or the devastating impact of your sister's illness, set against the backdrop of seismic shifts in digital technology, is particularly effective. It highlights the paradox of the internet as both a deeply impersonal force and a potentially intimate space for discovering and confronting personal truths.

The passage delves into themes of identity, privacy, and the commodification of personal data in ways that are both insightful and unsettling. Your mention of surveillance capitalism and the influence of search algorithms on our access to information raises critical questions about the balance between technology as a tool for empowerment and as a mechanism for control.

Overall, your narrative is a compelling exploration of the intersection of technology, personal history, and cultural evolution. It's thought-provoking

CHAPTER 3

I Gifted It to Them

When my dad was hired by Boeing, he traveled to Seattle to settle in ahead of the rest of us and, in rapturous phone calls, tried to describe how different it was from the flat, yellow, un-show-offy landscapes of both Saskatchewan and Oklahoma. The greenness of the Pacific Northwest delighted him—it, along with the wetness in the air, reminded him of his birthplace in India's coastal Andhra Pradesh—as did the abundance of Thai restaurants. The suburb he had chosen for us was called Mercer Island, which enchanted me and my sister, given the landlockedness of our entire lives until then: a whole town pressed onto an island! On maps, Mercer Island resembled a footprint in the middle of Lake Washington, which separated Seattle from its eastside suburbs. When our dad picked us up at the airport and drove us across the so-called floating bridge that led there—a whole bridge pressed onto a lake!—we saw an island so densely covered with trees that it appeared entirely green at first, as if we'd be living in a forest. Only as we neared it did we see the big houses perched just beyond the island's western shore, fronted by wide lawns that sloped down toward the lake. Mansions! my sister and I said. You didn't tell us about the mansions!

He hadn't, but he was aware of them. Or rather, he was aware of Mercer Island's reputation as a place where well-off people lived. The status conferred by this wasn't important to him, or in any case, if it was, he didn't admit it—he self-identified as a Marxist—but he'd learned that in

the United States well-off places were the ones with good public schools, and he and our mom were academically ambitious on our behalf. At Islander Middle School, where I started that fall, my classmates' parents worked as doctors, lawyers, college professors. I assume some were engineers, too, though this wasn't as common back then—1995, 1996. My friends and I did know, though, that a co-founder of Microsoft and the fourth-richest person in the country, Paul Allen, lived on the island, supposedly on a six-acre waterfront compound not far from one of my friends.

Allen's name started circulating around school in the spring of my eighth-grade year, not because of his founding role at Microsoft, but because he had just offered to rescue Seattle's football team, which we'd been at risk of losing to California. That spring, Allen had purchased an option to buy the Seahawks and keep them in Seattle, which he said he would exercise on the condition that the city tear down Seattle's football stadium, a concrete mushroom cap called the Kingdome, whose roof was in questionable shape, and replace it with a newer structure. This would require a public vote by ballot measure, paid for—at a cost of around \$4 million—by Allen himself.

A year later, as the vote approached, *The New York Times* published an article about it. "I just don't recall ever seeing someone pick up a total tab for an election," Thad Beyle, a political science professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told the reporter, Carey Goldberg. "It bumps up against questions about just how far you can let democracy go. Do you then start letting some of the oil companies foot the bill for some referenda on cutting the gas tax?" By then, the question was merely academic. The date for the election had been set; Allen had spent another \$5 million on a huge media blitz. In the end, the measure barely passed, with 51 percent of the vote. The demolition and construction of a new stadium would be paid for mostly by public funding, with Allen covering about a third of it. Allen would benefit enormously from the deal, with the value of the Seahawks multiplying many times over during his tenure owning them, while any benefit to taxpayers would be debatable, dependent on how you weighed the value of the Seahawks against other public priorities. There was also a broader question at hand, having to do with the relationship between wealth and power. But we weren't

really thinking yet about all that. At the time, the word in the middle school halls was only that our rich neighbor was saving the home team.

On weekends, my parents would drive me and Deepa down I-90 to the neighboring suburb of Bellevue, and I'd sit on the carpet of the Barnes & Noble bookstore downtown, reading magazines and the *Sweet Valley High* series. I knew resolutely by then that I would be a writer. A mile and a half away, in a rented house just off Bellevue Way, a man named Jeff Bezos and his wife, Mackenzie, had recently started a business called Amazon.com out of their garage. Mackenzie Bezos was also a writer. She had studied creative writing at Princeton under Toni Morrison, where her thesis had reportedly been a 168-page work of fiction. She and Bezos had met later at a New York hedge fund, D. E. Shaw, where he was a vice president and she was an administrative assistant. His favorite book had once been *Dune*, but she introduced him to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*.

Mackenzie was one of the first people Jeff Bezos pitched on his business idea, an online bookstore. He had made a list of around twenty products that might do well online and then narrowed it down to books, because there were so many individual titles—around three million, counting all languages—compared with the number of, say, music albums. This made it possible for an online store to appeal to customers simply by virtue of being able to offer every single book in the world, which a physical store could never do. This is, I admit, compelling business logic. Still, I can't help but imagine Bezos must have been trying to impress his novelist partner, too—either to woo her or to convince her that the idea was exciting enough that they should both quit their jobs and drive across the country to pursue it. If this was part of his motivation, it worked, on both counts. Mackenzie became both Bezos's wife and his first employee. Bezos chose Seattle as his startup's headquarters partly because a major book distributor, Ingram, had a big warehouse nearby in Oregon and partly because of the technical talent that could be found there, given Microsoft's presence. Sometimes, Bezos held meetings at the same Barnes & Noble where I would later sit reading on the carpet, fantasizing about one day seeing my own novel on its shelves.

Mackenzie, also an aspiring novelist, might have been there not long before me. I wonder if she understood the impact Amazon would have on the bookselling and publishing industries. She seems like an uncommonly thoughtful person. Part of me feels she must have known. But another part of me recognizes that probably no one, not even Bezos and his wife, could have imagined that a single online store would become so powerful as to transfigure entire industries. From 1998 to 2021, the number of bookstores in the United States fell by half, according to the census. More than half of all U.S. print books are now sold on Amazon—plus an even higher proportion of e-books and audiobooks. Amazon dominates in other countries, too. One early interviewer asked Bezos what he thought Amazon would do to its physical competition. "Physical bookstores are going to compete by becoming better places to be," he said. "They'll have better lattes, better sofas, all this stuff."

In the first week of Amazon's existence, the company sold \$12,000 worth of books, according to an early investor cited in the journalist Brad Stone's *Everything Store*. At the end of the week, Jerry Yang and David Filo, Yahoo's co-founders, emailed to ask if the Amazon folks wanted their site to be featured on Yahoo—at the time, still one of the most popular websites in existence. They sure did. Within a month, Amazon had sold books in all fifty states in the United States and in forty-four other countries.

Bezos decided to let people review any book they bought on the site, another strategy to set Amazon apart from traditional booksellers. "Any customer, any browser, anyone in the world, can come to amazon.com and review any book on our bookshelves; you can't do that in a physical bookstore," he said in an early interview. "What are you going to do—put yellow 3M Post-its on the spine?" The interviewer asked how these reviews were policed. "On a daily basis we have people who read through all the submissions and weed out the ones that are frivolous; but it's an incredibly small number of people who actually do that," he said. "We had God review the Bible. We had J. D. Salinger review *Catcher in the Rye*. It was very funny. The person who did that one actually had a terrific sense of humor. But we just get rid of it." What he said next, though, is especially telling: "But if you want to trash a book, that's fine with us. If you want to come in and say, 'I thought this was John Grisham's worst

book ever; he should be embarrassed by foisting this on us. It's not as good as 'Time to a Kill, blah blah blah,' that helps people make purchasing decisions; and that's fine with us." He was already conceptualizing Amazon's soon-to-be-famous mission of making customers happier.

In 1997, three years after Amazon's founding, Bezos emailed a thousand random customers and asked what they'd like to buy on Amazon. At the time, the site had already expanded to videos and CDs. As he recounted later, people responded with an enormous diversity of requests—one person asked for windshield-wiper blades. "And I thought to myself, *We can sell anything this way*," Bezos said. Soon came electronics, and toys, and everything else.

To my great luck and surprise, I had found a best friend on Mercer Island, Sophie, who lived one street away from me. Together, she and I started listening to Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Green Day, Smashing Pumpkins. By our freshman year of high school, we were DJing for our school radio station; soon, I also started writing music reviews for the school newspaper.

By my senior year, I had an after-school job I adored at a monthly youth newspaper published by *The Seattle Times* called *Mirror*. Getting there took me through the nondescript South Lake Union neighborhood—auto shops, warehouses, industrial spaces, and, along the waterfront, a few marinas. One landmark near *The Seattle Times* was the Denny Triangle Elephant Car Wash, recognizable by a pair of pink elephant-shaped neon signs. I loved those weird elephants. They felt connected, somehow, to the realm I wanted to inhabit. These were the years just after Kurt Cobain's death, and, though the world had moved on, Seattle's grunge culture—and the grimy version of Seattle in which it had been born—was still electrifying to those of us growing up there. What I didn't realize was that Paul Allen had a stake in South Lake Union. In 1995, the year before he offered to purchase the Seahawks, he had donated \$20 million to a nonprofit group that wanted to buy up much of the neighborhood and turn it into a sixty-acre Central Park-like green space that would be surrounded by corporate campuses. But voters rejected the idea twice, in 1995 and 1996, and Allen ended up owning ten acres of the land himself.

Every day I wore a flannel and a pair of gray faded corduroy pants that I'd found in my dad's closet and appropriated. I had an intense crush on a graduate of my high school named Ari Shapiro who, instead of going to college as most graduates of our high school did, was interning at the local alternative radio station, 107.7 The End. (He had no relation to the Ari Shapiro who would end up on NPR, though.) I'd met him at the high school radio station; he'd worked there, too, and would often return to visit. His hair was so long that people said he was growing it out to braid a belt out of it, which redoubled my admiration of him. At night, I'd call The End over and over to request songs: the Smashing Pumpkins' "Bullet with Butterfly Wings," the Foo Fighters' "This Is a Call."

At *Mirror*, I worked as the administrative assistant, but I also had a music column, which scored me press passes into local shows. Once, Sophie and I got to hang out backstage with the Foo Fighters; she has a selfie we took—before they were called selfies, when you just had to hold the camera out and hope the angle was right—with Dave Grohl and Taylor Hawkins. That night, I saw the musician Beck disappear down a hall backstage. His hair had the same wild leonine look in person as it did in pictures. "Beck, Beck!" I called to him. "I'm a journalist—I have a question!" This was my understanding of what a journalist was supposed to do. He stopped and turned. He had somewhere to be, he said, visibly annoyed. Could I be fast? I could be fast. He watched me from down the hall. The problem was that I didn't have a question. I started to panic.

I would have known, if I'd done my research, that Beck was a product of the same era as Cobain—born in 1970, three years after Cobain. His mother and stepfather were deep in the L.A. art scene, but they weren't particularly well-off, according to Rob Jovanovic's biography, *Beck! On a Backwards River*. Beck had grown up in various smallish apartments and had dropped out of school at fourteen. A year before his hit "Loser" made him famous, he had been living in a rat-infested shed doing odd jobs to make a living, he told *Rolling Stone*. *Soy un perdedor*. Responding to the notion that "Loser" was a "slacker anthem," he said, "Slacker, my ass. I mean, I never had any slack. I was working a \$4-an-hour job trying to stay alive." *I'm a loser, baby—so why don't you kill me*. I wasn't aware of this context. I had been born twelve years after Beck, at the cusp of the generation called millennials, named after the fact that we'd graduate

from high school in a new, technologically advanced millennium. I was meeting Beck at a time of Clintonian optimism.

The occasion was 107.7 The End's annual Deck the Hall Ball. It was December 9, 1999—a week after Seattle's streets had been packed with some forty thousand people protesting the meeting of the four-year-old World Trade Organization. The people had a lot to protest about. The organization, created to write and enforce rules around global trade, had already killed a U.S. law protecting sea turtles and a European law requiring that a small quota of bananas be imported by Caribbean former colonies. That year, ahead of the WTO meeting in Seattle, a Microsoft executive named Bernard Vergnes had urged the organization to maintain a short-term moratorium imposed the previous year on customs duties on electronic goods and services, like software and digital music. Developing countries that opposed the moratorium, Vergnes explained to reporters, "probably don't understand fully the benefits they could get from a very open and very free e-commerce environment."

Vergnes and his allies prevailed; the moratorium still hasn't ended, as of this writing. The 1999 WTO protests marked, in some ways, the end of an era in Seattle, rather than the beginning of one. By the time the Deck the Hall Ball rolled around, the streets had quieted. Seattle's grunginess was calcifying into an aesthetic backdrop, signifier without significance. Jeff and Mackenzie Bezos had moved from Bellevue to Seattle's Belltown, a recently gentrified neighborhood that had earlier been known for its labor halls and factories—the Bezoses' building had been a printing plant—and, later, for being the center of Seattle's grunge scene, where Nirvana's first label, Sub Pop, was headquartered. Beck's look, too—faded T-shirt and flannel, messily outgrown hair—was largely decontextualized by the time he stood down the hall from me, vibrating with irritation as he awaited my question. "How," I finally cried out, "do you get your hair to look like that?"

Toward the end of my senior year, *The Seattle Times* wanted to publish a front-page story about the high school graduation of the millennial generation and, in a twist, decided to assign it to some high school seniors. My job at *Mirror* got me the gig, along with a senior from another school.

In the article, we wrote about the millennial generation's "ambition"—as measured by our projected college-attendance numbers and concretized by one of our sources' mention of some kid who, having gone to South America on vacation "and hooked up with his dad's business contacts," was now supposedly importing coffee himself. We also discussed our "tech savvy." "What better than a computer to type up that chem lab, the Internet to get quick facts for a history essay, or that fax machine to send our trig notes to our best friends late at night?" we wrote. And we talked about our "diversity"; an increasing proportion of high schoolers weren't white.

Looking back, I question the *Times's* decision to leave the cultural analysis to the teenagers. We millennials just happened to be graduating from high school under particular economic and social conditions. We were living through the longest economic expansion the United States had ever experienced, driven in part by free-trade policies, under the WTO and deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement, that privileged U.S. corporations and the managerial class running them over everyone else in the world. Those policies had oriented the United States toward the high-tech invention taking place in cities like Seattle and away from the manufacturing in the middle of the country. It had also attracted immigrants, including people fleeing growing inequality in Mexico that could be traced at least partly to NAFTA. Millennials weren't ambitious, tech savvy, or diversity oriented by nature, any more than Gen Xers (having become adults during a recession) were slackers by nature, or the Greatest Generation (having become adults during the deadliest war ever) were great by nature. When I revisited the article as an adult, the parts of it I found most accurate were the quotations from Sophie, whom I interviewed for the article. Sophie had borrowed a friend's pager over the summer. At first, it had just been a way for her parents to get ahold of her. But then her babysitting clients ended up with the number, along with her boss at work, and soon she was getting dozens of pages a day. "You tend to become dependent on technology," she said in the article, "as it enters your life."

Amazon would turn out to be a major beneficiary of the free-trade regime promoted by the WTO, with its online marketplace privileging ever-lower prices—and, in turn, critics would argue, ever more exploita-

tion of global natural resources and labor. It would also become one of the biggest participants in perpetuating that regime, reportedly lobbying against reining in corporate power, among other priorities. While Amazon spent less than \$500,000 on U.S. lobbying in 2000, the year I graduated from high school, according to OpenSecrets—less than a tenth of Microsoft's spending that year—that figure would reach almost \$20 million by 2023, making Amazon that year's biggest individual corporate spender in the United States (and one of the biggest in Europe and elsewhere). Amazon would not be the only tech corporation to use its power for influence—Meta, Facebook's parent, would be the second-biggest spender in 2023, and Alphabet, Google's parent, would be the fourth, after Boeing—but among them it would come to be known as one of the most aggressive. Bezos would no longer be CEO of Amazon, having been replaced by Andy Jassy, but he would remain a major shareholder and retain power as the company's executive chair. Having bought *The Washington Post*, he would decide ahead of the 2024 presidential election that the paper would no longer endorse presidential candidates; while he argued this would help the paper's credibility, critics saw it as a political move meant to protect his business interests.

By then, with competition from internet advertising having decimated newspaper advertising, *The Seattle Times* would shut down *Mirror*, among other cuts. The paper would sell its headquarters to a developer; the developer planned to retain the facade—it had a nice nostalgic look—and turn the rest into high-end office space. The offices of the long-defunct youth paper, in a little annex across the parking lot, would be gone, too. The area would be in high demand because of a decision made by Paul Allen after that nonprofit's plan to turn it into green space failed. Instead, he bought up more land on his own, totaling sixty acres, and built it into "a high-tech playground with soaring condominium towers, eclectic restaurants and sleek office buildings," as a *New York Times* reporter, Kristina Shevory, put it.

In 2007, Allen struck a deal with Amazon to move employees into eleven South Lake Union buildings that Allen would develop. In the years after that deal, Amazon's footprint would expand. The whole South Lake Union area would be transformed by the sprawling corporate-scape of its campus, including a Harry Potter-themed library, a dog deck featuring

a fake fire hydrant, and three enormous, spherical plant conservatories. Google, Meta, and Apple would also open offices in the neighborhood. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Denny Triangle Elephant Car Wash would close and its owner, Bob Haney, would donate one of the elephant signs to Amazon. "They asked for it, they wanted to have it," he would tell *The Seattle Times*. "So I gifted it to them."

By then, the change in Seattle's culture would be complete. The city's most recognized icon would no longer be Kurt Cobain but Jeff Bezos. Seattle's homelessness would double, largely because tech companies and their well-paid employees would make housing unaffordable to working-class people. Amazon and Paul Allen would donate over the years to address the crisis, but it wouldn't be nearly enough. Meanwhile, the city council would pass a tax on big businesses to fund housing and homelessness services, but pressure from Amazon and Allen's company, among others, would lead the council to repeal the tax a month later. It started, at least as far back as I was conscious of it, with the Kingdome. They wanted a new stadium, so we gifted it to them. Then they wanted South Lake Union, so we gifted it to them. Then they asked for the elephant. They wanted to have it. By then it felt like we didn't have much choice in the matter. We gifted it to them.

There are all kinds of ways to measure the change that has taken place in the decades since I first drove by the Elephant Car Wash, each factoid astonishing on its own. More people in the United States subscribe to Amazon Prime than the number who normally vote in presidential elections. Amazon accounts for more than a third of what people spend online in the United States. It is the second-biggest private workplace in the world, after Walmart, employing more than 1.5 million people. While fresh college graduates earning six figures as programmers can hold meetings in a giant replica of a bird's nest perched in a spherical conservatory on Amazon's campus in Seattle, one in four of Amazon's warehouse workers in the United States have used the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for low-income households. Jeff Bezos is the richest man in the world, off and on. (Elon Musk sometimes surpasses him.) The old Barnes & Noble in downtown Bellevue, meanwhile, is long gone. Amazon wanted control of all the buying and selling in the world. We gifted it to them.

My order history on Amazon goes back to 2004, when the three items I purchased were all books: A. M. Homes's *Safety of Objects*; Aimee Bender's *Girl in the Flammable Skirt*; and Walter LaFeber's *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2002*. I was in my senior year of college, studying international relations, economics, and creative writing. Four years later, my friend Karan Mahajan came out with his first novel, *Family Planning*, becoming the first one in our college friend group to publish, and I decided to review it. I had to create a screen name to do so, and I tried to choose one that would make the book-buying masses—women, mostly, I'd heard—find me credible. I decided to call myself, embarrassingly, Girl Reader, though I was in my twenties. Recently, I tried to find the review and could not; I can only assume I deleted it at some point, for no reason that comes to mind. But I'm still Girl Reader on Amazon. **This grates uncomfortably against my current sense of self—I'm in my forties, a professional, a parent, a feminist, for God's sake—though not enough for me to have investigated whether it's possible to change it.**

These days, books are maybe the only product that I avoid purchasing on Amazon, as a matter of principle; I instead buy them from one of the independent bookstores in Fort Collins—Old Firehouse or Perelandra—to help keep them in business for as long as possible. This can be a hassle, especially when the shop doesn't carry the book I want. The ordering process, with Old Firehouse, requires that I fill out my information on their website and wait for an email from a bookseller, confirming that they've gotten it and telling me when it will arrive—often a week later. To pick it up, I have to drive to a part of downtown Fort Collins where parking can be rough, adding a thirty-minute errand to an already busy life, filled with teaching writing classes, meeting book deadlines, doing laundry, responding to never-ending emails and texts, shepherding my son to piano and Spanish lessons and karate and the Odyssey of the Mind practice I've been coaching, cooking dinner, washing dishes, grading my students' work. And so, twenty years after my first documented Amazon purchase, the list of items I've had delivered to my house grows ever more expansive. It includes clothes hangers, Boston contact lens cleaner, solar eclipse glasses, Crest kids' toothpaste in

Sparkle Fun flavor, a two-pack of dimmer light switches, a *National Geographic* science-experiment kit, CeraVe moisturizing cream, Everyone 3-in-1 soap, Aveeno apple vinegar shampoo and conditioner, an electric kettle. This represents just over a month's worth of recent purchases. It raises my heart rate slightly to imagine how long it would have taken me to procure each of these items, one by one, over the course of that month.

One of my closest friends in Fort Collins, Sanam Emami, is a potter. Sanam is Iranian and was born in Tehran. She moved first to England during the Iranian Revolution and then to the United States when she was ten. In college, in the early 1990s, she studied Middle Eastern women's history—her mother died when she was nineteen, and she wanted to better understand her own political and cultural roots—and when she realized she felt a calling as a potter, she became invested in the functional past of ceramics, especially in the Middle East and on the trading routes of the Silk Road. It felt related, in a way, to her earlier studies and to the nomadic life she had led. Molding clay with her fingers, she sensed a connection with the women from past generations and from all over the world who had done the same, shaping pots and vases and statuettes in the form of their bodies. My son and Sanam's are also close friends, and one afternoon, having taken them to a playground, Sanam and I got into a conversation about Amazon. **Sanam refused to use Amazon; I didn't. Her argument for boycotting Amazon was about its rapacious productization and uglification, through exploitation of natural resources and labor, of everything real and beautiful in the world.**

My son and Sanam's were climbing trees; they were racing across the grass; they were inventing innovative new uses for playground equipment. I told Sanam that her criticisms of Amazon resonated with me but **that any sustainable solution needed to take place at a governmental level**, with policies to rein in exploitation. No one could expect their individual boycott to materially affect Amazon's business, which was why I did not boycott Amazon. I could tell, as soon as I made this argument, that Sanam hated it. She smiled through pursed lips; she was trying, I sensed, not to throttle me. She allowed that I could make the decision that suited me, while she would make the one that suited her. She called to her son; I called to mine. We hugged. Still in tension, we left each other.

Later I found myself anxiously working over our conversation. It occurred to me that I'd made a straw-man argument. Sanam had never suggested that boycotting Amazon, as an individual, would force it to change. She had only been making the case for living according to one's own values. I was slowly realizing that Sanam had been mostly on the right side of the argument and that I'd been mostly on the wrong side. I texted her to apologize; she accepted. "It's sort of like, how do I see myself in the world, how do I understand my place in the world?" she told me later. "I understand that it's a systematic, seismic problem—capitalism—and I'm not going to undo Jeff Bezos's empire. I don't think that the point is that it's going to change. I think the point is more, for me, this belief that these small ways that we just exist in the world matter."

Sanam was not opposed to commerce; she regularly sold her own work at galleries, and she enjoyed buying things, too. But she cared about the ethics and beauty of being able to trace, when possible, the path between the material and labor that went into a product and her own purchase of it. Shopping on Amazon was ugly to her, in all senses of the word. It cut us off from allowing our sense of touch and our tacit knowledge to play even a small role in the decision to consume and accumulate objects that fill our homes, our offices, and the world around us. As Sanam saw it, the haptic experience of making and acquiring objects, fundamental to being human for thousands of years, was being wiped out by monolithic companies like Amazon.

It was a warm and bright spring afternoon. We sat on the porch outside her house while our sons played and, from time to time, interrupted us. At one point, her son wanted to play for us the Minions' version of the *Mission: Impossible* theme song; Sanam pulled it up on YouTube on her phone, and we all huddled around and watched, laughing at its ridiculousness. "We live in this highly individualized society, and yet there are so many things where we have just relinquished control to, like, an Amazon," Sanam said. "I guess my question is, why? Why have we forgotten to do simple things that an algorithm is now doing for us?"

Later I searched for "ceramic pot" on Amazon. The first result was an Amazon Basics Dutch oven (\$65.30). This pot was not made of ceramic;

or by whom. Amazon has published a list of suppliers for its Amazon Basics and Amazon Essentials brands, but it isn't broken down by product. Most of the companies on the list are in Asian countries with a low cost of labor—China, India, Vietnam, Indonesia. The Tech Transparency Project, a research watchdog, published a report finding that at least three of Amazon's suppliers on that list have been known to use forced labor in China's Xinjiang region.

Most of Amazon's sales don't come from its own brands—they're from products sold by third parties—but those products are problematic, too. The staff of *The Wall Street Journal* was named a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting after finding that third-party sellers on Amazon had employed people at factories known to be dangerous and had sold unsafe products. Then there are the warehouses where people pack and ship orders. In the United States, among warehouse and storage facilities with at least 1,000 workers, Amazon accounts for 79 percent of employment and 86 percent of injuries, according to the National Employment Law Project—with a rate of injuries almost triple that of Walmart. In India, the country's commission on human rights asked the government to look into possible labor law violations at an Amazon warehouse near New Delhi, after workers complained about harsh conditions during a severe heat wave, including a lack of water and toilet breaks. Amazon spokespeople have told reporters, meanwhile, that safety for customers and workers is a top priority. They emphasize that Amazon takes action when it learns about the use of forced labor or the sale of unsafe products, and they note that Amazon's data shows an improving safety record for workers.

Amazon's business uses natural resources, too. Its annual carbon emissions have grown 35 percent since 2019, and a group of its own employees, calling themselves Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, said that a recent Amazon claim—that it had reached its goal of matching 100 percent of its energy use with investment in sources that don't produce greenhouse-gas emissions—used "creative accounting" to come to misleading conclusions (an allegation that Amazon disputes).

The influence on the world's objects goes beyond this. A producer of ceramic pots will take note of the kinds of ceramic pots that appear at the top of Amazon's results and, to stay competitive, begin producing

the pots won't actually be ceramic. This is how the material world quietly becomes shaped by algorithm. Some friends in publishing have suggested to me that it seems the same is happening to books. With Amazon dominating the market and publicizing the titles with the most popular appeal, publishers, too, choose to focus on mass-market products—celebrity memoirs and the like—at the expense of smaller, more literary projects. A ceramic pot transforms, by Amazon's logic, into a cast-iron oven; literature transforms, by that logic, into Prince Harry's memoir.

"I feel like, what are the choices I can make in my day that allow me to feel okay with my place in all of this?" Sanam had explained to me that afternoon on her porch. I think a lot of us, no matter our wealth or class, wonder sometimes about how to feel okay with our place in all this. In 2018, Paul Allen died of cancer. He had become a major philanthropist; his plan for the Seahawks was for the team to be sold after his death, with the proceeds going to charity. In 2019, Mackenzie Bezos divorced Jeff Bezos; she would soon change her last name to Scott. Shortly after the divorce, she committed to giving most of her wealth to charitable causes. In a letter explaining her reasoning, she cited Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*: "Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes." She wrote in her letter that she wouldn't wait to start giving and would keep at it "until the safe is empty"; Scott has since become one of the most ambitious philanthropists in the world.

After my first conversation with Sanam, I vowed to buy on Amazon only if I absolutely had to. I wanted to make it harder for myself to use it, so I came up with a rule that every time I purchased anything on the site, I had to review it, explaining my justification for shopping on Amazon. This would cost me in time and effort, since, being a writer, I can't help but labor over every sentence I type. It would cost me in privacy, too. Later, I told Sanam about the project, with some pride. She didn't seem particularly impressed. I understood what she must have been thinking: For all that effort, wouldn't it have been easier to just stop using Amazon altogether? The problem is that if she had asked it out loud, I would have had to tell the truth: no—for all that effort, it still wouldn't have been

A Great Deal

August 25, 2021: Lactaid Fast Act Lactose Intolerance Chewables with Lactase Enzymes, Vanilla, 60 Count (\$11.99)

These taste good and are effective.

I try not to order on Amazon, but I was the one who used up the last of the Lactaid before going out of town for two weeks, and I didn't want my husband to have to go replenish our supply at Walgreens in my absence, since it was my fault there weren't any left. The last time I bought Lactaid—it's for both me and our six-year-old—I accidentally bought the kind that isn't chewable, or rather, that, when chewed, tastes disgusting. I wasn't sure if it's okay for a six-year-old to swallow pills that size, so I made him chew them every time, which he hated. But this kind—the chewable kind—is very satisfying to consume. It is vanilla flavored and has a pleasantly chalky mouthfeel. I was going out of town to a writing residency at a grand mansion in upstate New York, at which meals were served in a handsome dining room with heavy wooden furniture and nothing was asked of me whatsoever. The mansion had belonged, a long, long time ago, to Spencer Trask—a financier who backed Edison's invention of the electric lightbulb and at one point was the majority shareholder of *The New York Times*—and his wife, Katrina. They had been living in Brooklyn when their son suddenly died. Of what cause I'm not sure. Spencer bought the mansion and surrounding estate, in Saratoga, to get