

Joseph Cornell's Children: A Narrative of Literacy, Memory, and Migration

written by Guest Contributor | May 24, 2018



Image Credit: [Joseph Cornell](#), *Object (Roses des Vents)*; 1942-53; Construction, 2 5/8 x 21 1/4 x 10 3/8 in; The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Philosophy's first question is memory

—Bernard Stiegler, “The Industrial Exteriorization of Memory”

1.

How do we remember what we have not experienced? I see Susan Howe being handed Box 24 of the Jonathan Edwards Collection at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library. She lugs the box up to the Reading Room, pushes the glass door open with the weight of cardboard and paper. Matter against matter. She is petite, and appears almost fragile until you detect her sharp eyes framed by the spectacles. That was the first thing I'd noticed about her at a reading a year ago in Columbus, Ohio. In Beinecke, she appears to me in the black coat and stripe scarf she wore that drizzling October evening in Columbus.

I catch myself staring at an empty desk and turn to the ephemera in the archival box before me. When searching the library's online catalog, I am seized by the gnawing sensation that I will never find what I am looking for, mostly because I don't know what I am after. And when I am handed the boxes I request, I photograph documents—raggedy paper, limited-edition manuscripts,

scribbles on envelopes—with anxious haste, as though the inked words, the creases that mark the history of use, and the stains will evaporate any time now. As if esoteric messages folded in the records will give me the slip. A very professorial-looking man sits across from me measuring with rulers yellowed manuscripts propped up on foam book holders. Ana, my Airbnb housemate, is also clicking pictures with her point-and-shoot. She is going through another box of H.D. Papers. We are all hoping to make worlds of meaning out of Hollinger boxes.

Outside, it is a pleasant September in New Haven but in the temperature-controlled Reading Room, it's winter. I imagine, Howe, unlike me, would not look around every few moments. At some point during her research in this same Reading Room, she had chanced upon a folder in Box 24—*Wetmore, Hannah Edwards, Diary: in the hand of her daughter Lucy Wetmore Whittlesey*. Those were the private writings of Hannah, the younger sister of the eighteenth-century theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Howe spent several years in New England, not far from where Hannah had lived, and so, the right-slanted iron gall ink brought back to her—"the qualities peculiar to *our* seasonal changing light and color." In her book-length essay, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014), Howe wrote that her connection with Hannah across time and space, grounded in her sensory contact with the oxidizing manuscript in the archive, granted her "a second kind of knowledge—tender, tangled, violent, august, and infinitely various."

2.

As Ana and I walk down Chapel Street, she says she might return to the US in a few years to continue searching archives of Modernist women authors, though by frantically clicking manuscripts on this trip she is trying to ensure she doesn't have to visit Beinecke again. Transatlantic archival research is an expensive undertaking. Ana was a doctoral student in southern England, where she'd moved from Zagreb in Croatia. When she first arrived at the Airbnb in New Haven, she was surprised that there were no corner shops in the Prospect Hill neighborhood. I recognized her surprise: in the narrow alleys around my house in Calcutta, India, three convenience stores had squeezed in. But five years in the States—in Columbus—and I didn't make much of the fact that our host would have to drive us a good ten minutes before we reached the nearest grocery store.

This evening Ana and I are on our way to Sally's Apizza in Wooster Square, where Italian immigrants had settled over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A Yale alumna tipped me off about the Pepe's versus Sally's pizzeria rivalry. "I prefer Sally's, but you could try both and decide for yourself," he had said.

Tackling the irregularly-shaped crust of the huge apizza, served on a parchment paper at Sally's, Ana asks me what I found in the archive earlier that day. I tell her about the drafts and correspondences from "Susan Howe

Papers.” I detail the contents of a letter in which another poet I admire asked Howe to recommend her for a dream job.

I had been perusing Howe’s papers to see whether they make note of the times she was in Beinecke collecting materials, deliberately or accidentally, for *Spontaneous Particulars*. And while I hadn’t found any specific documents to shed light on that book, I’d received this vivid image of her, seated in the glass-front Reading Room, sifting through papers and folders.

Touching objects that my poet once touched—that is perhaps how *Spontaneous Particulars* is best understood anyway. If certain books invite “haptic criticism,” then this book must be one of them. Howe calls the book a “collaged swan song to the old ways” of doing archival research. She plays the “wreader” in it—one who is reading archival documents as well as writing about them. Facsimiles of paper collected from the archives—including Hannah Edwards’s journals—are enclosed in *Spontaneous Particulars*. Howe’s commentary runs associatively on the adjoining pages.

The brown-washed texture of the facsimiles give *Spontaneous Particulars* its tactile and quaint character. Even a new copy of the book looks like it belonged to someone else. This aura is mass-produced and yet, sincere. Holding the book fills me with the child-like pleasure of going through ephemera passed down by an older generation. The blue threads of the book’s cloth binding call to mind a *Dhakai-Jamdani* saree my mother bought when I was nine or ten. I wanted to wear it, but she wouldn’t trust me with the delicate weave. It tears easily, she would say whenever I slid my hands under the fabric to feel the blue mesh against my skin.

3.

Handed over letters, documents, and photographs saved by three generations of her family, Karen Tei Yamashita scratched their surface in search of “deep history.” In her memoir *Letters to Memory* (2017), she wonders why her family saved this “stuff.” Perhaps they knew what was happening to them was significant and wrong? They had been forcibly removed from their homes to the internment camp in Tanforan during the second world war. Tomi, Yamashita’s grandmother, was taken to police custody for “freely walking the streets” in search of her daughter, Kay. In the internment camp, the family having their freedom taken away were “freed to new knowledge” of what it means to be American.

Karen Tei Yamashita is bound by blood to these stories of a time preceding her birth in California. To reconstruct and imagine—to remember—that period, she invokes Homer, Ishi, Vyasa, Qoholet. They are to hold her hands as she plunges into “deep storytelling,” composes *Letters to Memory* (2017). To her readers Yamashita says, “Homer’s work demonstrates the tedious precision of tracing forensics of history, to uncover a question stone by stone,” adding, “I ask for your indulgence, to attempt to overturn at least one stone.”

But, Yamashita also remains acutely aware of the implications of filling gaps, extending a story, even as she goes about narrativizing records that have left out almost as much as they've said. "You should never trust a fiction writer" she jokes when reminiscing a reunion her cousins organize on learning she's writing a family memoir. She also mentions, more than once, the bulk of her family memorabilia housed in the University of California, Santa Cruz's collections. So, it's clear that *Letters to Memory* is merely a selection, indicative of a greater chaos of records. However, Yamashita's book-archive is much more than a synecdoche. In it she recounts births, deaths, and bus rides, dutifully citing her family's correspondences, incarceration documents, and hearsay, to ultimately pose questions about the nature of memory. Aren't works of memory always also touched by fictions? Because, "how close can anyone get to history even if you live it?"

Yamashita's performance of hesitation throughout the memoir, her articulation of uncertainties, reminds me of the French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler. While writing about "memory" and classifying it into types, Stiegler observed how the thing we call "memory" frustrates any attempts at systemization. In *Phaedrus*, Plato had distinguished internal memory, constituting experiential knowledge and oral history, from technical memory (written records), but Stiegler questions this opposition "bequeathed by Plato to Western philosophy." Memory, he says, is a process in which "living and dead compose without an end." How else would we remember generation-after-generation what we have not experienced? And thus, Yamashita remembers and records without ever letting go of the quiver in her voice.

4.

I walk the Santa Cruz boardwalk with Yamashita's *Letters to Memory*. "Voted the world's best boardwalk" says a bright fluttering banner with the pictures of a roller-coaster and French fries on it. My partner asks, "Who votes for such things?" We laugh. We are immigrants. We have not been able to vote in elections of any consequence for many years.

As I pick the book up from where I'd left off, I note how the pages with section titles are watermarked with traces of particular documents. A transcript of "Reburial Service of Nobu Kajiwara" has "War" inscribed on it in large fonts. What follows is Yamashita's account of reading *Iliad* for the first time, the circumstances of her uncle Tom's and cousin Ted's drafting into the U.S Army, the family friend Nobuo Kajiwara's decision to enlist. Nobuo Kajiwara thought that "positive" actions like joining the Army "will be in favor of all Japanese sincerely wishing to remain in the U.S." In the battlefield, Kajiwara got blown up by the grenade in his own hands. Oh the naivety of immigrants! His last moments are described in graphic details. We come full-circle with this homage by Yamashita to the deaths and death rituals in *Iliad*.

The order in which objects and anecdotes are placed in the book sheds light

on the process of the deep storyteller. Perhaps she finds a transcript somewhere, remembers seeing a photograph. She, then, rummages her family's collections to exhume the debris that when put together would make sense. Yamashita's *Letters* in this respect is a kin of Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010).

Another book-archive, another book-grave, *Nox* is an accordion foldout that memorializes Carson's estranged and deceased brother, Michael. Photographs, letters, and Carson's translation of Catullus's elegy 101 are glued scrapbook-style on the foldout's surfaces. Carson looks to model herself after the Greek historian Herodotus, because "history" and "elegy" are akin. The word "history," she says, comes from an ancient Greek verb meaning "to ask" and "when you are asking about something . . . you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself."

5.

Remember (you must carry it) or write a book (fashion it into a thing that carries itself). Yamashita's *Letters to Memory*, Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars*, and Anne Carson's *Nox* are portable archives that do both. Curating and boxing up trinkets, the authors have constructed spaces for readers to enter, inhabit, remember. Notwithstanding the precise reasons for each text's genesis, it is also hard to miss that this valuation of thingness, this show of deep gratitude toward objects—including, the book-object itself—is a response to the possible transubstantiation of all matter into electronic clouds. And while the worn-out pages, torn bits of letters, the textures of archived things in these books might have been reproduced with the help of digital tools, the book in the reader's hand artfully hides that trail.

Carson, Howe, and Yamashita have mastered the lyricism in used and inherited objects. Through their books, haptic contact emerges as the means to forge familial ties. I savor the aesthetic illusion of finding a family by caressing the fingerprint of the dead, though the Carsons, Yamashitas, and Edwards are not *my* dead.

6.

When members of my family—my father's aunt, my aunt's husband—die back home in Calcutta my parents pass on the information to me over the phone. I follow the chatter about who came to the crematorium, who attended the funeral in a Whatsapp Group called "Family." No one expects me at these death rituals anymore. Visa rules and travel regulations fluctuate, now more than ever, they know. Last time I was visiting my family in Calcutta, the US consulate sent my passport for an opaque "administrative processing." I had just bought

a sixty-inch television—my first TV in the States—at a Black Friday sale prior to the India trip. While waiting for the results of the administrative processing, I kept wondering what I would do about the TV in case I am not allowed to return.

“Your situation is better than mine,” a friend reminds me when I sound sentimental about missing funerals. She grew up in Iran. Her parents are not able to obtain a visa to come see her and though she has work approval in the US, that approval alone would not let her re-enter the country, if she chooses to travel to Teheran at present. “What if something happens to my parents now,” she asks no one in particular as we share a bowl of sour-sweet Fesenjoon. It is just another Friday evening at Famous Kebob. Every few weekends, my friend suggests we come to this Iranian restaurant, because the food here is the right amount of spicy for her. North Indian food burns her tongue. This weekend my partner had proposed an alternative—Baghdad Nights, which is in the same neighborhood. My friend texted back, “But that Iraqi place is not good to sit Probably we can get [kebob from there] one time and eat at home.”

7.

Holding Carson’s, Howe’s, and Yamashita’s books side-by-side, as a literary scholar trained to detect family resemblance among literary and art objects, I see the authors turn out to be Joseph Cornell’s children.

While at Beinecke, I had found Cornell’s “Manual of Marvels,” a book he created by cutting and pasting images and other ephemera onto a French agricultural manual. Cornell’s collaged ephemera are not “personal” in the same sense that Yamashita’s and Carson’s are, and yet, they testify to the artist’s commitment to nostalgia. Nostalgia is also what constitutes the aesthetic of the more famous of Cornell’s oeuvre—his boxes.

Of course, there are other possible genealogies of the contemporary books that assemble and contain things; books that place visual-tactile memorabilia within fragmented narratives. There is Andre Breton’s *Nadja* from the 1920s, there are the Dadaists, and perhaps, even more pertinently, the shadow of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* looms over Yamashita’s *Letters*. After all, the collage form is not new. Still, Cornell can lay a strong claim over popularizing portable nostalgia in the collage form through the twentieth century. Ask Robert Pinsky, John Ashbery, Octavio Paz, Lydia Davis, Jonathan Safran Foer.

Cornell’s tableau of found objects, packed in glass-front boxes, struck a delicate balance between recalling the past through stories that could be associated with those objects and arresting the audiences in the moment, awakening them to the power of being simply present among objects. Reviewing an exhibition of Cornell’s work, Ashbery wrote, “Looking at one of his “hotel” boxes one can almost feel the chilly breeze off the Channel at Dieppe

or some other outmoded, out-of-season French resort. But this is the secret of his eloquence: he does not recreate the country itself but the impression we have of it before going there, gleaned from Perrault's fairy tales or old copies of *L'Illustration*, or whatever people have told us about it." Cornell knew the romance of used objects, the magic of second-hand memory. His method of grafting things into artworks was quirky but not cynical. He believed in the possibilities of connections.

8.

My obsession with the book-archives did not begin until I came to the U.S. for graduate school. The experience of migration turned my bookshelf into a mise-en-abyme of sorts. It now holds books that hold other books within them; paper documents, notes, bookmarks, boarding passes, and photographs are also inside—only some of which I inserted while reading.

The eight-thousand-mile journey from Calcutta to Columbus acquainted me with the cost of things that weigh. My parents had tried to fit the entire world for me within the luggage allowance: rice, sugar, utensils, blue saree, and what not. Not Cornell-like minimalist in the aesthetic of packing; not we. During my transit through the Chicago airport the clarified butter in my carry-on luggage, which had passed off as solid at a previous checkpoint, had transubstantiated. It was no longer permissible as carry-on. The security officer asked me, "let it go?" I looked at my watch. "Yes." He dropped the can into the trash with a kind of ceremony—lifting it up first, turning it half-way, perhaps to read the label, and then, letting it fall. I heard the can roll in the plastic trash bag, hit other things left behind by other people. Under Chicago's clean, blue, enormous sky, I remember thinking one day I will have memories here.

Moving in and out of rented houses taught me to hoard the bare minimum. I would ask myself can the sum of my belongings be relocated from one apartment to another over a trip or two in some friend's SUV? I hadn't learned to drive, and it seemed fit I invest in e-books. Cheaper and weightless. Then, I discovered a new kind of book—the book-archives. You can't read textures on an e-book reader, I told myself.

The records and documents inside these books—many of which are memoirs but some like Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*, actually, integrate archival documents into fictions—looked older than anything I'd possessed in the States. As a student low on resources I had discovered that it was cheaper to buy something new than fix the defunct. Every so often I would buy new things and the sky would be clean, blue, empty again. But in the book-archives—I had first come upon *Nox*—I found things that were not untouched. I learned to wander as an interloper in the spheres of memories contained in them. I also spent many hours in archives, chasing the thickness of accumulated time.

9.

I wonder if Cornell would understand this romance, one peculiar in some ways to the life of migrants, who must trim what they can bring, whose memorabilia must comply with airline policies. Joseph Cornell had spent most of his life in Flushing, Queens. There, in 37-08 Utopia Parkway, he resided with his mother and his brother, Robert, who had cerebral palsy. Cornell did not have sustained relationships with women, did not marry, had no children. His favorite color was midnight blue. Often, he made field trips to used book stores and thrift shops to collect relics of time. But he created his art cooped up in that small house in Utopia Parkway; assembled scraps, stones, rings, and other ephemera into the cases from his garage and basement.

I think of his workshop as a box of incongruities, a sacred enclosure and a prison at once, where the artist sat dreaming of traveling the world, perhaps waking up in a French resort he'd seen in a film or a fairytale. He packed what he remembered of dreams into the small boxes. Though somewhat reclusive, he did have many friends in the art world, who curated and opened his boxes to ever multiplying audiences; thereby, fashioning his legacy into something that would carry itself. On his part, Cornell couldn't even drive.



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If writing defies “common sense,” if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we’re allowed to reinvent ourselves. That’s what I’m looking at with the literacy narrative. I want to hear yours: when you first “clicked” with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote “poetry,” but looked at it again and called it “lyric essay.” I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more [literacy narratives](#) from yours truly and others.