Evocative Objects: Reflections on Teaching, Learning, and Living in Between

Doug Hesse, Nancy Sommers, and Kathleen Blake Yancey

*Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?*

—Thoreau

Objects are rich sources of inquiry; they invite us to observe closely, pose questions, forge connections, and anchor ideas in the concrete. Sherry Turkle observes that “[w]e find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought” (5). In *Evocative Objects*, Turkle gathers short essays whose writers explore items ranging from cellos to rolling pins, bracelets to slime mold, a yellow raincoat, a stuffed bunny, the Melbourne train.

As it is for Turkle, so too for us. In the following essays, what one reviewer called an *ensemble*, three composition teachers write about ordinary objects—a son’s craft project for a father, a family photograph, and an image of tectonic plates—to summon a network of associations and evoke cross-disciplinary inquiries, using both visual and verbal resources in an effort to make meaning, allowing the process itself to guide our explorations, to direct our reflections. Blurring traditional boundaries...

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between personal and academic writing, we demonstrate the evocative nature of all reading and writing.

While this venture started as a writing experiment (some might claim a self-indulgent one), the activity itself and resulting pieces raise larger questions about the nature of writing and the assignments we give to our students. Conventional wisdom casts composition as meeting rhetorical situations or extending delineated subject matters or scholarly traditions. Our approach flouted that convention by identifying objects first, then seeing what we could make of them. Each of us began with an object of significance to us; each of us believed that by focusing on that object—in that focus teasing from it what it might teach us, writing in response to that object and away from it—we would understand something we hadn’t before. But that possibility was more question than certainty, with the value of the exercise more uncertain still.

Our compact celebrated an approach that was, at least initially, personal and essayistic, participating in the recently re-re-discovered tradition of Montaigne and E. B. White, of Joan Didion and David Foster Wallace, the found-yet-again tradition of creative nonfiction. The intersections of subject matter, images, authorial experience and temperament, and evolving words on the page generated artifacts that were more aesthetically shaped, in some ways more pleasurable and more challenging, than conventionally scholarly or academically rhetorical.

Yet even as we purposefully ignored those last, we found our emerging texts ineluctably (perhaps tectonically) sliding toward themes and issues familiar to composition studies. Separated by thousands of miles, we’ve known each other first as composition teachers and scholars, albeit in later years as friends; we designed this undertaking as both a common project and an individual exploration, perhaps like the parallel play of children, with each of us writing together and separately. So it seems that, even if we started by choosing objects unconstrained by academic purpose, our shared professional identity exerted a sort of gravitational force. Even then, we ended in slightly different relations to composition studies, with different degrees of disciplinary concerns manifested among our three pieces.

We found that beginning with evocative objects rather than with, for example, a problem or issue indeed provoked observations and feelings, associations and questions we likely would not have produced through other means. We propose our modest method as at least an occasional practice in composition scholarship and in composition classrooms.
“1 Mist you”: Four Evocations of a Piece in Pipe Cleaner and Crayon

Doug Hesse


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What did I do in Portland, Oregon? I was there for the Council of Writing Program Administrators annual meeting. It was the day after my thirty-fourth birthday. It was ten days after Andrew’s sixth birthday. I had been a writing professor for four years, directing a program the last three. In Portland I was talking about hypertext as a tool for teaching writing teachers and organizing program materials. I’d forgotten that talk until this object and its question sent me to boxes in the garage. Back then, there was an Apple program called HyperCard that let you make “stacks,” linked pages in a file, and I found the dusty printout. Now, we’d make websites, but these were the days even before the Mosaic browser. In 1990 I did not have access to the Internet. I had not yet written my first email, to Gail Hawisher. But of course, that has almost nothing to do with the point of this essay.

Part 1

Andrew made this object because he had something to say and because he had the means and because he had models for this kind of activity. We call it self-sponsored writing these days, writing done not because a teacher assigned it or a boss required it but because the writer wanted it. It was summer, after all, when a little boy could—and did—go swimming, play in sandboxes, and chase a dog named Petra. But ours was a house redolent with paper, ruled and plain, white and colored, with every kind of pencil and marker, with pipe cleaners, staplers, glitter, and punches. It was a house where Dad was always writing and Mom was always making; she was a folk artist. So if a kid wanted to do a mixed-media whatever, he could, and in doing so, he’d be emulating his parents, which is a thing that kids do.
When we moved to Colorado, we filled boxes with artwork and writings, lots from school, yes, but lots kids did on their own. Our house was very like all of your houses, I’m sure. Figure 2 assembles three pieces from a file folder. One is a very tiny book that my stepdaughter Paige made, “How to Survive 5th Grade with Miss Wilder.” With it is the masthead for an online manga that she and her friend Lauren did when she was a high school junior. Paige has long since graduated from college, along the way tutoring in the DePaul University writing center, and she now works in public radio. The last piece is the opening of a novel that my daughter Monica began in sixth grade; it goes on sixty pages, and you’ll particularly note that she thought to revise. She now writes for the *Washington Post*.

I think of kids, mine and yours, and of self-sponsored writing these days as I ponder the Common Core State Standards Initiative, measures that may soon govern what and why writing is taught nationally, including in America’s kindergartens. Consider their stipulations that kindergarteners should

1. Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of a book or the topic they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book. [. . .]

2. Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.
3. Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events [. . .] and provide a reaction to what happened. [. . .]

4. With guidance and support from adults, [. . .] add details to strengthen writing as needed. (English Language Arts Standards 19)

The standards recognize that kindergarteners draw and color, but they already mark writing as making a point for the purpose of school, as five-year-olds inform, explain, express opinions. You can see that adults are to guide students to add details and strengthen writing through revision. I can imagine it now. “Andrew, ‘I missed you’ is vague. Please revise with details that clarify this claim.”

Now, I recognize that schooling is designed to teach things that mere living never will. Not many of us are going to stumble onto calculus. I get that the kinds of writing taught in school almost have to be different, in vital ways, from writing we might elect on our own. But I have to wonder how much the Common Standards bearers thought about the refrigerator door or the front stoop or the kitchen table, or about texts that trigger only responses like “thank you” and a hug and the binding into albums.

Part 2

We just finished our winter quarter at the University of Denver, which meant that we also dealt with the spring registration. As you know—and as you know triply if you have any administrative responsibilities—weeks like that bring out desperation and indignity from some students, from pleading to accosting, to outrage that we haven’t deemed their analyses profound, their insights deft, with disbelief that laws of cause and effect might apply to them. We regale with tales of student hostility or cluelessness. When the Chronicle of Higher Education chortles over what it declares the most outrageous student email ever, we cringe but swear we’ve seen worse.

I wonder, though, if we might see our students even now as somebody’s kids, even the hard-luck ones who aren’t. I’m not saying we ought never to shake a head or commiserate with colleagues, “Just what are they thinking?” But I temper my dismay now and then by seeing a student as someone’s kid. On one level, that means deeply granting the ways students are socially and familially constructed for writing, yes, but also for the world, for better or worse. Maybe they had fathers and mothers who went on business trips and never had time and never had pipe cleaners. Maybe they had homes rich in reading and writing. Maybe they had only the family Bible or only soccer/swimming/tennis/softball or only spankings and scoldings. They had school, yes, too, but they had a life beyond.

On another level, to think of each student as someone’s child is to conjure what we want or wanted for our own kids when we sent them to school. We wanted teachers to know them, to care, to know beneath everything was a hand-drawn valentine or birthday card, or at least a head in the lap on a July night, or at least the longing.
Part 3

What Andrew made is a convention badge. He’d seen me come from plenty of conferences, returning with logoed name tags slung beneath elastic lanyards, and here was his own version. Andrew’s piece is a mixed genre, badge in form, personal letter in content. Instead of a name, his or mine, is a message. It’s hard to imagine he had much concept of conventions and hundreds or thousands of people needing to brand themselves for reasons of cordiality, security, and networking. Why would anyone need a name tag at 1317 Towanda Avenue, in Bloomington, Illinois?

At least part of the message on Andrew’s badge was, “Pay attention.” There are two flowers, and I’d like to think them him and me. He knew that distant places and professional meetings could win Dad’s attention for days at a time, even more powerfully than could my office on campus. Perhaps, as a token or totem of that power, his own badge could keep me in sessions at home. My conference talk could be about streetcars in Portland, Oregon, and his could be about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. We could have a plenary about matchbox cars, and our breaks, sponsored by Mom and not Bedford, would have juice boxes and scotcheroos.

My past is haunted by pictures like Figure 3, twenty years and forty pounds ago. It’s 420A Stevenson Hall, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. I’m transfixed by a computer screen. Monica is wearily bored, in a way that conveys all too clearly that she’s been here before. Andrew knows better how to cope, playing on the floor behind me, his Spiderman underwear peeking over his pants. From the purse on my desk I discern it was Dawn taking the picture, my ex-wife, self-sponsoring her own message about time and attention.

When you look at studies of how much professionals work, you find that, for all our protestations, professors are pretty average. Lawyers and executives spend more time in the office than we do, and so do physicians, certainly in the early stages of their careers. So, while we feel beleaguered—and my Facebook friends’ status updates consistently testify we are—it doesn’t seem simply because of comparative clock hours. Perhaps it’s because of other stresses, including finances. Especially for adjuncts and graduate students, hours and incomes vary almost inversely, driving warranted anxiety.

But the real factor for those in permanent positions is how our work defines us. Most of us have never lived outside schooling for any appreciable length of time since we were in kindergarten.
School calendars our biorhythms and our beings. A writing professor’s work is especially insatiable. There are the papers, of course, but more important, there are the always better classes to be taught, the always better handouts and assignments, the better curriculum and program, the endless horizon of writable articles, professional talks, the listservs, the journals, the unread books. Job credentialing drives this, as do tenure and promotion. But so do ego and identity. What the figures about hours of work per week don’t show is psychic time, the time fretting or feeling about our jobs, even at that reptilian preconscious level of “shouldn’t I be working?” Even more than colleagues in other fields, our work binds an M. C. Escherian “teach writing, write, teach writing, write.”

All of this has implications, of course, for relationships with family and friends. I think and hope my kids survived my teaching ego and identity as well as most kids. We talk a couple of times a week and email, including the odd ritual of phoning each other anytime we’re at a baseball game. A thousand and two thousand miles apart, we see each other a few times a year. Probably, my absences fostered their own independences. Still, I wonder how I’ve modeled parenting to them as they, now married, ponder families.

I also wonder about this all-consuming identity for my students. Because of who and how I am, and because I see them almost exclusively in the role of teacher to student, as writing subjects, I view students through a certain lens. Sure, we talk about their families or movies, their upcoming games and recitals, their vacations, their worries, but I have to consciously adjust the lens that projects on them my relationship to writing and school. I used to have the reality check of high school kids in my living room. With my own kids older now, it’s harder to focus that my students are somebody’s kids.

The first time I’d ever been in Louisville, Kentucky, was in 1992, at the NCTE annual convention. Andrew came with me, and we stayed a night in the Galt Hotel, and we ate catfish. Andrew is now twenty-seven; by that age I’d already been to 4Cs three times.

A further fret.

Now and then I inventory my list of 100-mile friends. In my cognitive calculus, a 100-mile friend is someone you can call when your car breaks down 100 miles from home, and you know they’ll drive to wherever you are. Just as crucially, you don’t hesitate to call them because you know they would call you. And, just as crucially, they have to be able to make the drive. My dear friends Ron and Beatrice have fallen from the 100-mile roster because they now live in Houghton, Michigan, and I live at the base of the Rockies. Now, I’ve got plenty of 10-mile friends, though some of them don’t own cars, and I’ve got a couple 50-milers who are colleagues. I figure I have two 100-mile friends in Denver, Susan and Laurence, friends from Illinois who happened to move out here after us. So, I’ve got some coverage from Steamboat to Pueblo, Breckenridge to Fort Morgan.
Now, I can think of plenty of good professional friends, people with whom I do more than talk work. These are friends I’ve met on panels or committees or after sessions on a restaurant patio in Bellingham, Washington, people I could email last week when our dogs ate pills from a kitchen counter and had to be hospitalized lest their kidneys shut down. But except for Brigadoonish events like 4Cs, these friends are not there to have coffee or help carry a mattress into the basement or pick you up at the hospital when you ride in the ambulance with your wife to the ER. My world is hugely richer for these 4Cs friends a click or a call away, but there remains, at least for me, a crucial difference between virtual presence and physical.

Part 4

That brings me to Part 4.

What do you take from a burning house? That is, besides your family and pets? What are the irreplaceable artifacts? For decades, a prominent answer has been photo albums, the imaged record of lives and times, perhaps bundles of old letters, diaries, family Bibles. The answer changes as more of our lives are digitized, when even important photographs often live never on paper, in frames, between covers. Perhaps we grab laptops or hard drives. But even then, with diligent backups or cloud computing, the artifacts of our lives are infinitely reconjurable, so do the machines even matter? Does the physical artifact matter? Are such objects simply fetishes? Do we imagine they have power the way Indiana Jones found the Ark of the Covenant? Why do people still stand in lines in the National Archives to see the Declaration of Independence, which you can hardly make out anymore? Why bother with the Mona Lisa when a life-size gigapixelled image lets you get closer than the Louvre ever will? What draws people to a leather violin in the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe or to Henry Aaron’s 715th home run ball in Cooperstown? Why stand in Elvis’s Jungle Room? Why be in this room when camera, recorder, and transcript can do?

After all, not only can most everything be imaged, even the “real” is mediated by our senses, our memories, the semiotic systems within which experience nests. We’ve known this since C. S. Peirce or Susan Langer. And certainly from a teaching or scholarly standpoint, or even from the life of a surfing browser, the image is hugely more practical, accessible, democratic. It is backed up, secure, in the unsulphurous digital cloud.

With a house in flames, I might grab three self-portraits hanging in our dining room, done when the kids were successively fourth graders and astute self-judges. (See fig. 4.) Monica, ever severe, does not smile. Pinstriped Andrew has a baseball bat. Paige bears a big heart on her chest, more fittingly bold than one simply on her sleeve. I’ll surely confess nostalgia, the guilty attempt to recover an idealized—and idolized—past. But there is an element in the impermanent original and singular, something that testifies this work was made by this person in this time and place. And
while these words and this picture can be rendered repeatedly, even very well, the moment of its making cannot. Other moments may be very very very like it, but they will not be this one. The artifact, the thing that the hands actually touched, is vital for its physicality, and that physicality matters only because it stands in time, in place, not against them.

Last Saturday Becky and I went hiking in Red Rocks Park, in the mountains west of Denver. As we came down the Morrison slide trail, we saw several folks atop a cliff. Signs posted all around say “Keep off,” but these people were not troubled by signs or stinking badges. Sure, you could fall, but the signs protect less the people than the not-timeless sandstone. Rocks fracture and fail. A generation of conscience-less clambering could topple them all. But if the world is mostly virtual and endlessly remake-able, you might never consider the consequence of a climb, whether on a rock or up a professional career.

So then.

Dear Andrew,

Here’s what I did in Portland, Oregon. I took a boat ride on the Willamette River. I watched people film a car commercial; they hosed down a street so it was shiny and then they drove a black car really fast after they stopped all the other cars. I went to a movie by myself because I didn’t know anyone else at the conference, and I was too shy to ask. You wouldn’t have liked the movie because at the end they cooked a dead man. Really. You would have liked the boat ride and the car commercial. I gave a speech, and I heard lots of other people give speeches. The speeches helped me understand my job better, and they gave me some ideas for writing, and they made me feel like I had some friends who like the same things I like. While I was listening to the speeches, I did not miss you. When it was time to come home, I did miss you, and when I got your writing, I knew why. There are two meanings of missing. One is a feeling, and the other is just being somewhere that someone else isn’t. Twenty years and a hundred conferences later, I understand that I missed you because I missed you.

Love, Dad.
Don’t Tell the Aunts

Nancy Sommers

“I will tell you what happened, but don’t—DON’T—tell the aunts” is how my mother prefaced any family news worth knowing. The emphatic DON’T made the information seem ominous, even conspiratorial. And the repetition of “Don’t—DON’T—tell the aunts” and the hushed tone made clear that sensitive family secrets were being bestowed. The protective ritual around such secret information—that I, a child, might learn something that adults couldn’t be told—instilled a sense that certain truths were so dangerous they must be parcelled out incrementally, as quarter-truths or half-truths, and that certain people, such as my Aunts who had suffered enough, needed to be shielded from them.

The Aunts, my grandfather’s sisters—Nora, Carola, and Friedl—lived in dark, cramped, overheated apartments on the West Side of New York City. They observed the Sabbath, kept kosher, and dressed formally, though they rarely left their apartments. They mostly spoke German, and seemed more rooted in the old world than in the unaccustomed country to which they had been reluctantly transplanted. As a child, I didn’t know much about their sufferings, but I knew that Nora lived with her schizophrenic daughter; that Carola believed strangers were recording her phone conversations; and that if I had been a boy, I would have been named Peter after Friedl’s son who had drowned at age thirteen.

The Aunts worried about everything, so my mother and her sister, Elsa, went to great lengths to conceal facts. The dates of my grandfather’s air travels, for instance, couldn’t be uttered lest the Aunts spend their days imagining airplane crashes. News of a subway accident in London couldn’t be mentioned lest they conclude that our English cousins were injured. The Aunts were professional worriers, and even if their worrying kept planes aloft and subways on their rails, information had to be withheld, secrets kept. I adored these Aunts, so if they were not to be told about Uncle Salo’s ulcer, my brother’s summer job working on roofs, or cousin Yvonne’s alcoholic husband, I was willingly conscripted, quickly learning the art of sifting and selecting information.

To my Aunts and parents, the past was another country—far, far away—and they never wanted to be reminded of their foreignness: no photographs were displayed, no ancestral objects savored, nothing to remind them of “back then.” I knew there was a history that preceded me, but I had no access to it. So, I followed my family’s lead: we forged ahead, asked no questions, and never looked back. That is, until my fortieth birthday when Elsa presented me with a box of photographs, which she had discovered in Aunt Friedl’s closet.

Among the treasures was a picture (see fig. 1) of the Aunts and their eight siblings in the Bavarian Alps, lined up from eldest to youngest, the boys in knickers, the
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girls in dirndl dresses, looking as if they were auditioning for roles in *The Sound of Music*.

And a picture (see fig. 2) of Aunt Friedl and friends, taken in Munich, 1930—looking impossibly young, as if they would always be so—out and about the city, in fashionable coats and jaunty hats. With a theatrical gesture, they lean into the camera, each extending one hand to feed a flock of pigeons.

It might have been the complete absence of photographs that made me so hungry for a visual narrative to make sense of my family history; or it might have been, as Reynolds Price has written, that “nobody under forty can believe how nearly everything’s inherited” (110) and at forty we begin to understand our connections to the past. Somehow these photographs—arriving on my fortieth birthday—released me from my family’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, opening up a previously hidden and unreachable world of “back then.”

One photograph in particular (see fig. 3), taken on the occasion of my grandparents’ wedding, stirs my imagination and calls forth questions about the family narrative.

Like all photographs, this one has a story to tell, at the expense of other stories. Let’s start with the simple story: It is November 1924, in Straubing, Germany, and fifteen members of the Levite and Schwatzhaupt families have gathered in this garden to
celebrate the wedding of my grandparents, Irma Schwatzhaupt and Max Levite. At the center of the family tableaux are the bride and groom, flanked by older siblings. In the middle row, seated on wicker chairs, are their parents. And, on the ground, are the Aunts—Friedl, Nora, and Carola—innocent and beautiful, before the rest of their life happened to them. That the family chose the accustomed earth of their garden rather than a dignified portrait studio perhaps speaks to the safety and comfort they felt in their homeland—in that place, in that time.

Why they chose the garden and not a portrait studio, I do not know. Nor will I know if the photograph was taken before or after the dramatic moment in Jewish weddings when the groom smashes a glass underfoot, a startling reminder of life’s fragility—that on the other side of happiness is sorrow; on the other side of creation is destruction. Even at a wedding—a joyous moment of optimism, of promise and faith in the future—Jews are commanded to remember the past, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. I can’t know the complete story of this photograph, but what I can imagine is that, in the split second the shutter was open, these fifteen people, in the fullness of life, looked into a future they believed was theirs to possess, and in doing so preserved the day for themselves and future generations.

No one in the photograph is alive to tell me the facts of that day, or to tell me if the photograph was important enough, in Germany, to be displayed in someone’s parlor—a souvenir from the triumphant day, a way to tell the story: “we married them off; we married them well”—and to ease the telling of other stories. And I’ll never know why this photograph was one of the few items the family took in 1938 when they fled Germany. Or how it ended up in a suitcase hidden in a closet. Maybe I must be content with the “not knowing”; maybe, as John Ashbery suggests, we are saved only by what we could never have imagined (Watney 31).

And yet what I can imagine about this photograph makes it both comforting and disturbing—in a word, evocative. **EVOCA TIVE**—what a swoon of a word; even the word itself is evocative. To say that this photograph is evocative, though, is to wonder—of what is it evocative? It doesn’t, for instance, evoke a familiar time or a
set of treasured experiences called forth from my own storehouse of memories. It
doesn’t have the same effect on me as the smell of 4711, my father’s citrus eau de
cologne; or hearing the words “Wabash Avenue,” the central artery of my Indiana
childhood; or touching Aunt Nora’s long white gloves, curved, even decades later,
with the memory of her hands. I may be sentimental about these other objects and
sensations, summoning people and places long gone, but the filter of sentimentality
creates a distance between me and the object, a way not to ask too many questions,
or not to open up the object for attentive interrogation. With this photograph,
though, there is a call and response between it and myself; the object asks me to
make it anew, to author an interpretation so that those captured in the photograph
who once were, will ever be so.

When I moved houses recently and arranged my bookshelves, I chose the
wedding photograph to be prominently displayed. I needed it near me, even if I
didn’t know why. At first, the attraction of the photograph was its innocence—my
grandmother’s tender look and the tableaux of a once large, stable family gathered
in a garden to celebrate the newly married couple. But the garden, with its prom-
ise of continued growth, is deceptive. The season is autumn; the fence is high and
pointed; seven years later my grandmother will die, on my mother’s birthday, of a
mysterious gas poisoning. Something in this photograph compels me to lean toward
it and away from it. But it is not the details of my grandmother’s face, or the family
tableaux that are the punctuation marks of the photograph. Rather, it is the fence
that punctuates, defining the garden and framing the photograph. For history is on
the other side of the fence.

The photograph may be set in a garden, apart from a house or portrait studio,
but it is not set apart from the historical events that befell a large family who lived for
three centuries in neighboring Bavarian villages, murdered my great-grandparents
in a concentration camp, and exiled the rest to three continents, to whatever safe
havens could be found. Looking at the photograph, I say, “On the other side of the
fence is history”; but on that day, in 1924, as those pictured sat in front of the fence
and could not anticipate their own futures or their roles as innocent historical actors,
they simply didn’t know what they didn’t know. All they could know is that on a
wedding day full of promise and hope, they had every reason to look into the camera
and believe that the future was theirs to possess—every reason to imagine that the
emotional arithmetic of the day would be one of addition and multiplication, not
one of subtraction and division.

I look at the photograph, from my own historical moment, and want to urge
them to “RUN AWAY—RUN AWAY—terrible things will happen if you stay in
the garden—the future is not yours to possess.” I want to warn them, save them,
but that role is not mine to play; the past must obey its own unfolding. The shock
of the photograph is not just the inevitable, failed attempt to reverse history or the
inability to imagine lives lived in a form other than the way they have been lived. We all live our lives as historical actors, in our time, in our place, without knowing the historical arithmetic on the other side of the fence. Rather, the poignancy of the photograph is the way in which those captured stare steadily forward with their backs to the fence, as though history is behind them, when, in fact, it is yet to come.

As I look at the photograph, I see dragons inhabiting the garden of my ancestors—not just those dark, disturbing echoes of history, but also the tensions of fencing off half-truths and quarter-truths, of protecting family secrets by admonishing children “not to tell.” Fences protect, define, and contain, but such protection is fragile, as we know from history, and as we know when secrets are eventually revealed. Probably my intense desire to tell something to someone led to my elementary school reputation as a “talker”—requiring that I sit on the other side of the classroom, alone, fenced off from friends, with no one to tell. My fourth-grade teacher, exasperated with my excessive talking, sent home a note: “Nancy talks at school.” My mother, in her polite, minimalist style, responded: “Thank you. Nancy talks at home, too.”

Over the years, “don’t tell” became a way of living—a code of honor—a ritual to be observed, like lighting Sabbath candles—a way to protect and preserve the fragile family narrative of stability and order. We lit our candles; we didn’t tell—that is, until funerals, when secrets found their way into the light, refusing to be contained in darkness and shrouded in silence. First, there was the revelation that Uncle Salo had converted, at age ninety-two, to evangelical Christianity; then, the surprise that Uncle Simon, who lived what everyone believed was the life of a lonely bachelor, in a seedy residential hotel, had fathered a son—a teenage son who shared his heart-shaped face and almond eyes, and who showed up at Simon’s funeral, intending to declare his parentage. And then, words were whispered at Aunt Nora’s funeral that “she had deserved something better.” Desired better, it was told, than the loveless marriage she was forced into with her first cousin, Ernst. And deserved better than the secret life she lived in the 1950s, when she had an affair with the family doctor, who, himself wanting something better, diagnosed Nora’s husband with a heart condition, ordering Ernst to spend much of the decade resting in bed.

It would have been all right if the family ritual of “don’t tell” were just a simple way of saying to the public, “It’s not for you to know; it’s enough for us to know.” But “don’t tell” took on a life of its own and over time became a protective superstitious ritual, a kind of magical thinking: If we don’t talk about it, it won’t happen. If we don’t tell anyone, it didn’t happen. We won’t talk about airplane schedules or subway crashes, ulcers or alcoholism, religious conversions or romances in residential hotels. And just for extra protection against the unknowable, we’ll put our faith in amulets of good luck—my mother collecting four-leaf clovers and Aunt Friedl wrapping fish scales in foil packets and scattering them throughout her cupboards and closets. One from the garden, the other from the sea—objects to evoke their own stories and secrets.
Some objects, though, tell stories we don’t want to hear, as my family learned a few years ago. A mysterious stranger arrived from Germany, claiming to be our cousin in search of her family. Joseffa arrived with objects she professed to have found in a suitcase while cleaning up the apartment of her recently departed mother—disturbing objects from the 1930s—affidavits and address books, photographs and jewelry—proudly displaying these objects as proof of her connection.

No superstitious rituals—no four-leaf clovers or fish scales—could protect us from the assault of the stories she told, the objects she displayed. In these objects were traces of people long gone—their handwriting, dates of birth, engraved initials—details about relatives for whom affidavits had been signed, but their passage out of Germany denied. These objects were reminders of stories long buried, names no longer spoken.

A different family might have welcomed Joseffa into the fold by sifting, selecting, and, ultimately, incorporating her stories and objects into their own. Yet there were enough inconsistencies in her stories that we started to wonder whether she had bought a suitcase in a Bavarian flea market and found the objects hidden within. And there were enough inconsistencies in her stories about how she located our family that we wondered if she had simply found us on the Internet. But equally disturbing was the question—if the objects weren’t rightfully hers, then to whom did they belong? To accept these objects was to allow a stranger to retell the family narrative of who got out of Germany, who didn’t, and to allow her to use these objects to open up tightly sealed stories about what happened to those family members long believed to be dead. But what I realized, a while after Joseffa had left this country, is that she and I, after all, did, after all, share something important. There was so much that neither of us knew for certain or could ever know. In the end, the objects that had set each of us off on our separate journeys kept their secrets.

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Some years ago I visited Ryoan-Ji, a Zen garden, in Kyoto, with fifteen rocks, arranged in three groupings—seven, five, and three (see fig. 4).

Known as “the temple of the peaceful dragon,” Ryoan-Ji baffles visitors because only fourteen rocks are visible from any vantage point; there are no perspectives from which one can see the complete view. As one rock appears, another disappears; spaces open, then close.

Similarly, the more I look at the photograph of my fifteen ancestors from that autumn day in 1924, I am baffled by the way the photograph continues to evoke—summoning and calling forth—and yet never offering a complete understanding. No matter from what side of the fence I observe it, I am humbled by what can never be known. Like the rock garden in Kyoto, my interpretation depends on perspective, and a complete perspective is never attainable.
I gave myself the assignment—write about an evocative object—and the assignment set me on a journey to understand what is evocative about objects. Even now my object continues to call: You don't know me, but you must; you must ask and you must tell so that those in the photograph who once were, will ever be so. In the telling there is a kind of knowing, but just a kind of knowing, never a complete perspective. In the call and response among Don’t tell—Can’t Tell—Don’t Know, I write—my own protective ritual—evoking an afterlife for a photograph before it fades from sepia to dust.

All the World in a Single View: Four Observations on Composition Sponsored by an Image of Tectonic Plates

Kathleen Blake Yancey

At 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906, an earthquake centered just to the west of San Francisco and into the Pacific took the city as its target, especially the Market Street area, not ten blocks from San Francisco Bay and arguably one of the most photographed cityscapes in the country. The writer Jack London, safe in the Glen Ellen area north of the city close to the water, survived unscathed: he and his wife rode their horses into the city to take a look, and six weeks later he published an anemic description of the event that earned him the highest sum he would ever make as a writer. Others weren’t so lucky: although no credible tally exists, at least 3,000 people died, we
think—some in the first shaking or through new fissures the shaking created, some crushed under collapsing buildings, many in the fires that all but consumed the city. And certain populations—principally the poor and the Chinese—fared far worse than others.

I’m interested in *this* story for many reasons. One is personal: because my paternal grandmother lived through the earthquake, and because as a San Francisco native who has never actually lived in San Francisco, I’ve always thought of this larger historical San Francisco narrative as my grandmother’s and thus as in some way mine, too—as strange as I suspect that sounds. A second reason is more dispassionate: as I became interested in the science of earthquakes and volcanoes, I thought of the 1906 San Francisco story as the prototypical case study of rhetorical invention, and of two related kinds—the invention of the subdiscipline of seismology, and the invention of the epistemology of seismology based on the materials of the San Francisco earthquake. Prior to 1906, there was no science of earthquakes, thus no scientific explanation for the causes of earthquakes—to explain their duration; to articulate connections accurately linking one quake to the next (there were plenty of inaccurate connections); to point to a measure like the Richter Scale to account for intensity (Edward Richter, who contributed to the scale named for him in 1935, was on that disruptive day in 1906 a six-year-old boy living in Ohio); to gather data on a single event or several earthquake events. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake thus provided both an exigence and the materials for invention—because such data are the material of invention, in this case allowing us to make knowledge about earthquakes.
In its wake, the 1906 earthquake prompted an extensive data collection conducted by a group of scientists working collectively. Using their work gathering the first complete data set for any earthquake worldwide—a data set that is still the best we have—they also initiated a field we now know as seismology. The 1906 earthquake began all this. Under the leadership of a Berkeley scientist named Andrew Lawson, scientists made “geologic observations of the fault rupture and shaking effects, and other consequences of the earthquake,” compiling them into the 1908 Lawson Report (USGS, “Marked the Dawn”). Two years later, another scientist, H. F. Reid, using the information on the “1906 displacements and strain in the surrounding crust, formulated his elastic-rebound theory of the earthquake source, which remains today the principal model of the earthquake cycle” (USGS).1

In recounting all this, it’s easy to think of this singular earthquake event, particularly given its significance in history and in science, as an isolated occurrence. But the San Francisco earthquake—like the devastating 2011 quake in Japan, the 2010 quake in Haiti, the earlier one in Chile, the one before that in Indonesia—isn’t a stand-alone event. None of them is. Rather, this earthquake, like all earthquakes, was a function of a set of tectonic plates—defining the earth, underlying the land formations we can see, and constantly moving against each other—tectonic plates itself an expression, a concept, that began with Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift in 1912, but that was not fully realized until late into the 1960s.2 With the concept of tectonic plates, we invented anew: we literally saw the single earthquake inside a multiple, palimpsest-like arrangement, much as in a (rhetorical) tagmemic grid: alone, as the mythical stand-alone event; in context one to another, wave-like; in context to the whole, field-like.

In our composing, we often include such personal associations invisible to the eye. In 2004, when in “Made Not Only in Words,” I claimed that “[l]iteracy today is in the midst of a tectonic change” (298), I associated the word tectonic with San Francisco 1906 and its role in science. From my perspective, it changed the world. To help make my point about literacy and its being made not only in words, I wanted an image that would suggest such a change—and that image is my evocative object. Through it, I see anew.

When I first look at the tectonic plate map (Fig. 4), I see shifts, shifting, and their significance. What
seems to be a simple shift can fundamentally alter our understanding of the world, be it geological or compositional. In geology, the invention of tectonic plates explains, and in doing so re-makes, the world. Ten years after the 1906 earthquake, scientists began talking about continental drift, the first concept explaining (as it sounds) how our continents have merged and split apart and remerged and remixed over time. With the related and later concept of tectonic plates, we literally see what we otherwise cannot: continents layered over the plates, always in tension with them, always dynamic even when we feel grounded. Together, continents, drifts, and plates help us theorize our geologic past and predict our earth’s future.

In composition studies, we are experiencing a similar shift as digital technologies and Web 2.0 create change on a tectonic scale. They aren’t so much replacing conventional literacies—you can’t insert a URL without alphabetic literacy—as fundamentally altering them. These literacies, like the surface of the earth and its substratum, are in dialogue with each other, and as N. Katherine Hayles has noted, the contrast is inventive, helping us understand each one better (71). Even as we experience this shift, are in its midst, we also try to make sense of it, understanding that like seismologists in the wake of 1906, we are also inventing, in our case a new theory of literacy, one where print and digital interlayer, push against and inform the other, resulting in new texts, new textures, new meanings.

When I look again at the plate map (Fig. 6), I see relationships: geologically, the plates and continents; compositionally, the page, the screen, the interface, the network. Those layered plates, continental and tectonic, invite us, Lanham-like, to look at them and look through them. I see continents so familiar, and yet they are not named. What is named: the plates on which they sit—with mostly familiar land names like South American Plate and Eurasian Plate and some familiar ocean names like Pacific Plate, but with other land names that surprise me, like the Arabian Plate, and still others that mystify, like the Nazca Plate. I note that up by where Alaska
touches Asia, the boundaries aren’t clear, and I appreciate the uncertainty of that. This image: it’s a doubled representation meant to show what cannot be seen in the context of what can; it forces a doubled seeing, a recognition that what cannot be seen is fundamental to what can.

We are experiencing a similar moment in literacy, but it’s one that we might have anticipated, according to Richard Lanham. The “unselfconscious transparency” (14) of the printing press, the one best not noticed, was of course called into question on many occasions, by poster makers and by language poets, both of whom used typography as a way of “preventing people from looking ‘through’ words and of forcing readers to look ‘at’ them.” But today, such transparency is called into question by everyone composing at the keyboard and everyone reading there as well: textual surfaces are malleable, self-conscious, mobile. We are, Lanham says, always looking “first AT [a text] and then THROUGH it, and this oscillation creates a different ideal of decorum [. . .].” Look THROUGH a text, he says, and you are in the “familiar world of the Newtonian interlude,” that is, in my world of continents, where “facts were facts, the word was really dropped from out there, folks had sincere central selves [. . .].” Look AT a text, however, and we have “deconstructed the Newtonian world [. . .].” (5). The plates remind us how very contingent the continents are. I’d note that such looking at and looking through is now ubiquitous and medium-independent, called on by graffiti artists, designed into our most commonplace signs, evoked even by academic texts. We’ve shifted into an almost-routine textual practice that incorporates context, that invites a doubled composing and a doubled looking. Now, in other words, we see the plates.
When I look once more at this image of tectonic plates, I see intellectual property issues: because this image of tectonic plates is in the public domain, I can “use” it, but I’ll note that the “image” just below it—the empty square where you might have seen a C for copyright in the center—well, ironically, that’s not in the public domain. What does it matter?

It goes without saying that we’re in a remix culture—remixing a practice that digital technologies have heightened, but a practice that has informed composing for decades if not centuries. And even without wanting to remix or repurpose others’ materials, we might simply want to use them—to represent what-was, alternatively to represent what-was inside a new context to create a new what-is. That was the case for my interest in this image—to use the image to suggest visually the shifts in literacies I was seeking to tease out, to illustrate in the speech-that-became-a-print-text the very literacies I was talking about, in a paraphrase of Lanham, to show at and to show through. I chose this image, in part, precisely because obtaining permission was easy: I emailed the US Geological Survey, I asked permission, and they said yes. Permissions elsewhere were not so easy. In searching for images to represent the San Francisco earthquake for this text, given that photographs of the disaster were taken prior to 1929, I expected many earthquake materials to be in the public domain. And there are lots of materials—a large archive of them, for example, at the Bancroft Library at University of California–Berkeley, most of them available only inside that physical library, however, which keeps bankers’ hours. We’re back to access, a key term in our new composing curriculum, even if it’s access of another kind.

This search for the materials, however, allowed me to see another story, this one also connected to composing, one about composing itself, about representation, and about circulation. The materials documenting the San Francisco earthquake—images of all kinds—fall into two categories. One set of responses to the earthquake comes from what we might call the establishment, which in “select[ing] among dangers—the earthquake or the fire, made a political decision about what San Franciscans should fear or not fear, fire or earthquake” (Steinberg 26). The victory went to fire. Why? Because fire has a history. We think of Chicago’s Mrs. O’Leary and her cow kicking
over the lantern and the speed with which Chicago rebuilt. Fire, a known quantity, is preventable, does not impede progress. Earthquakes by contrast are unpredictable, devastating, terrorizing. Not one week after the 1906 earthquake-renamed-as-fire, the local media were claiming that all was well. In the words of the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “Faith Abounds in United City; Determination to Re-build is Everywhere Found.” And the point was made visually as well: in the May 6 supplement to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, an angel delivers a new San Francisco yet to be built.

At the same time, the residents of the city were busy not only creating their own records of the event, but in some cases, sending them around the world. The convergence of three factors—the earthquake, the 1903 Brownie 3A camera (which cost a mere dollar), and cards—brought materials and a new canvas to residents who became postcard artists sending their visual documentation around the world for a penny a piece. Put in the current vernacular, their visual accounts of the earthquake went viral, so much so that the San Francisco *Call* objected: “Ever since the disaster of April 18th the cooler members of the community have looked askance at the wide dissemination of photographic views of San Francisco after the earthquake and fire. Are we not damaging the city by every one of these views that we send away? [. . .] If we want to frighten people away from us, this is as good a way as any other” (qtd. in Steinberg 26). Much of what we know about the earthquake and fire, in other words, comes from these postcards as well as from scrapbooks; and many of them are not in the public domain.

In old composing as in new, copyright—which governs the provision of materials and thus our inventions—matters.
When I take a final look at this image of tectonic plates, I see how such images can themselves sponsor new forms of literacy. Deborah Brandt explains what the concept of sponsorship means: “Sponsors,” she says, “are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach and model, as well as regulate, suppress, regulate and withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). More specifically, Brandt mentions as sponsors a wide range of possibilities from family members to newspapers. In this context, my image has sponsored new literacies for me.

On one level, my image allowed me to use the language of one discipline—tectonic plates—to articulate principles of another—composition. Through this translation, I see doubly, differently, more fully.

On another level, my image helped me think about intellectual property and copyright, first to locate an image I could use; second, to publish the image itself; third, to think about what this means, epistemologically, in quite specific terms; and fourth, to develop a stronger awareness about intellectual property issues—and how we do and do not teach them.

And on yet still another level, I simply wanted to know more about the earthquake and about the ways it was documented by everyday people. In pursuing this question, in looking for primary materials, I found the postcards. I had no idea that postcards were a primary vehicle for circulation of information about the earthquake, but as for the earthquake, so too for any number of historical events. Postcards offer both space and method of circulating the vernacular writing of everyday Americans; they thus offer a unique window into composers’ writing lives. Likewise with vernacular scrapbooks—filled with the images created with the new camera—also developed at this time in another case of a new technology helping to motivate a new genre. There are several documenting the earthquake, four collected by scrapbook collector Barbara Levine, who donated them to the International Center for Photography in New York City, another housed in the California Pioneer Museum in San Francisco. Where might another one be?
In pursuing and documenting this ad hoc archive, I began to wonder about how other Americans composed in the twentieth century. We know how people wrote in school—through textbooks, for example, and student samples. More generally, we know something about vernacular personal writing, in part because such writing—letters and diaries—are, as one historian puts it, the rough drafts of history. But we haven’t attended to them as writing and as evidence of writing lives, and we haven’t had a compilation or collection or archive or corpus allowing us to think about and synthesize and analyze the writing of twentieth-century composers. Continuing this thought experiment, I began to try to construct such an imaginary archive. It might begin with letters documenting the Galveston hurricane of September 1900, and of course the San Francisco postcards and scrapbooks. It might include the letters that thousands wrote in response to FDR’s fireside chats. It might include the letters—sometimes on notecards, and at least once literally on toilet paper—written by soldiers during World War II. It might include the diary of Stanley Hayami, a student from Los Angeles interned at Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming before enlisting in the army, only to die in Italy. It might include the wartime letters of the “Crusaders,” interned
Japanese American women who wrote to Japanese American soldiers overseas. It might include any, some, or all 753 versions of “This I Believe” radio essays created in the 1950s, or the posters resisting the Vietnam War and celebrating International Women’s Day created by students in the late 1960s and early 1970s.5

Motivated by an image of tectonic plates, I found myself researching the vernacular writing that, like the plates underneath continents, had been available all along.

In his work on multimodality, Gunther Kress notes the interrelationships contextualizing communication: “Participants,” he says, “are embedded in networks of social relations with others who make meanings by making signs” (35). My reflection upon the image of tectonic plates reminds me that it has ever been so. Our writing today—in school and out, in formal curricula and in ad hoc spots of time—is and has always been part of a larger network. We bring past writing forward, making a present of the past, at the same time creating materials for the composing of those who will succeed us. Through that network, we sponsor each other: as writers, we are always in relationship, always networked in time, in space, and in writing.

Notes

1. There is considerable confusion about the damage caused by the earthquake compared to the fire, the latter of which was emphasized by the media in an effort to keep San Francisco a viable urban entity. But even the damage caused by the earthquake was exacerbated by faulty construction: see, for example, Steinberg’s Acts of God.

2. Ironically, the theory of tectonic plates couldn’t be fully developed until the evidence provided by the seas was included as well.

3. The fact that this is not how the Chicago fire started only contributes to its mythology.

4. It’s worth noting how visual writing was a century ago, as the ornamentation on this postcard
demonstrates. Composers, who relied on the visual to make meaning (as we all do), were no doubt influenced by a culture that at the turn of the century was especially visual. See, for example, David Henkins’s *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*, Columbia University Press, 1998.

5. This collection is more than an exemplar: it forms part of the collection for my study *The Way We Were: A Cultural History of Vernacular Writing in 20th-Century America*.

**WORKS CITED**


