

Trans Affect, Memory, Paper, and Fire:
How to Remember Yourself When Years of You Are Erased

Jessie Carney

Oberlin College, Department of Comparative American Studies

CAST 404: Trans Theory

Dr. KJ Cerankowski

May 16, 2026

“So often, struggle is cast as singular, and therefore surmountable, a mess to wipe clean. But my body betrays this narrative at every turn. My body is the site of ongoing uncertainty, in process and aching over that reality. And within this specific ache, I recognize those myths – that knowing all of ourselves makes a morality, that overcoming pain is compulsory and therefore possible, and that the good human is the known human—I recognize that these myths fail us.”

– C. E. McKenzie, *Achy Affects*

Introduction

How much of your life is made of paper? The paintings on your walls, the books on your shelves, the mothers day card you made in first grade. As humans, we are collectors. We learn to remember our lives and shared human histories by saving tangible examples of them. By framing them, and putting them up where people can see. In this exercise of self-remembrance, we build ourselves a castle made mostly out of paper. One major problem that this fragile system rarely, yet famously, must confront, is fire. Catastrophic losses like the burning of the Library of Alexandria and the Great Patent Office Fire of 1836 have shown us the devastating power heat and flame hold over human memory. These events also reveal something else, however. Human histories, even when reduced to ash, do not fully disappear. They instead shift form, migrating into the memories, affects, and bodies of those who survive to remember them. When disaster strikes, it forces us to reckon with the fragility of our archival systems and appreciate the memories that outlive their physical being. This essay then serves two purposes: An examination of the affective layers of disaster, tragedy, and rebuilding associated with transness and general multifaceted identity, and a memorialization of the tangible histories lost in the Palisades Fire. It asks what becomes of us when the physical evidence of our lives is destroyed, and how trans affect theory can help us understand memory, not as a static record, but as a living, adaptive force capable of patching the tears left by tragedy.

The Power of Memory

Memory is what makes us who we are. The thought of the fall you took in fifth grade reminds you to watch your step when you're running. The memory of that weird comment you made on your first date, the one that makes you wince when it comes to mind, reminds you to think before you speak. Memory allows us to track the subtle shifts in who we have been and what we've learned, to notice the patterns that shape our choices, and to cultivate a sense of self that is continuous even as it changes. Without memory, there is no stable ground from which to say *I want this*, *I don't like that*, *I hope for*, or *I am becoming something new*. It is how we assemble a coherent life out of the fragments of experience. For trans people, memory takes on an even more complex role in the construction of the self, because the only relationship we have to the former versions of ourselves, versions that may feel distant, painful, resented, beloved, or even unrecognizable, is through memory. Transition does not erase the past, but rather delineates traditional understandings of human beginnings and endings. The child self, the pretransition self, the selves shaped by misrecognition or closeting, memory draws all of these self-concepts together, bridging across discontinuity to hold together a life that may feel divided. It is also the site where ache accumulates. It is equally, however, the site of affirmation, allowing us to recognize the consistencies that flow beneath change. In this way, memory is not just a record of the past but a companion to transition itself, shaping how we understand who we have been, who we are, and what we want to become.

On the Desire To Maintain Oneness With Past Identity

Proximity to physical and social maleness function in very different, yet parallel ways for femmes and mascs. These patterns of proximity converge around social belonging and physical safety. Womanhood is unique in its sense of community, belonging, and strength in numbers. It is

a private club that many different marginalized groups have historically been excluded from. This club of female connection and solidarity is, in many ways, a fundamental opposite of its masculine counterpart. Women champion, protect, and support one another because systems of patriarchy have shown that strength in numbers and alliances are your greatest asset when your oppressor holds greater mechanical power. Meanwhile, manhood has functioned as a system of competition and hierarchy in which trust is weakness and loyalty is conditional on the grounds of self preservation or empowerment. The images and themes colloquially tied to masculinity are also often ones of incredible violence, deceit, and narcissism. Because the club of womanhood is so exclusive and so antithetical in image to American masculine community and self, many trans femmes are often put in a position of needing or wanting to distance themselves from prior life and identity, on both physical and social levels, in order to receive the benefits of women's solidarity, safety from transphobia, or a personal validation of female identity. Many trans mascs, on the other hand, often find themselves in a position of desiring the physical embodiment of masculinity without the full removal from womanhood that is expected upon such embodiment.

Alongside the social group-oriented motivations for distancing from or embracing prior identity, capitalism pressures trans people to sever themselves from their prior identities, insisting on a forward-moving, "progress-oriented" narrative that aligns with what Malatino calls teleological modes of gendered becoming (Malatino, 2022). Under this logic, remembering one's past becomes suspect, and even counterproductive, because the marketable trans subject is imagined as someone who has successfully shed their former self in favor of a new legible, binary identity. Malatino discusses how this demand produces shame around earlier embodiments and encourages a kind of affective amnesia, pushing us to treat our pasts as obstacles rather than sources of knowledge. In resisting this pressure, memory becomes a form of

care: a way of honoring the complexity of one's becoming, refusing the capitalist fantasy of total reinvention, and insisting that the past, however complicated, remains an integral part of who we are. My connection to womanhood and female solidarity is still the most significant connection I feel to traditional gender definitions, but rather than practicing this connection through physical aesthetic means, I learned to practice it through treasuring the memory of my life pretransition. I kept everything. The baseball trophies and science fair projects with my old name written on them, the paintings from elementary school and the yearbooks with my old face plastered in them. They all held sentimental significance and played a vital role in my construction of self.

On Trans Loss and Disaster

“The moment “Ain’t I a woman?” had to be addressed by Sojourner Truth, the moment she had to bare her breasts to prove that she was the woman, was already a queer, a trans moment. So that rather than seeing ourselves as outside blackness, as outside the dialogue of queerness and trans, I think that we need to place ourselves as black females at the core of the dialogue.”

– bell hooks, *Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body*

Marginalized identity affects every aspect of how we move through the world. C. E. McKenzie and Hil Malatino both speak to the idea that transness shapes our experiences of everything from joy and relaxation to pain and tragedy in unique ways. Disaster is a fundamental part of the human experience. We mourn it, paint it, draw our maps around it, and sell it. We, as a species, are born from it. As climate change advances, we are seeing an exponential increase in disasters like flood, wind, and fire. While we have spent the last several centuries developing disaster-resistant infrastructure and advanced warning systems, this exponential change in frequency and intensity of disaster has caused a shift in human beings’ relationship to past and prospective tragedy. The Los Angeles Fire Storm of 2025 changed the city, and everyone in it.

Almost everyone in Los Angeles today knows somebody who lost everything in the fires. These losses are felt on a massive scale. It is estimated that around 200,000 people lost their homes (Tanaka, 2026). When a loss is felt so widely in such a culturally diverse area, it means that the loss will be felt differently by many, as each person's own culture, tradition, sentimentality, and identity will shape how they experience grief and mourning.

A mandatory evacuation is a race against time for anyone unlucky enough to encounter it, but identity and history add layers of urgency to this unfortunate event. The majority of lives lost in the Palisades and Eaton fires were those of the elderly, the disabled, and the care takers who refused to abandon them. A bedbound disabled person does not suddenly become mobile because the National Weather Service issues an evacuation notice. It becomes their caretaker's responsibility to move them, to gather their medical documents and necessary equipment, to manage their pain and fear in the transition, and everything in between. The fires starting two weeks after Christmas day meant that many people still had their trees up, not only leaving some of their family's most treasured ornamental memories in the path of destruction, but also placing an additional fuel source to the space. Not being able to find your passport during evacuation adds an additional layer of panic in a time when the government is actively making it as difficult as possible for people like you to acquire accurate identity documents. Transness, like other layered identity markers, adds dimensions of panic and grief to the process and aftermath of disaster. The moment I asked myself what was more important to put in the car, the laundry basket filled with important documents and clothes, or the box filled with memories from my life pretransition, was a queer and trans moment. It represented the additional layers of loss I was preparing to face when we returned to the rubble of our home to dig. My transness not only impacted the tangible items that burned, but also the spaces of safety and embodiment that

represented various sacred moments throughout my transition and queerness. The front door where I kissed a girl for the first time, the sink I shaved my first patchy mustache in, the mirror I looked in as I took off my post-operative chest bindings. In a world where safe and sacred spaces are few and far between, each of these spaces hold irreplaceable history. When irreplaceable items and places such as these are lost, it becomes necessary for us to exercise memory and celebration of life.

The Resistance in Irreplaceability

There may come an urge, following a period of great loss, to replace absolutely everything. While this urge is entirely understandable, as it is human nature to remember what has been lost and to miss it, I would like to push back against it. When sudden destructive events like fires, tornadoes, and flash floods exist on such a global and advancing scale, all physical items are at a constant risk of sudden loss. There is then, a certain kind of resistance in ownership of the irreplaceable. Holding onto paper items, building things that cannot be replaced, is to refuse the capitalist logic that value must always be proven through acquisition and upgrade. Capitalism insists that identity, stability, and even grief can be sutured through consumption, that the “good old days” are recoverable if one simply makes enough money to purchase all of the lost items that represent that feeling of nostalgia. An irreplaceable object severs the connection between personal importance and interpersonal recognition, because sentimentality is based in memory, not product. Once it is gone, there is no transaction that can restore it, no market that can compensate for its singularity or historical value. Its value is not in its exchangeability but in its refusal to be exchanged. The Claire’s hairclips that were sitting at the bottom of my bathroom drawer, with the last existing strands the world will ever see of my long wavy hair still tangled in their hinges, cannot be replaced by a fresh new pack from the mall. They would not be the same.

They would not be mine. In this way, irreplaceability becomes a subtle rebellion against the demand to demonstrate one's existence through material accumulation; it insists that meaning is not something that can be bought back, but rather only lived with, carried, appreciated, and mourned.

Wofle-Hazard's writing on transfiguration as an intrinsic process of the living world extends this resistance into the ecological. If transness is not a deviation from nature but rather one of its most fundamental expressions, then holding onto an irreplaceable object becomes a way of aligning oneself with nature's own cycles of regrowth, decay, and reinvention. Trees sever their own limbs to survive the drought, oxbow lakes form when a winding river is realigned by its underflows, wildfire prone regions regenerate with species that only bloom after burning. Nature engages in a never-ending cycle of erasing and reconstructing itself. Irreplaceable objects echo this ecological truth: they weather, they fade, they come apart at the seams, they age with us, and the memories that grant them their value often die with us as well. To keep them is to honor a world where change is not a failure of maintenance or swiftness, but a condition of life. In this way, the object becomes a small altar to non-teleological becoming, a reminder that survival is not about perfect preservation but about living through cycles of loss and renewal, and finding meaning in what endures, even if only in altered form or in memory alone.

How to Remember Yourself

After tragedy erases a part of your history, remembering yourself becomes an act of reconstruction as vital as finding a new roof to put your head under. For this, I propose a five-step process of remembrance and self-celebration. These steps are largely applicable to everyone, and it is encouraged that measures are taken before tragedy occurs to prepare for the

possibility of needing them. The first step takes place prior to disaster. This step is record keeping. Take pictures of the things that are important to you and write down anything a picture won't do justice. The second step, immediately following disaster, is recognizing your own survival. In such a period of tragedy, it may feel difficult to celebrate this survival. I encourage you to do so anyway. You lived and that is important. The third step is inventory taking. Take inventory of what is left, so as to visualize everything that isn't there. There will be items from the far back corner of the closet and the bottom of the bookshelf that you know you're missing but can't quite visualize. That's okay. Just do your best to form an image in your mind of the things you don't want to forget. Fourth, you must treat your memory as a sacred space. Appreciate your mind as the primary home and storyteller of all of your past selves and experiences. Let yourself practice the act of remembering continuously. The memories of what was lost will come up frequently as others tell you stories of their childhoods, when friends ask for help moving, when coworkers ask you where you're from. Treat these moments kindly and practice gratitude that the people you care about want to invite you into their lives by showing you their own living mementos. The fifth step is connecting to nature in any way you can as frequently as realistically possible. Before we had homes filled with things, we roamed the earth with what we could carry. This is not to say "abandon all physical possessions," but rather an encouragement to appreciate your own connection to nature's cycles of destruction, decay, and rebirth. Embracing the constant renewal of nature with your own renewal of self can remove some of the shock and overwhelm that comes with such loss. Flood waters recede, hurricanes dissipate, fires are extinguished when the rain returns, and you will feel like you again, even if you are different.

To lose years of yourself in the blink of an eye is to confront the fragility of human archives. What remains after destruction is not simply waste and ruin, it is the raw material of reconstruction and memory. Trans affect theory teaches us that becoming is never linear or free of the past, it is a process shaped by ache, contradiction, and the ongoing negotiation between who we were and who we fought to become. Disaster makes this negotiation visible. It strips away the illusion that identity is secured only by objects and proof, revealing that the self is instead carried in sensation, in recollection, and in the stubborn human persistence of building anew. What burns can be mourned, but it can also clear space for new forms of life, art, and creation. Remembering oneself after erasure is therefore not just an act of restoration, but one of dynamic living in a changing world and changing self.

Works Cited

Mackenzie, C. E. (2025). *Achy affects: Crisis and compositions of Selfhood*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Malatino, H. (2022). *Side affects: On being trans and feeling bad*. University of Minnesota Press.

Tanaka, M. (2026, April 16). *More than 200,000 lost their homes in the L.A. County fires. for people already on the streets, the damage ran deeper*. Los Angeles Times.
<https://bit.ly/42BD1kG>.

Woelfle-Erskine, C. (2022). *Underflows: Queer trans Ecologies and River Justice*. University of Washington Press.