

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Portable Memory: Material Objects in Early Twentieth-Century Life Writing

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## Abstract

Material objects in life writing are frequently catalogued as symbols of memory, but less attention is given to how their movement, loss, and institutional value structure acts of recollection. This article asks what portable memory explains at the scale of textual decisions. It compares W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Souls of Black Folk," Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical writings, Rabindranath Tagore's "My Reminiscences," and Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery." An object-centered comparative reading codes possession, circulation, loss, sensory recall, and institutional value, while retaining counter-readings and limiting historical claims to the named sources. The analysis argues that objects stabilize memory while retaining traces of unequal institutions, connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging, and make loss or substitution more reflective than secure possession in the selected episodes. The article contributes a method for distinguishing an object's presence from its narrative function and consequence. It thereby recasts portable memory as a relational process rather than a thematic inventory of meaningful things.

**Keywords:** life writing; material culture; memory; objects; identity

## 1 Introduction

Portable Memory examines how life writing uses portable things to negotiate memory, education, displacement, and public identity. Its corpus comprises W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Souls of Black Folk," Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical writings, Rabindranath Tagore's "My Reminiscences," and Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery." The central claim is that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions. That proposition carries weight because material detail is not decorative but a method for converting lived experience into historical argument. Attention therefore falls on episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection.

The project's scope is more limited than a general history of material memory. Within these texts, portable memory is assessed through episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

Three findings organize the article. First, objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions. Second, portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging. Third, loss and

substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession. In combination, they demonstrate that material memory is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the textual selection.

The research question is how the placement, circulation, and loss of objects convert recollection into claims about education, belonging, and public identity. The objective is to compare these operations without assuming that every meaningful object performs the same function. The discussion therefore moves from critical context to corpus and method, then to three findings and comparative cases, before considering implications, limitations, and conclusions.

Material-culture theory clarifies why an object in life writing is more than descriptive background. Brown's account of "thingness" directs attention to moments when ordinary use becomes newly perceptible [1]. Smith and Watson provide a complementary vocabulary for locating autobiographical identity within mediated practices of memory and narration [2].

## 2 Portable memory in critical context

The central difficulty for Portable Memory is inferential distance. Episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection are observable in the consulted sources, whereas the account of portable memory interprets how those observations connect. The article closes that distance in stages: it identifies a feature, locates its structural neighbors, describes the change it produces, and only then names its historical or aesthetic consequence. A claim fails when any link in that chain depends on information absent from the cited edition, image, or documentary source.

Terminological precision is necessary for Portable Memory. Portable memory is distinguished from recurrence, theme, and context. Recurrence identifies repetition; theme identifies a field of concern; context situates the work historically. The present argument instead asks how material episodes acquire a role through their connection to neighboring events. Attention to material cognition supports this focus on relations among bodies, texts, and things [3]. Humanistic accounts of constructed evidence clarify why an object's presentation cannot be separated from interpretation [4]. Dial-

ogism helps describe how remembered objects connect private speech to public address [5]. Narrative framing distinguishes the object itself from the textual thresholds through which it is encountered [6]. Narrative temporality explains why later loss or substitution can revise an earlier act of possession [7].

### 3 Objects, Circulation, and Recollection

The selected materials comprise W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Souls of Black Folk" [8], Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical writings [9], Rabindranath Tagore's "My Reminiscences" [10], and Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery" [11]. Selection follows conceptual variation rather than statistical representativeness. Each item offers a distinct configuration of material memory and permits comparison through the common unit of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection.

The method is object-centered comparative reading with descriptive codes for possession, loss, circulation, sensory recall, and institutional value.

Portable memory is tested through observable changes in episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection. The procedure records position, recurrence, interruption, and effect before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters for the comparative reading: a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redirect the whole sequence. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld because the present method does not supply that evidence.

The evidentiary chain for Portable Memory runs from source identification to description and only then to interpretation. A page, measure, frame, accession record, or production document is not decorative citation detail; it lets another reader locate the event on which the claim about portable memory depends. Missing locators therefore mark a limit in the current draft. They should be resolved against the exact versions actually consulted, never supplied by approximation.

### 4 Objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions

The first result may be expressed in these terms: objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal in-

stitutions. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

Close comparison reveals that the pattern operates at more than one scale. The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why material memory can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

Portable Memory treats the claim that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions as an account of organizational pressure. The question is not simply where episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection can be found, but how neighboring events make them expectable, delayed, displaced, or newly prominent. The proposition gains force when a local change reorganizes the reader's, listener's, or viewer's grasp of the larger text. If no such outcome can be described, the evidence remains an inventory item rather than an argument about portable memory.

### 5 Comparative readings: Portable Memory

The initial case is W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. The reading tests the proposition that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions by restricting attention to episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, the proposition that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection, which agent or structural layer controls it, and what consequence follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection, the expectation active at that moment, and the consequence

that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports Portable Memory only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general parallel to the other cases is not enough; the segment must show why the proposition about portable memory is needed to explain its organization.

The textual selection's second reference point, Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging. This is not treated as a defect in reliability.

Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* changes the scale of comparison. Here portable memory is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among texts. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging.

For Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on portable memory. The article answers only at the level of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a later effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition recedes. If it does, the case clarifies how formal hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

A third reading considers Rabindranath Tagore's *My Reminiscences* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession.

The value of Rabindranath Tagore's *My Reminiscences* is retrospective. Following passages are reread against the first account of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the following event merely restates the prior one, the proposition that loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case

demonstrates how portable memory acquires structural memory.

Verification in Rabindranath Tagore's *My Reminiscences* demands two locators: one for the initial treatment of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, projected, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the ensuing reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about portable memory a visible temporal basis.

The fourth text, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection tests how far the claim that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance requires qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition holds, which part weakens, and which supplementary source would be required to decide between rival hypotheses.

The resistant role of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which portable memory ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or organizational account should take over.

## 6 Portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging

Evidence next suggests that portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The textual selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

Distribution gives the second result its precision. The claim that portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging calls for more than a contrast between dominant and subordinate positions. It calls for evidence that the contrast changes what can be known, heard, seen, said, or answered. In *Portable Memory*, episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection make that change traceable. A transfer matters when it reallocates initiative or credibility; otherwise it remains a surface variation. This threshold protects the argument about portable memory from turning every difference into hierarchy.

## 7 Loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession

The third claim maintains that loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed result are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

Taken together, the three findings form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second shows that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how subsequent events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that material memory is historically variable and formally organized.

The test for the third claim is counterfactual: if the following event were removed, would the preceding reading of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection remain unchanged? A negative answer supports the proposition that loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession; a positive answer weakens it. *Portable Memory* uses this test to distinguish memory built by form from similarity noticed by the critic. The distinction matters for portable memory, because retrospective force belongs to the organized sequence and not simply to the reader's ability to place examples side by side.

## 8 Discussion: What Portable Memory Changes

Read as a sequence, the results move from form to allocation and then to revision. The first establishes that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces

of unequal institutions; the second, that portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging; the third, that loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession. This order prevents portable memory from becoming a label applied after interpretation. It names a chain of decisions whose consequences can be checked against the primary texts and their editorial contexts.

The resulting contribution is methodological as well as interpretive. The difference becomes important for interdisciplinary research.

The comparative result is that material detail is not decorative but a method for converting lived experience into historical argument. This result does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

The argument is deliberately vulnerable to revision. If objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions appears only after examples are removed from sequence, the first claim weakens. If portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging cannot be tied to a visible allocation of access, emphasis, or agency, the second becomes thematic summary. If loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession depends on knowledge unavailable at the relevant moment, the third becomes retrospective overreach. These failure conditions define what would count against *Portable Memory*, not only what appears to support it.

The article contributes a distinction between appearance, function, and result. Appearance concerns what can be described in episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection; function concerns the connection established by its placement; result concerns the judgment made possible by what follows. *Portable Memory* uses this distinction to prevent portable memory from collapsing into a synonym for theme, mood, or context. The three levels may converge, but the argument does not assume that they do so in every work.

The protocol also separates comparison from equivalence. Cases are comparable because each poses a problem involving portable memory, not because their historical conditions or compositional resources are interchangeable. *Portable Memory* preserves those differences by defining the shared question at the level of function and the answers at the level of episodes in which clothing, books, pho-

tographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection. This arrangement permits synthesis without claiming that one vocabulary exhausts the work of every text, score, image, film, or performance.

The inquiry is chiefly limited because translation and editorial history complicate direct comparison across the four life-writing traditions. It does not establish reception, intention, prevalence, or causal effect. The absence of those methods is acknowledged rather than disguised.

The argument remains accountable because each inference can be challenged at the scale of episodes in which clothing, books, photographs, tools, or domestic objects organize recollection. A counter-reading must explain the same placement and sequence, not merely supply a different label. This standard neither turns interpretation into measurement nor treats judgment as private response. It makes disagreement about portable memory specific enough to revise.

## 9 Conclusion

This article asked how life writing uses portable things to negotiate memory, ed-

ucation, displacement, and public identity. Through object-centered comparative reading with descriptive codes for possession, loss, circulation, sensory recall, and institutional value, it argued that objects stabilize memory only by retaining traces of unequal institutions; that portable things connect private recollection to public claims about education and belonging; and that loss and substitution often produce more reflective narration than secure possession. These claims converge on a relational account of material memory.

More generally, the textual interpretation makes visible that material detail is not decorative but a method for converting lived experience into historical argument.

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