

Agency in Motion

One — Continuing

Agency is what persists under conditions designed to end it.

There is a woman in the water at night. The family carries her swimming away from an island in a cold bay, in winter, a child held on her back, with other women who were said to know how to swim and a river woman taken along because she knew water. The child holds on so hard that a necklace breaks, and the beads go down, and the telling says they are down there still. Who exactly the child was, and whether the child was Craven himself or someone a half-generation above him whose escape the family folded forward into his name, the record will not say and the family does not pretend to know.¹

Begin here, in the water and in the not-knowing, rather than with a definition. A definition would already have made the first mistake — it would begin where agency is secure enough to be theorized, on dry land, among people whose right to act is not in question. The woman in the water is not exercising a capacity that a framework granted her. She is doing the thing a framework exists to describe, under conditions arranged to guarantee she could not, and she is doing it in a story whose dates and names have been so worked over by erasure that even her descendants cannot fix them. That double fact — the act, and the fog the act comes wrapped in — is where this book starts.

The name as testimony

Consider the name itself. Gibson is not, in the family's understanding, an ancestral name carried down from some Pit River forebear. It has the shape of a name pasted onto an Indian laborer — assigned, the way such names were assigned, by an employer or an agent or a clerk who needed a label and was not in the business of preserving the one underneath. Craven descends from a man named Dennison, who stands either as his father or as his father's father; the family carries the line through Dennison and through that imposed name, and the fact that even the spacing of the generations is uncertain — father, or grandfather — is of a piece with everything else here. The parentage behind the

¹The account followed here is Darryl Babe Wilson (told in part by Pit River Elder Craven Gibson), *"Once Upon a Time on Allisti Ti-Tanin-Miji, Rock Rainbow, aka Alcatraz,"* The Californians: The Magazine of California History 9, no. 6 (May/June 1992): 8–12 (hereafter Wilson, "Allisti Ti-Tanin-Miji"). Where Wilson's telling and the surviving administrative records disagree, this book treats Wilson as the closer-to-true account and the records as documents made by people whose business included erasure. Wilson (Sul'ma'ejote, 1939–2014), Achumawi/Atsugewi of the Pit River Nation and Craven Gibson's grandson, treated this removal history in his dissertation, *Remove Them Beyond the West, California, Gold!*, and his memoir, *The Morning the Sun Went Down* (Berkeley: Heyday, 1998).

name does not survive. It does not survive because the places that handled these lives, the forts and the agencies and the ledgers, did not keep what they did not value, and what they did not value included who an Indian child's mother and father were.²

This is worth dwelling on before any argument is built, because the argument is already present in the name. A book whose subject is agency under systems that see Native lives wrongly does not need to reach for an example of misrecognition. It is carried in the surname of the man at its center. The name records not a lineage but an act of administration — a person made legible to a system on the system's terms, his prior name and prior people written out in the same motion that wrote the new one in. To be named this way is to be recognized in advance, before you have spoken, as a unit the system can use. The whole of this book is, in one sense, an unfolding of what is compressed into that single imposed word.

What the record cannot fix

The birth is shrouded in the same way. The family carries it at around 1904 or 1905, on the fourth or the fifth of July. The surviving records are worse than silent; they are contradictory, placing the birth in Louisiana in one place and in Bieber, California, in another, which cannot both be plainly true. The temptation is to treat this as a research problem — to dig until the real date surfaces and the others can be discarded as error. This book refuses that temptation on principle, because the refusal is itself the finding.³

A man this consequential — an elder a whole nation would remember — has a birth that floats across years and a birthplace that contradicts itself, and the contradiction is not noise around a signal. It is the signal. The same state that could enroll a Native infant on a census at two months, that could prosecute a Native child and number him into a prison register, that could march people to an island and count the ones who died, could not or would not record within any honest margin when this particular person entered the world.

²The dates here cannot be fixed. The family carries a birth around 1904 or 1905, on the fourth or fifth of July; surviving records variously place the birth in Louisiana and in Bieber, California — entries that cannot both be straightforwardly true and that are best read as evidence of how Indian lives were recorded rather than as competing facts. Wilson's account places Craven a generation or more earlier. This book does not resolve the discrepancy, for reasons the section that follows makes explicit.

³The surname is treated here as an imposed laborer's name rather than an inherited family name; the parentage behind it does not survive in any record the family has been able to recover. Craven descends from a forebear named Denison, held in the family as either his father or his grandfather — the generational distance is itself uncertain. This is presented as the nature of the thing — what such a name and such a gap testify to — rather than as a verified genealogical claim.

The precision was always available; it was spent where the system had a use for it and withheld where it did not. To leave the date unfixed in these pages is to let that asymmetry stand visible on the page instead of papering over it with a false certainty the record was never going to earn.

If the family dating is right, and Craven was born in 1904 or 1905, then the founding story in the water cannot be placed as easily as a single clean escape, and he may not have been the first of his line to leave that island, or the swim may belong partly to the generation just above and have been carried forward in his name. None of this is a defect in the story. It is what a wound of this size does to the people who carry it: it telescopes, it composites, it holds one survival as the survival because holding all of them separately would be more than a family could bear. The book honors the story by keeping its seams showing.

The claim

The claim of this chapter can now be stated plainly: **agency is what persists under conditions designed to end it.** Not the capacity to choose among options a cooperative world lays out. Not the freedom a person enjoys when nothing is pressing on them. Those are real, and most writing about freedom is about them, and they are the dry-land cases — agency described where it is least tested and therefore least revealed. What the woman in the water shows, and what the long life that followed confirmed, is that the deepest form of the thing appears exactly where the conditions for it have been withdrawn, and often where even the record of it has been withdrawn too.

This is not a claim that the spirit always triumphs. The water drowned people. The march killed people. The removals and the winter ocean killed people who were every bit the agents the survivor was. To say agency is what persists is not to say it always persists, nor that those it failed to carry lacked it. It is to say something exact: that the survivors' continuing is not explained by the conditions, because the conditions were set against it. Something other than the system's permission was operating. That something is the book's subject.

Craven Gibson as standpoint

It matters that Craven Gibson is the standpoint of this book and not its illustration. An illustration is chosen after the argument is built and could be swapped for another without altering it. A standpoint is the position from which the seeing is done. Craven is not an example of a claim arrived at elsewhere; he is the location from which the claim became visible at all. The framework did not come first, with him recruited to dramatize it. The

survival came first — held in a particular family, across particular generations, in a name that testifies to an erasure — and the framework is the attempt to say, in terms that can travel, what that standpoint already knew.

The reversal is the methodological core of the book, and it is not casual. To treat Craven as an example would be to repeat in miniature the very move the removal performed: to take a person and process him into an instance of a category managed from elsewhere. The insistence that the life is the vantage and not the specimen is not sentiment. It is the discipline the subject demands. A book about agency that turned its anchor into an illustration would have contradicted its argument in its method.

The long continuing

The water is the easy case, because an emergency announces itself as something to be survived. The decades afterward do not. They arrive as ordinary time — as a one-room house at Atwam, a hundred miles east of Redding; as belongings going worn; as the slow administrative weather of a state that no longer needs to march anyone because it has quieter means. To continue across that kind of time, to keep carrying a language and a relation to a place and a refusal to let an imposed ending become the real one, when no single moment forces the question, is agency in its least visible and most demanding form.

This is the harder thing the chapter is actually about. Craven continued not by escaping once but by remaining — by being, for decades, an elder the Pit River would remember, a keeper of the old stories and the old names in a century built to dissolve both. The continuing was quiet and it was long and it did not look, from outside, like the dramatic thing the water was. From inside, it was the dramatic thing. It was the whole of it.

The cabin

And it cost him. The family carries more than one account of how he died — there is a rumor of a road accident with brothers — but the understanding the family holds is that he died alone, in a cabin, having turned to drink. A chapter about continuing that stopped before this point would be dishonest about what continuing exacts. The man who was carried out of the water, who held the stories through a century meant to take them, came to the end of it by himself, with a bottle, on land that had been his.⁴

⁴On the manner of his death the family carries more than one account, including a rumor of a road accident with brothers. The understanding followed here — that he died alone, having turned to drink — is the family's, as is the memory, from an aunt who knew him as a small girl on land that had been his, of a man who was kind. Any reading of why is offered as a descendant's reflection, not as fact.

Why is not a question the record answers, and a descendant's reading is only that. But it is not hard to see a man who had lost almost everyone — among them a son, taken by the state to a prison cell at fifteen and dead there before he was twenty — who had watched the nation he wanted for his people fail to come together through conflict from within, and who stepped back from all of it — out of grief, or out of a refusal to keep standing in the path of harm, or both, which are not really separable. To isolate after that much loss is not a failure of the agency this book is describing. It can be one of its forms: the choosing of how, and away from what, to spend what remains.

And beside that, held at the same time and not cancelled by it, is another memory. An aunt who knew him as a small girl, on the land that had been his, remembers him as kind — thought highly of him, simply, the way a child knows an old man to be gentle. Both of these are true. The isolation and the kindness, the bottle and the gentleness, the elder who carried a people's memory and the man who died alone with it. The book will not resolve them into either a hero or a casualty, because the resolving would be the lie. He was a person who continued, at a cost, and was loved, and is remembered, and the remembering is now part of the continuing — carried forward, as the story in the water was, by the ones who came after.

That is the work the following chapters take up: what it is to be seen, and seen wrongly, by systems that name you before you speak; what it is to hold an agency that was never individual; what it is to walk into the office where the forms are stamped and nothing moves; what it is for an uncorrected wrong to harden into a structure and then into a self; what it is to refuse; and what it is, finally, to return. Each is a way of continuing, or a way continuing is obstructed. We begin, as Craven began, in the middle of things — already in the water, already carried, already named by someone else, already required to act before anyone has granted us the standing to do so.

Two — Being Seen

To be unseen is dangerous; to be seen wrongly is dangerous; to be seen completely by a dominating system is dangerous. The asymmetry is the condition.

Before Craven Gibson spoke a word, he had already been seen. The name he carried was a recognition — someone had looked at an Indian laborer, or at the child of one, and decided what he would be called, and the deciding happened on the system's terms and entered the record in the system's hand.⁵ This is the ordinary situation, not the exceptional one. We are none of us seen for the first time when we present ourselves. We are seen in advance, sorted before we arrive, recognized into categories that were waiting for us. The question this chapter asks is what that does to a person's agency — and the answer is not the simple one that being seen is good and being unseen is bad. The truth is harder and more useful than that.

Three dangers, not one

There is a story we tell about visibility in which it is straightforwardly a good. To be seen is to be acknowledged, counted, granted standing; to be invisible is to be neglected, abandoned, left out of the protections that visibility brings. There is real truth in it. A people the state refuses to recognize cannot claim what recognition would secure; a person no system can see falls through every net. Invisibility is a genuine danger, and much of the political work of dispossessed peoples has rightly been a demand to be seen.

But anyone who has lived inside a dominating system knows the story is incomplete, because there is a second danger that is the mirror of the first. To be seen wrongly — recognized, but as something you are not — can be worse than not being seen at all. The man whose name records an erasure was seen; he was seen as a laborer to be labelled, as a unit to be processed, and the seeing did not protect him, it processed him. To be misrecognized is not to be overlooked. It is to be actively taken up into the system under a description that serves the system, and then to be held to that description, governed by it, made to answer to a self you did not author.

And there is a third danger, the subtlest, which is to be seen completely. A system that recognizes you fully — that knows your name, your whereabouts, your history, your people, your every documented act — has not thereby done you a kindness. Total legibility to a dominating power is not safety; it is exposure. The census that can find you

⁵On the imposed surname and the lineage through Dennison, see Chapter One, "The name as testimony," and its notes. The reading offered there and extended here treats the name as an act of administrative recognition rather than as inherited family identity.

at two months can find you at fifteen.⁶ The clarity that a benign institution would use to serve you is, in the hands of a system arranged against you, simply the precision of its reach. To be fully seen by such a system is to have nowhere left to stand that it cannot observe.

The asymmetry

Put the three together and the shape of the condition appears. The person moving through a dominating system is caught among dangers that do not resolve into a single direction. Step toward invisibility and you forfeit the protections that only recognition brings; you become the one the net does not catch. Step toward visibility and you risk being seen wrongly, taken up under a description that serves the system rather than you. Achieve full visibility and you are wholly exposed to a power that does not have your interest at heart. There is no safe position on the axis. Every point on it carries its own danger, and the person inside is doing constant, exhausting triage among bad options.

This is what is meant, in this book, by an asymmetry. It is not that visibility is sometimes good and sometimes bad, as if the trick were simply to find the right amount. It is that the costs and the benefits of being seen fall on different parties. The system gains from seeing you — it gains legibility, control, the ability to sort and route and act upon you. What you gain is contingent, partial, and revocable, and it depends entirely on whether the system that sees you means you well. When it does not, every increase in its sight is an increase in your exposure with no corresponding increase in your protection. The seeing is structured so that its benefits flow one way and its risks flow the other. That is the asymmetry, and it is a condition of the field, not a feature of any one encounter.

Recognition comes before speech

The deepest point is one of sequence. The person inside the system does not first appear, neutrally, and then get evaluated. The recognition comes first. By the time Craven could have said who he was, the name had already said something else about him, and the name was in the ledger and the ledger was the thing the system would consult. To be recognized in advance is to arrive into a description already written, to spend the encounter not introducing yourself but contending with a self the system produced before you opened your mouth.

⁶The case of Craven's son, sent to San Quentin in 1941 at fifteen under a life sentence and dead there within a few years, is treated in Chapter Seven. It is referenced here only to mark the difference between being unseen and being seen with total administrative clarity. The point is not that the record was absent but that, where the system had a use for precision, it was exact.

This inverts the ordinary picture of agency, in which a person acts and the world responds. Here the world has already acted — has already seen, sorted, named — and the person's first task is not to act freely but to answer a prior act of recognition that framed the whole field of what their action could mean. The agency that operates under these conditions is not the agency of the unencumbered chooser. It is the agency of someone who must work against a description already in place, whose every move will be read through a category they did not pick, and who knows this, and who acts anyway. That knowing-and-acting-anyway is not a lesser form of agency. It is agency under the actual conditions most people, and nearly all dispossessed people, have always faced.

What this asks of the one who is seen

To live in this condition is to develop a competence the dry-land theories never name: the constant reading of how one is being seen, the management of one's own legibility, the choosing — moment by moment, office by office — of how much to show and to whom and under what description. It is work, and it is invisible work, and it is performed most heavily by exactly the people who can least afford the energy it takes. The person who has been misrecognized learns to anticipate misrecognition, to pre-empt it, to present themselves in the narrow band the system will read correctly, and to absorb the cost when even that fails.

None of this competence shows up in an account written from the shore. From outside, the person simply appears to comply, or to resist, or to participate; the enormous prior labor of managing one's own visibility is invisible precisely because it is the labor of managing visibility. This is why the standpoint is required. A theory of freedom that cannot see this work will mistake the smooth surface of an encounter for the absence of struggle, when the smoothness is itself the product of struggle — the achievement of a person who has learned, at cost, to be seen in a way that does not get them hurt.

Craven carried a name that recognized him wrongly from the start, and lived a long life inside a century that kept trying to see his people out of existence, and he held the old stories and the old names through all of it. To do that is to have solved, daily and without credit, the problem this chapter describes — to have found, again and again, a way to remain himself under a system's gaze that was never arranged to see him truly. The next chapter turns to what that self was made of, and why it was never the solitary thing the dry-land picture assumes: the agency that persists under being seen is held, it will argue, not alone but in relation.

Three — Holding

Agency is constituted in relation, not in isolation. The web that sustains it is not a constraint upon it; it is its ground.

The stories survived because they were held together. This is the plain fact that the previous chapter's argument runs into and that this chapter takes as its center. Craven did not carry the old names and the old tellings the way a single man carries a possession, alone, by force of private will. He carried them the way a people carries them: in company, at gatherings, in the back-and-forth of elders who held the same memory from different angles and corrected and completed one another. He was, by the family's account, a social man — one who held parties, who made space and place, who was loved among other keepers of the same inheritance.⁷ The continuation that the first chapter named was not the achievement of an isolated agent. It was the achievement of a web.

Against the solitary chooser

The dominant Western picture of agency is a picture of a single person choosing. The agent stands at a fork, surveys the options, and selects; freedom is the absence of anything that would interfere with that selection; other people figure mainly as potential interferences, as constraints on a liberty that is conceived, at bottom, as solitary. On this picture, relation is something that happens to an already-constituted individual — a limit set on a freedom that would otherwise be complete. The self comes first; the web comes after, and at a cost.

This book denies the picture, and denies it not on the strength of a competing philosophy but on the strength of what the standpoint shows. The agency that held the stories was not a prior individual capacity that the community then constrained. It was produced by the community — sustained, corrected, made possible by the relation. Take the web away and you do not get a freer individual; you get a person with nothing left to hold and no one to hold it with. The relation is not the limit on the agency. The relation is the agency's ground. To be an agent, in the sense this book means, is already to be in relation — to a people, to a place, to the dead who handed the memory forward and the unborn it is being kept for.

⁷The substrate argument here restates, in first-person register, a claim developed analytically elsewhere in the corpus: that freedom is bounded by a person's accumulated conditions and their exposure to violence, such that violence does its deepest damage not by blocking a particular act but by destroying the conditions under which acting is possible at all. See the Freedom Architecture and Property Hierarchy texts.

The substrate that violence destroys

This reframes what violence does, and it is the reframing the whole book turns on. If agency were solitary, then to attack a person's agency you would have to stop their particular acts — to block this choice, prevent that movement. But if agency is constituted in relation, then the deepest attack on it is not the blocking of any single act. It is the destruction of the ground. You do not need to stop a person from speaking the language if you have destroyed the community in which the language lived; the speaking has nowhere left to happen. You do not need to prevent a particular act of belonging if you have dismantled the web that belonging required.⁸

This is why the removals and the boarding schools and the long administrative weather did the damage they did, and why that damage is so badly captured by any accounting that counts only direct, individual harms. The harm was to the substrate. It worked by thinning the web — by scattering the people among whom an agency could be held, by severing the relations that made the holding possible, by leaving survivors with the memory intact and the company gone. A person can be left formally free, unblocked in every particular act, and still have had the conditions of their agency destroyed, because the conditions were never inside the individual to begin with. They were in the relation, and the relation is what was taken.

Seen this way, Craven's gatherings were not recreation around the edges of the serious work of cultural survival. They were the serious work. To hold space, to bring people together, to keep a living company of keepers in being, was to maintain the very substrate on which the survival of the memory depended. The party was the infrastructure. A man who keeps a web of relation alive through a century built to dissolve it is not relaxing between acts of resistance; he is performing the most fundamental act of resistance there is, which is the maintenance of the ground that makes all the other acts possible.

The edges

He was also a man with a temper, and the book would be lying if it sanded him into a saint. The clearest story the family carries of his harder edge concerns a cat — that he killed one, out of anger, because the animal was mean. It survives in the telling as evidence of

⁸The account of Craven as a social man — one who held gatherings, made space, and was loved among other keepers — and the story of the cat both come to the family as community memory. They are reported here as what the community carried, not as verified acts. The distinction matters: a story that lives in a community is evidence of how he was held and seen; it is not the same as an accusation, and this book does not treat it as one.

temper. But even this, the one story that brushes against cruelty, does not sit still when you look at it. Feral cats, loosed into a landscape, do real and well-documented destruction to the small native creatures of a place; a Pit River man who killed one may not have been losing control so much as discharging a responsibility to the ground he was charged with keeping. The act that the community remembered as temper may have been, in fact, an act of stewardship that looked like temper from outside.

The book does not resolve this, and the refusal to resolve it is the point. Two things are true at once. The first is that the line between protecting a web and harming a creature is real and contested, and a man devoted to the holding of place might cross it, or might be seen to cross it, in either direction. The second, and more important for what this chapter is doing, is that the story is the community's, not the verdict of a court. It is evidence of how Craven was held and seen by the people among whom he lived — and a story that lives in a community is a different kind of thing from an accusation against a man. To report what the community carried is not to charge him with anything. It is to show that even a loving company glosses its keepers, recognizes them into stories, holds them in a telling that is never identical to the man himself.

There is a quiet symmetry in this, and it is worth naming. The previous chapter described what it is to be seen by a system — recognized in advance, held to a description one did not author. This chapter shows the gentler, but still real, version of the same thing inside a loving community: Craven, too, was seen, was carried in his people's telling, was recognized into a story with edges he may or may not have had. The difference is everything and it is the difference the whole book is built on. To be glossed by a community that loves you and holds your memory forward is not the same as to be processed by a system that means you ill. Both are recognition. Only one is care. The web that sustains an agency can also simplify the one it sustains — and that is a cost of relation, not an argument against it.

For the ground is still the ground. A man held in relation, edges and all, is an agent in the full sense; a man stripped of relation, however unblemished, has had the conditions of his agency destroyed. Craven had the web for most of a century, and was sustained by it, and sustained it in turn. What it meant when that web began to thin — when the company of keepers grew smaller and the holding grew lonelier — belongs to the later chapters, and to the cabin. The next chapter leaves the web and walks into the office: it asks what happens when the person formed in relation steps into a system built to recognize only individuals, and finds that the most important things about them cannot be seen there at all.

Four — Walking In

Recognition is something done to you. The category arrives before you do.

A person formed in relation walks into a room built to recognize only individuals. This is the encounter the chapter is about, and it is among the most ordinary experiences there is — presenting oneself to an institution, an office, an agency, a desk — and among the least examined from the side of the one presenting. The previous chapter argued that agency is held in a web. This chapter follows the person out of the web and into the system, and asks what happens when the most important things about them cannot be seen where they are now standing.

The category is already there

The first thing to understand is that the recognition does not begin when you arrive. It is waiting for you. The categories are already written, the forms already printed, the boxes already drawn, and your task on arrival is not to present yourself freshly but to be sorted into a slot that existed before you walked in. You do not author the terms on which you are seen. You answer them. The encounter feels, from inside, less like an introduction than like an identification — the matching of a living person against a template made by someone who never met them and will never be present in the room.

This is recognition as something done to you, and it is the inverse of the recognition described in the previous chapter. A community recognizes you by holding you in its telling, over time, with knowledge of who you are; the telling may simplify you, but it is grounded in relation and oriented by care. A system recognizes you by matching you to a category, at the moment of encounter, with no knowledge of who you are and no orientation but its own function. The community's recognition arises from a history with you. The system's recognition arrives without one and does not want one; history would only slow the sorting.

The sequence

Watch how the taking-in proceeds, because it has a sequence and the sequence is the same across almost every system a person meets. First you are seen — registered as present, as a body in the queue, as a case to be handled. Then you are named — matched to a record, an identifier, a file, the administrative version of you that the system will actually deal with from here on. Then you are recorded — your presence and your business written into the system's memory, where the written version begins immediately to outrank the living one. Then, if you are fortunate, you are granted standing — admitted

as someone whose claim the system will entertain. And then the system enforces, or repairs, or refuses: it acts on the version of you it has constructed.⁹

At every step the administrative version of you gains authority and the living version loses it. By the time the system acts, it is acting on the file, not on the person; the person has become, for the system's purposes, an attachment to their own record. This is not a malfunction. It is how the thing is built to work, because a system that had to deal with the full living reality of each person could not function as a system at all. Legibility requires reduction. The reduction is the price of being processed, and it is charged to everyone — but it is charged most heavily to those whose reality least fits the available categories, and the people whose reality least fits are, with grim reliability, the people the categories were not built for.

What cannot be seen at the desk

Return Craven to the room. A man whose agency is held in a web of relation, whose name records an erasure rather than a lineage, whose very birth will not sit still in the record — what becomes of him at the desk? Almost nothing that matters about him can be entered. The web cannot be entered; there is no field for the company of keepers that sustains him. The relation to place cannot be entered; there is no box for what the ground is to him. The history compressed in his name cannot be entered; the system reads the name as data, not as testimony. He arrives as a whole person formed in relation, and he is received as a row.

This is the specific injury the chapter is naming, and it is subtler than refusal. Craven is not necessarily turned away. He may be processed perfectly correctly. The injury is that the processing, however correct, can only engage the reduced version — and the reduced version omits exactly the relational substrate that the previous chapter showed to be the ground of his agency. The system does not see the web because the system has no eyes for webs. It sees individuals, claims, cases, files. A person whose reality is fundamentally relational is therefore systematically mis-seen by an apparatus that can only recognize the individual, and mis-seen not through malice but through the basic architecture of what a system is.

The cost of this falls on the person as a peculiar kind of solitude. To be processed as an individual is to be, for the duration of the encounter, severed from the web that constitutes

⁹The sequence described here — see, name, record, grant standing, enforce or repair — is offered as a first-person rendering of how an administrative system takes a person in. It corresponds to the recognition and standing vocabulary developed analytically elsewhere in the corpus.

you — to stand at the desk alone in a sense deeper than physical, stripped of the relations that are, in truth, part of who is standing there. The system does not know it is doing this. From its side, it is simply handling a case. From the person's side, it is being asked to appear as something they are not — a self-contained individual — and to conduct their business in that reduced form, and to absorb whatever is lost in the reduction as though the loss were nothing.

Acting anyway

And still the person acts. This is the thread that runs through every chapter and it runs through this one too. Knowing that the category is already written, that the file will outrank the living self, that the web cannot be entered and the reduction cannot be refused, the person walks in anyway and conducts their business — because the business is real, because the standing is needed, because refusing the encounter altogether is its own and often greater cost. The agency exercised here is not the agency of someone who shapes the terms of recognition. It is the agency of someone who submits to terms they did not write, works within them toward an end they do need, and holds, privately and unenterable, the whole relational self that the desk could not see.

Craven did this for a century, in a country whose every institution was built to recognize his people wrongly or not at all, and he kept the web intact on the other side of every such encounter. That the system could not see the web did not mean the web was not there; it meant only that the web survived unrecorded, carried home from every desk undiminished by having been invisible at it. The next chapter stays in the room and asks the harder question — what happens not when the system mis-sees you, but when it sees you, processes you correctly, treats you with perfect procedural politeness, and nothing changes at all.

Five — Polite Walls

*The system opens the door, stamps the form, keeps the appointment — and moves nothing.
The politeness is not the accuracy.*

There is a harder experience than being turned away, and a harder one than being mis-seen. It is being received correctly. The door opens. The clerk is courteous. The form is the right form, and it is stamped, and the appointment is kept, and the letter arrives on time and is properly worded. Every procedure is observed. And nothing changes — not this time, not the next time, not ever, no matter what you bring or how you bring it. This chapter is about that experience, which is among the most disorienting a person can have inside a system, because it gives them nothing to push against and no honest account of why their pushing does not work.

Form without function

An institution is built to do something — to protect, to adjudicate, to provide, to repair. That is its function. It also has a form: the offices, the procedures, the courtesies, the paper, the visible apparatus of an institution doing its work. In a healthy institution the form serves the function; the procedures are how the protecting or the repairing actually happens. But form and function can come apart. An institution can keep the whole of its form — every office staffed, every procedure observed, every courtesy intact — while the function it was built to perform has quietly drained out of it. From outside, and from the front desk, it looks exactly like an institution doing its work. It is, in fact, an institution performing the appearance of its work while the work itself no longer occurs.¹⁰

This is the condition the corpus elsewhere names with precision, and supplies a test for: if the contested outcome never changes through the channel the institution provides — if the recognized pathway, used correctly, demonstrably alters nothing — then the form has been preserved and the function has been lost. The test is behavioral, not rhetorical. It does not ask whether the institution says it is working, or whether its staff are sincere, or whether the procedures are followed; all of those can be fully in order. It asks only whether using the institution as designed produces the change the institution exists to produce.

¹⁰This chapter is the first-person counterpart to the analytic concept of preserved form developed elsewhere in the corpus: the diagnosis of an institution that retains its outward structure while losing the function the structure exists to perform, distinguished by a behavioral test (does the contested outcome change through the recognized channel?), a constraint-subtraction rule, and a withdrawal condition that separates a captured institution from a merely underfunded one. What that framework names from outside, this chapter describes from within.

When the answer is reliably no, the politeness at the desk is not evidence of function. It is the form, intact, around an absence.

Why this is so hard to see from inside

The cruelty of preserved form, for the person subject to it, is that it removes every ordinary signal of obstruction. When you are turned away, you know you have been turned away; the refusal is legible, and you can name it, contest it, organize against it. When you are mis-seen, you can at least point to the gap between who you are and how you were taken. But when you are received correctly and nothing changes, there is no refusal to point to and no visible gap to name. The system can show, at every step, that it did exactly what it was supposed to do. The failure is real and total and also, by the system's own account, nonexistent. You are left holding an experience the institution's records flatly deny.

This produces a particular kind of suffering that is easy to mistake for personal failure. The person begins to wonder whether the fault is theirs — whether they filled the form out wrongly, came to the wrong office, failed to say the right thing, lacked the patience or the competence to make the system work. The system's perfect procedural record encourages exactly this self-suspicion, because if everything was done correctly and nothing changed, the only remaining variable appears to be the person. Preserved form does not just fail to help; it quietly transfers the blame for its own emptiness onto the people it fails to serve, who are the least able to bear it and the least responsible for it.

The distinction that matters

It is essential not to confuse this with an institution that is simply overwhelmed. An underfunded office that cannot keep up, that is trying and failing for want of resources, is a different thing entirely from an institution whose form has been preserved precisely so that its function need not be performed. The difference is detectable, and the corpus draws it with care: an overwhelmed institution will change its contested outcomes when the constraint on it is lifted — give it the resources and the function returns — whereas a captured one will not, because the absence of function is not an accident of scarcity but the point of the arrangement. The withdrawal of resources can always be offered as the innocent explanation. The test is whether restoring them restores the function. Where it does not, the scarcity was the cover, not the cause.

This distinction protects the argument from cynicism. The claim is not that all institutions are hollow, or that procedure is always theater, or that courtesy always masks emptiness. Many institutions function; many failures are honest failures of capacity that more capacity would cure. The claim is narrower and therefore sharper: that some institutions retain their

form for the specific purpose of appearing to perform a function they have ceased to perform, and that the people subject to these institutions are subjected to a distinctive injury — the denial, backed by an impeccable record, of an obstruction they are nonetheless really suffering.

What it asks of the one at the wall

To act under preserved form requires a competence even stranger than the ones the earlier chapters named. The person must somehow hold, at once, two things the system insists are incompatible: that the procedures were genuinely followed, and that the outcome was genuinely denied. They must resist the self-suspicion the perfect record invites, without sliding into the cynicism that says nothing works and nothing is worth attempting. They must learn to read the behavioral test for themselves — to notice, across enough encounters, that the recognized channel is not moving the outcome, and to trust that noticing against an institutional record that contradicts it. This is epistemically demanding work, performed under conditions designed, whether by intent or by drift, to make it nearly impossible.

Craven lived inside institutions of exactly this kind — agencies and offices that recognized his people on paper, observed the forms, kept the records, and moved nothing that mattered. The recognition that a system extends on paper while withholding it in substance is preserved form at the level of a whole people: the treaties unratified and filed away, the standing acknowledged in language and denied in fact, the channels provided and the outcomes frozen. To have continued under that, to have kept the web intact while the institutions performed their hollow courtesies around it, was to have passed the behavioral test in the only way that finally counts — by building and holding, off to the side of the polite walls, the relation the walls were never going to provide. The next chapter follows what happens when the hollow recognition is not merely endured but begins, over time, to get inside the person it is practiced upon.

Six — Hardening

An uncorrected wrong does not stay an event. Left long enough, it becomes a structure — and then it becomes a self.

A wrong that is corrected remains an event. It happened, it was named, it was answered, and it takes its place in a life as something that occurred and was addressed. But a wrong that is never corrected does not hold still in that way. Over time it loses its character as an event at all. It stops being a thing that happened to a person and becomes part of the standing arrangement of their world — first a fact of how things are, then a fact of how things have always been, then simply the background against which everything else is measured. This chapter follows that hardening through its stages, and then follows it to the place the earlier chapters were building toward: inside the person.¹¹

From event to structure

Consider how an uncorrected misrecognition ages. At first it is sharp and legible as a wrong: I have been seen as something I am not, and this is an error, and the error should be fixed. The person knows the shape of the correct recognition and can measure the wrong against it. But correction does not come. The misrecognition persists, is repeated, is built upon; other arrangements are made that assume it; records accumulate that encode it. With each repetition the wrong grows more load-bearing — more things now rest on it, more of the world has been organized around it — and harder to name as a wrong, because naming it would require unsettling everything built on top.

By the end of this process the misrecognition has become a structure. It is no longer experienced as something done to anyone; it is simply how the institutions are arranged, how the categories run, how the world is set up. The original wrong has been laundered by time and repetition into neutral fact. This is how an injustice becomes invisible without ever being resolved — not by being corrected, but by being assumed so thoroughly, for so long, that it passes out of the category of injustice and into the category of circumstance. The harm has not ended. It has been promoted to the status of background.

¹¹The claim that uncorrected misrecognition hardens, over time, from event into structure corresponds to the corpus account of how harm that is not repaired ceases to read as harm and begins to read as the neutral background condition of a life. The first-person register adds the further movement traced here: the same hardening can occur not only in institutions but inside the person subjected to them.

From structure to self

The first-person register reveals a further movement that an account written from outside can miss entirely. The same hardening that turns a wrong into a structure can continue, and turn the structure into a self. A person told wrongly who they are, persistently, without correction, across enough of a life, does not merely live beside the misrecognition. They begin, in places, to incorporate it — to organize their own expectations around it, to anticipate the wrong before it arrives, to pre-shrink themselves into the room the misrecognition leaves them, to stop reaching for what experience has taught them will not be granted. The external structure grows an internal lining.

This is the most intimate damage the book has to describe, and the most important to name carefully, because it is so easily mistaken for the person's own nature. When the lining has set, the person's diminished reaching looks, from outside and sometimes from inside, like who they simply are — their temperament, their limits, their lack of ambition or trust or hope. It is nothing of the kind. It is the shape that uncorrected misrecognition has pressed into them over time. The wrong that began entirely outside the person has, through sheer duration and the absence of repair, taken up residence inside, where it now does the work of limiting them without the system having to lift a hand. The most efficient cage is the one the prisoner has been brought to build inside themselves.

Why naming this is dangerous, and necessary

There is a real hazard in saying this, and the book must hold it openly. To describe the internalization of misrecognition is to risk implying that the people most harmed are damaged goods — that the wrong has won, that the self is now defective, that the diminishment is final. That implication would be false and it would be cruel, and it is the opposite of what is meant. The point of naming the internal lining is not to certify it as permanent. It is the reverse: to denature it, to peel it back from the self it has been mistaken for, to insist that what looks like the person's nature is in fact an injury with a history and therefore, in principle, a thing that can be named, resisted, and undone.

This is why the hardening must be described from the standpoint and not only diagnosed from the shore. From outside, the internalized limit is simply observed as a trait of the population, and the observation can slide, almost without friction, into the very misrecognition it should be exposing — the people seen, once again, as lacking, now with a sociological vocabulary to dignify the seeing. Only from inside can the lining be felt as a lining, as something laid over a self that precedes it and exceeds it. The person who can say, this expectation of mine is not me, it is what was done to me, has already begun the work of separation that the whole rest of the book is oriented toward.

The one who did not let it set

Craven is, in this chapter, the counter-case, and the counter-case is as instructive as the injury. A man carried out of an erasure, named by an erasure, processed for a century by institutions that recognized his people wrongly or not at all, had every condition in place for the misrecognition to set inside him. And by the family's account it did not. He held the stories. He kept the names. He maintained the web. He remained, across the whole length of that pressure, a man who knew who his people were and refused the diminished version the world kept offering. Whatever the cost of that refusal — and the later chapters will not pretend it was free — he did not let the structure become his self.

How a person manages that is not a formula the book can extract and hand out, and it would be false to pretend otherwise. But the standpoint suggests at least this much: that the web of the third chapter and the resistance to internalization in this one are the same thing seen twice. What keeps the misrecognition from setting inside a person is, above all, the relation that holds an alternative recognition in being — the company of those who see you truly, who carry the true account of who your people are, who reflect back a self the system cannot supply. The internal lining sets most readily in isolation. It is held off, most durably, in relation. Which is why the stripping of relation is the deepest violence of all, and why the chapters that remain turn from endurance to two forms of active answer: the refusal that says no, and the return that begins, against everything, to repair.

Seven — Refusing

No is an act of agency, not its absence. A people's refusal can outlast every system built to extract its consent.

Begin with a fact, stated plainly because it does not need anything added to it. A fifteen-year-old was sent to San Quentin in 1941 — among the youngest people ever sent to that prison — at a time before the law recognized the incarceration of a child as raising any question that ought to give it pause. His name was Lee Vernon Gibson. He was Achumawi, born in the Fort Bidwell country, and he was Craven Gibson's son. He died inside the prison within a few years, still a boy by any measure but the law's.¹²

This book has argued that systems see selectively — that their precision is spent where they have a use for it and withheld where they do not. Lee Vernon is the limit case of that argument, and it is placed here, at the threshold of the chapter on refusal, because it marks the full reach of what a system can exact when it sees with total clarity and no care at all. The apparatus that could not fix the year of an elder's birth could try a child, sentence him, number him into a register, and hold him until he died, with complete administrative confidence. The clarity was always available. It was turned on for the prosecution of a boy and turned off for the recognition of one. There is no contradiction in that, for the system; the selectivity is the whole of how it works. There is only the fact of the boy, and what it cost.

What refusal is, and is not

Against that fact, the chapter turns to refusal — and it must be careful from the first sentence, because Lee Vernon's death is precisely what refusal could not prevent, and any account that made refusal sound like a reliable shield against such things would be a lie told over a child's grave. Refusal does not guarantee outcomes. It did not save him. What this chapter claims is narrower and, in its place, unbreakable: that refusal is itself an act of agency, a real exercise of the capacity to act, even when — especially when — it

¹²Lee Vernon Gibson (also recorded as Vernon Lee Gibson) was Craven Gibson's son. He appears in the California prison records as received at San Quentin in 1941 at the age of fifteen, under a life sentence; he is recorded as Achomawi, born in the Fort Bidwell area, and died at the prison in the mid-1940s. As with the births and the name, the surrounding dates in the administrative record do not all reconcile, and this book treats those discrepancies as further evidence of how these lives were recorded rather than as doubt about the relation. What is not in question, and what the chapter turns on, is the conjoined fact: that Craven's fifteen-year-old son was sent to San Quentin, among the youngest ever so sent, in an era before the law recognized the incarceration of children as raising any distinct question at all.

cannot secure the result it seeks. To say no to a system that has the power to proceed regardless is not the failure of agency. It is one of its purest forms.

The dry-land picture has trouble seeing this, because it measures agency by effect: an act counts as agency to the degree that it gets what it aims at. By that measure, refusal that does not prevail looks like mere gesture, noise, the powerless shaking a fist at what they cannot stop. But the standpoint shows something the effect-measure misses. To refuse is to withhold the one thing a dominating system most needs and cannot simply take: the consent that would convert its power into authority, its force into legitimacy. A system can compel a body. It cannot compel a yes. The no remains the property of the one who holds it, and holding it — refusing to supply the consent that would complete the system's claim — is an exercise of agency that no amount of external power can directly overcome.

The people's no

This becomes clearest not at the scale of a single person but at the scale of a people, and it is at that scale that the chapter's central instance lies. The Pit River people were subjected to nearly every instrument a state possessed: removal, the killing years, the boarding schools, the long administrative weather, and the particular insult of treaties negotiated and then never validly ratified — agreements that would have bound away the land, made and then filed unsigned, so that the dispossession proceeded without even the cover of a completed bargain. And across all of it the people did not supply the yes. The standing was never surrendered. The claim to the land was never converted, by any valid act of consent, into a relinquishment.¹³

This sustained non-surrender is refusal at its most consequential. It meant that every subsequent assertion of the people's claim — including the land actions of the early 1970s, when a younger generation moved to reclaim what had never been validly taken — was not the invention of a new demand but the continuation of a refusal that had never been withdrawn. A people that has never said yes retains, across generations, the standing to say no again, and to act on it. The refusal is cumulative. It is held in the web, handed forward like the stories and the names, and it constitutes a form of collective agency that persists precisely because it was never spent on a consent the system kept trying to extract.

¹³On the unratified California treaties of 1851–52 and the long non-surrender of Pit River claims, and on the land actions of the early 1970s in Pit River country, see the historical record and Wilson's account; these are treated more fully in the companion family work. They are invoked here as instances of collective refusal, not given their full historical treatment.

Why the system needs the yes

It is worth asking why a system with overwhelming power should care at all about a consent it could simply do without. The answer reveals something about the nature of the power. Naked force is expensive, unstable, and illegitimate; it must be applied continuously, and it persuades no one. A system that can convert force into authority — that can get the governed to supply, or appear to supply, their consent — has secured something force alone cannot buy: the appearance of rightful arrangement, the quieting of the question of legitimacy, the transformation of an imposition into an accepted order. This is why the unsigned treaty was still wanted, why the appearance of agreement mattered even to a power that could take the land anyway. The yes was needed because the yes is what turns conquest into title.

And this is exactly what refusal withholds. To refuse the yes is to keep the question of legitimacy open, to deny the system the conversion it most wants, to force the imposition to remain visibly an imposition rather than settling into accepted fact. The hardening described in the previous chapter — the laundering of a wrong into mere circumstance — depends on the eventual supply of consent, active or resigned. Refusal is what interrupts the hardening. A people that keeps saying no keeps the wrong from completing its passage into background, holds it open as a wrong, and preserves thereby the possibility of repair that the next chapter takes up.

The cost, named

None of this softens the fact the chapter began with. Refusal kept the claim alive; it did not keep Lee Vernon alive. The people's no, real and consequential as it was, ran alongside a stream of individual losses it could not prevent — the boy in the prison among them — and the book would betray its own commitment to the standpoint if it let the dignity of collective refusal paper over the grief of particular destruction. Both are true at the same time and neither cancels the other. A people can refuse across a century and still bury its children to the system it refuses. The refusal is not vindicated by being made painless, because it was not painless. It is vindicated by being real — by being an act, held and handed forward, that the system could neither extract nor extinguish, exacted at a cost that this book will not pretend was anything less than it was.

Craven held that refusal in the ordinary register of a long life: in the keeping of the names the schools tried to erase, in the maintenance of a web the removals tried to scatter, in the simple unsundered fact of remaining who his people were. The younger ones held it in the louder register of the land actions. And Craven held it, too, as a father who had given a son to that same system and gone on refusing anyway — for the boy in the prison was his

own, and the man who kept the web intact across a century did so on the far side of a grief that the system inflicted and never answered. The final chapter turns from the no to what the no keeps possible — the long, unguaranteed, mostly unwitnessed work of return and repair, which is the form agency takes when it sets out not merely to withhold consent from a wrong but to begin, against every reason for despair, to mend what the wrong has broken.

Eight — The Long Return

Repair is the agency of restoration. It is mostly invisible, mostly uncompensated, and it is the form agency takes when it sets out to mend what cannot be undone.

There is a kind of agency that does not withhold and does not refuse but sets out, instead, to mend. It is the last and in some ways the largest of the forms this book has followed, and it is the hardest to see, because it does its work slowly, across years, mostly without witness and almost always without reward. The earlier chapters traced agency under conditions designed to end it — continuing, being seen, holding, walking in, standing at the wall, resisting the wrong's passage inward, refusing the yes. This chapter follows what all of that keeps possible: the turning back toward what was broken, to begin the long work of repair. The book has called this the long return, and it is the return that the whole rest of the argument exists to reach.

What repair is

Repair is not the undoing of harm. The harm is not undone; the dead are not returned; the boy does not come home from the prison; the language beaten out of a generation does not come back whole. To imagine repair as a reversal is to set it an impossible task and then to despair when it fails the task it was never able to meet. Repair is something else. It is the work of building, on the far side of an irreversible wrong, conditions under which life can continue and the wrong can be kept from being final — the relations remade, the names recovered, the memory carried forward, the next generation given something to stand on that the wrong tried to deny them. Repair faces the harm fully, refuses to pretend it away, and works anyway to keep it from having the last word.

This is why repair is the highest expression of the agency the book has been describing. It requires everything the earlier forms required — the continuing, the holding, the refusing — and adds to them a turning-toward-the-future that none of the others demand. To refuse is to deny the wrong its consent. To repair is to go further, to take on the active labor of mending in a world that offers no guarantee the mending will hold, and to do it not for oneself, often, but for people one will never meet. It is agency at its most exposed: building what may break, planting what one will not see grow, bringing wood to a fire one is keeping alight for those who will sit by it after.

Craven's repair

Craven's whole long life, seen now from the end of the book, was an act of repair. A man carried out of an erasure as an infant, named by an erasure, who lost his son to the system at fifteen and buried him before the boy was twenty — that man spent the decades

that followed keeping a people's memory alive. He held the names. He kept the stories. He made the gatherings that sustained the web. He loved the Pit River country in a way that those who knew him remembered as something close to legendary. None of this undid what had been done to him. It did something else, something the book has tried to give its proper name: it kept the wrong from being final. It built, on the far side of grief that would have been reason enough to stop, the conditions under which the people's memory could outlive the systems built to end it.

And it cost what the first chapter said it cost. The same man who held all of that came to the end of it alone, in a cabin, with a bottle, on land that had been his — carrying a grief that the keeping of the memory did not cure and was perhaps never going to cure. The book has refused, throughout, to resolve the two into one. The repair was real and the cost was real and neither makes the other smaller. A man can perform the largest act of agency there is — the mending of a world for people he would not live to meet — and still be broken by what it took to do it. To say that his life was an act of repair is not to redeem his suffering. It is to refuse to let his suffering be the only true thing about him.

The lineage of the work

Repair, because it works across time and not within a single life, is necessarily the work of more than one person. It is handed forward. And the handing-forward is itself visible in this very family, in a line of people who each took up the keeping of the memory and carried it one stage further than they had received it. Before Craven there was Sukmit, also known as Frank Martin, who tried to save the language under the shadow of the school built to destroy it. Craven kept the names and the stories through the long middle of the century. And then his grandson, Darryl Babe Wilson, who had heard the old man tell of the escape from the island, wrote it down — set the elder's account on the page, against the erasure, having promised himself for years that he would do it because it was time.¹⁴

Each of these was the same act performed again in a new generation: the refusal to let the memory die, carried out by whatever means that generation had. Sukmit had the language. Craven had the spoken stories and the living web. Wilson had the written word and the scholar's training, and he used them to fix in permanent form a life that the records would otherwise have reduced to a contradictory entry and a prison number. The work did

¹⁴Darryl Babe Wilson, "Allisti Ti-Tanin-Miji," *The Californians* 9, no. 6 (May/June 1992). Wilson recorded his grandfather Craven Gibson's account and wrote, of his own long postponement of the task, that he kept promising himself he would write the story down because it was time. The act of writing the elder down, against erasure, is treated in this closing chapter as itself an instance of the repair the book describes.

not belong to any one of them. It passed through them. This is what repair looks like when it is real: not a single restorative act but a relay, each runner carrying what the last one handed over, none of them living to see the finish, because there is no finish — only the carrying, and the handing-on.

The one who writes it down now

I am the next one to carry it. I have kept Craven Gibson at the center of this book not as an example but as the standpoint from which everything in it was seen, because he is my great-grandfather, and because the framework these pages have built was not imported from a tradition I read my way into — it was the attempt to say, in terms that could travel, what I already knew from the inside of this family, from the shape of the harm that ran through it and the agency that persisted across it anyway. I did not invent what this book describes. I inherited it. The writing is my stage of the relay.

And I know what it is to write down a man whose end was hard. I know that Craven died alone, and why the records of his birth will not sit still, and that the boy who went to San Quentin was his son. I have not written any of it away. To keep it real is the only form of respect adequate to him — to set down the escape and the cabin, the web he held and the temper he had, the people he loved and the loss that finally closed over him, without sanding any of it into a shape easier to bear. He does not need to be made into a hero. He was a man who continued, at a cost, and was loved, and is remembered. Writing him truly is the repair I am able to make.

This is what it means to come to the fire with wood in your hands. The ones before me kept the language, kept the stories, kept the written record, each adding what they could to a fire none of them lit and none of them will see go out. I have added this. It will not undo the erasure that named him, or return the son the state took, or fill the cabin with anything but what was already there. That was never what repair could do. What it can do is keep the wrong from being final — carry the man forward, into a place where those who come after can find him, and know that he was here, and know that they are not the first to have refused to let him be forgotten. The return is long because it has no end. We are only ever in the middle of it, already carried, already carrying, bringing what wood we have to a fire that was burning before us and will be warming someone long after we are gone.

A note on standpoint and sources

This book stands beside other work of mine that approaches governance and structure more directly. Here the movement is different. It begins from within a life and follows what can be seen from there.

Its anchor is Craven Gibson, my great-grandfather, a Pit River elder. He is not treated as an example chosen to illustrate an argument reached somewhere else. He is the standpoint from which the argument became visible.

The principal published account drawn on here is Darryl Babe Wilson's telling of Craven's life. Where Wilson's account and surviving administrative records diverge, I do not assume the record is the cleaner truth. In California Native history, and in Indian Country more broadly, the record is often part of the problem. It preserves, but it also distorts, thins, renames, misplaces, and erases. For that reason, this book reads administrative conflict not simply as a research inconvenience but as part of the historical substance being described.

Some facts cannot now be fixed with certainty: dates, names, generational spacing, and the exact relation between remembered lives and recorded entries. I have not forced those uncertainties into a false resolution. Where memory is family memory, it is treated as such. Where interpretation is mine, it is marked by the shape and voice of the writing itself.

This is not a book that begins from archival confidence. It begins from carrying.