

Audio Transcript: *hand, writing*

Up Close: Julia Solomonoff

Julia:

This morning, I practiced yoga with my instructor in Buenos Aires. Then I taught at the university in Brooklyn, although many of my students are back in their hometowns and wake up at weird hours in order to attend class. In the afternoon, I moderated a panel for a festival in the Netherlands. And when a friend in Brazil invited me to a Zoom dinner, I told her I couldn't handle any more screen time. I turned off the computer and went for a walk in the park. As I walk, I ask myself what imprint our transition to the virtual world will leave in our personal memory. How do we remember when there were no places, smells, objects, those physical markers that we use to hold a memory and encapsulate a moment?

How do we remember when there was no physical trace? When the words were not followed by an embrace? How do we imprint a memory that has not passed through our body? I write in this notebook to remember, and sometimes I write to forget. My students, my kids no longer write by hand. In just a year, the notebooks have become obsolete.

Nina:

Today, we are going to be talking about an artifact that was greatly used in the past: the notebook.

Notebooks had different sizes and uses. They were made out of paper coming from trees with soft or hard covers. Depending on the need, notebooks could be lined, grid, or blank. Lined paper had a series of horizontal, straight lines and a vertical margin. The lines were meant to keep handwriting on its course and avoid a deviation. We will explain the concept of handwriting later on. Grid notebooks were used for geometry as they helped to visualize spatial dimensions. Blank ones were used for drawing.

So you open the notebook and turn the page, in this order. You can't skip any pages and you can't scroll or jump. Boring.

Notebook advocates claimed that these artifacts helped visualize a journey or progression in learning. They claimed that the acquisition of knowledge would get scattered and lost if laid in loose leaf or in web pages. The notebook wasn't only used for school. Many used them for work and in their everyday life to manage their time and contacts called address books or calendars, or to make personal annotations called journals or diaries. It was common to give little girls journals with keys and locks. A popular end of the year tradition was to gift planners, to wish for a happy new year. These planners only allowed for one time zone because the meetings and tasks took place in a fixed geographical space.

Julia:

There was a time when, at the end of the year, I used to transfer my contacts from one phone book to another. That ritual reminded me of people and events of the year, helped me decide who I was going to stay in touch with, whose numbers and birthdays to keep. I remember the impact of coming across the

name of someone who had died, or the confusion of reading a name and no longer remembering who it belonged to.

Nina:

If you made a mistake, you couldn't rip out the page because that would damage the book since the binding system connected all the pages. If you made a mistake in ink, you could just strike it out, but everyone would be able to see your mistake. If you used pencil, you could just erase it, but there'd always be some sort of physical evidence of your errors and doubts. It's not particularly nice for someone who wants to be perceived as flawless.

Julia:

All right, Nina, good take.

Nina:

The elimination of notebooks simplified the work of teachers who no longer needed to check homework, decipher handwritings, or correct exams. Finally, transparency and equity was guaranteed by the algorithm.

Julia:

I miss the classrooms and the corridors, the debates in which we talked over each other. This year helped me appreciate my role as an educator. It revealed to me how much I have internalized the individualistic, success-driven, and even masculinized role of the film director over the feminized, undervalued role of the teacher. As professor, I found a renewed strength and purpose in meeting with my students who give me a sense of belonging, a diverse and dynamic community.

Nina:

Handwriting was the physical act of writing. It was taught in schools to five or six year olds. With enough practice, the stroke would eventually transform or evolve. You could identify someone's profession, their mood, their level of education, or even nationality by their handwriting.

Unidentified Speaker 1:

[speaking in Spanish] *I looked for the loose words in between his papers.*

Unidentified Speaker 2:

I write in English with a Russian accent, even though I didn't speak with a Russian accent, and even though I can barely write English.

Julia:

My grandma's cursive in her recipe book, my grandfather's prints in the crossword puzzles, my father's letters, my mother's illegible writing on her medical prescription pads. You could spot emotion, fear, agitation, and doubt in handwriting. It could express affection like a caress. It could be expansive or shy. Writing is a gesture, an individual mark. It starts clumsy, laborious, and it becomes distinctive and personal. And with age, it can get hesitant and blur. What is lost when we lose our own handwriting?

My dad died this year during the pandemic.

[speaking in Spanish] “Together before my eyes, and thinking may this image never be erased.”

My sister found a letter in his night table addressed to her.

[speaking in Spanish] “I don’t know what tomorrow’s world will be or what vicissitudes you will face. But though it sounds absurd and exaggerated, your sisterhood gives me consolation and hope. Hold each other in a tight embrace. We will be inside it. Papa.”

Nina:

This is one of the mysteries of the notebook era, the proliferation of doodles. We’re still trying to figure out exactly what their messages or functions are, for it’s become quite hard for us to decipher. They generally appear in the margin of the text, somehow connecting to the body of the text, but also to the inner life of the student. They’re totally unrelated to the area of study.

Julia:

A few years ago, a teacher admonished my son for becoming distracted and doodling in his notebook. During the pandemic, he devotes himself to drawing, moving from paper to screen and back, spending hours immersed in a state of concentration.

Nina:

There’s a small town in Santa Fe, Argentina, called Garabato, or doodle. We are still investigating the relationship between its inhabitants and this practice.

Tango also has its own doodle, the *firulete*, but its connection to writing could not be verified by the algorithm.

Our passage to the virtual age allowed us to break free from chronological time and enter into the quantum era. We no longer need to transport ourselves in order to be in different places at the same time and live in parallel and simultaneous realities.

Julia:

Movement brings new ideas. How static and locked are the thoughts of someone who no longer moves around? Of someone who goes from work meetings to social life with just a click? How much thought is generated in transit, in between places, in waiting? What do we lose when we no longer approach others? When our lives stopped crossing paths, when we live in controlled parts, when we cannot see the world from mobile and multiple perspectives, and we are locked down in a fixed point? What do we lose when we can no longer put ourselves in each other’s shoes or simply be somewhere else or meet someone new?

Protestors:

Black lives matter.

Whose streets? Our streets. Whose streets? Our streets. Whose streets? Our streets.

Black lives matter. Black lives matter.