

Narrative Shifts

Session 2: Recommended Reading. In 2024, we sat down with [Saba Keramati](#), whom we published in [Issue 14: Economies of Harm](#); the poem we published is the first poem in her collection, [Self Mythology](#)) to talk about how she wields archives in her work. She joined one of our residency sessions as a guest writer, which we do from time to time. Below, she shares her “stones of wisdom,” as we call them, and below that, you’ll find our conversation, both of which can help you get to thinking about archives before our session together.



Saba Keramati's stones of wisdom:

- *An archive is both the medium and the space.*
- *As such, you are a living archive: you hold your own archives, whether they be, as Seventh Wave says, emotional, historical, familial, or otherwise.*
- *When I did this activity with Seventh Wave in 2021, I mined through linguistic and familial archives, which for me were intertwined as a child of immigrants. But I used other archives in my collection, Self-Mythology: I wrote a series of centos with lines from Asian American writers. These centos were taken from poems written in the first person, which allowed me to expand the “I” of the collection. The “I” was my speaker, but it was also other diaspora writers.*
- *Your role as a writer is to be. You are the archive, and you are creating a contemporary archive as you write and move through the world, as you witness and write with the history unfolding around you. The archive is your body, and the archive is your experience.*
- *Archives are inherently anti capitalist: in their definition they are “naturally and necessarily generated,” whether they are generated as commercial or social product. The archive is “distinct from documents that are consciously written or created to communicate a particular message.”*
- *2020: so many covid poems. 2024: so many better poems written in the time of loneliness that don’t even mention covid. We need to live through history before we can archive it; before we can understand it.*

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You can see the condensed transcript of our conversation with Saba from the summer 2024 session below.

Saba Keramati: Seventh Wave gave me the opportunity to write [this poem](#) in this braided format that connects to archives, two cultures, two histories in my personal life, which is the story of my parents. It kind of became the first poem in my collection. I call it the prequel poem because it gives all the background and the history and the context of my parents' lives and my relationship to that, which leads into the rest of the book as a narrative. I mined through linguistic and familial archives when I was thinking about this activity, but I also used a bunch of other archives including the Cento form, which uses individual lines from other writers, and I did a series of three cento poems in my book, all using lines from Asian American writers, most of whom are still actually alive. So when I say archive, I don't necessarily just think of history.

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One thing I think that's really interesting about the word *archive* is that it's both the object and medium, the space or the vessel that houses the archival materials. I am encouraging you to think of yourselves as an archive, as a living archive, and that you're holding your own archives. As Seventh Wave says, it could be emotional, historical, familial, otherwise, and it doesn't just mean documents. It doesn't just mean who's been recorded in history in a certain way. It includes oral histories and stories that were told, and tiny things like these little pigs that might not mean anything to somebody else but mean something to you.

You're collecting that archive in your body, so your role as a writer is to *just be* because you are the archive and you are creating a contemporary archive as you write and move through the world and as you witness and write with the history unfolding around you. I say *with the history* and not *about the history*, because as an editor in 2020, I received one billion COVID poems, and most of them were really bad because they were something that had not been contended with yet. It was just like, *Oh, this is happening, I don't have a thought about it, but it's happening*. And I get it. It was a time of fear. But in 2024, when we look back on stuff that was written about that time, or even if we think about longer in the future, so many better poems will be written that don't even mention the word COVID, but they will be contending with loneliness and

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isolation and fear and disease and recovery. We need to live through history before we can archive it, and that means that your role is really just to live with the contemporary, live with what is happening now, and the archive will become your experience and your body.

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Joyce Chen: Now that *Self Mythology* is out there — perhaps a part of “the canon” — *Self Mythology* is now kind of an archive, a canon, of literature. What is your hope for how folks will come back and reference it?

Saba Keramati: When I was submitting this book, I remember thinking, *I do not care what happens to this after I die*. I remember being knocked down with some rejections and everyone said, *Well, Vincent van Gogh didn't get discovered until after he died*. And I was like, *I don't care. That doesn't make me feel better in any way*.

Now that it's a real physical thing, I do feel a little differently about it. I feel like I want it to last, but I don't know how far in the future we're thinking. The thing about contemporary books is that they get printed on really crappy paper. It's not back in the old days when you could still find a book where the physical object of the book would last a hundred years. That really doesn't happen anymore. They disintegrate.

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In terms of longevity, some people say you don't really die until the last person who has a story of you dies. And I feel like that a little bit with this book. If it's in someone's memory — even if they don't remember that the line came from something I wrote or they don't remember my name, but they have the idea — that's really enough for me.

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When we think of the canon and longevity, we get stuck in this thought of the industry of publishing, and that's kind of just inevitable from living in the world that we live in. You can put it in a zine and encase it in resin and it will literally never die, and then you've created something, you've built an archive. I just saw this very silly thing on TikTok, where a girl was opening a time capsule she had made with her family and there were McDonald's toys in there. You never know what is important to you at that moment. At a moment in time, you don't know what it's going to mean to someone later. You don't know. Even if you find it in 25 years and you forgot what you wrote, there might still be value in it. I hope that with my book, when I look back on it, I can still feel that at any point in time.

Resident: I'm curious about your decision to braid in two cultures. As a bicultural person, I've always compartmentalized the two. I'm really interested in your choice to braid both, because for me, it still seems like a very hard thing to do: braiding two heritages.

Saba Keramati: It is really hard. That's why I needed this residency to be able to do it. I needed so long to think about how to bring these things together. I don't even know that I did it 100% the way that you're saying because I separated them into these different strands and then braided them together. I guess it's half put-together, but it is still showing that it's separate, because I felt like that was the thing that was actually true to my experience. If they feel separate in your life, maybe the answer is not to try to put them together in a way that feels inauthentic to the way that it lives in your body.

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I fully feel like my mom is on one side of my life and my dad is on another. And those histories came together into this braid, and that's the form that I used to end up thinking about. Don't force yourself to put braids together in a way before they feel ready. I keep talking about *The Story Game*. It's a memoir, but it literally ends — and this is not a spoiler to say — in the present day. I just think that's really, really interesting, as a way to write memoir. She was working through a lot of her finding, recovering her memories due to complex PTSD, and it ends with her being like, I'm still not really sure what to do with it. And that's fascinating to me. She was writing through this thing as it happens, and I think a lot more of ourselves need to give ourselves the

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ability to not fully understand — or I guess we understand it — but to be writing in the present about what we feel so in a way that feels authentic to ourselves. She didn't try to wrap up the book in a pretty little bow. She was just like, it's still confusing. I think if it's confusing to you or it feels separate to you as a bicultural person, use that and see what you can come up with rather than trying to put it into something really neat.

Resident: A resident asked a question about gatekeeping in the publishing industry because they had a bad experience with publishing, and ultimately not publishing, a chapbook that had won a contest.

Saba Keramati: That's so much to contend with. I'm thinking specifically about your saying (we removed the exact question above, but felt this answer was still important) the relationship between poetry and publication is separate, and it really, really does have to be that way. The publication game is not set up for anyone really to be super successful in it. It's one of those things where once you get one, it's easier to get more.

Looking back at some of my earlier publications, I did the same thing as you (referencing not speaking up for something that felt questionable). It was my third publication ever, and the publication paired my piece, which really had nothing to do with Islam, with a photo of a woman in a hijab. I don't know why they did this, and it felt weird, but I did not feel confident enough in myself to say anything. I remember complaining to my mom about it, and she was like, you should email them and ask. And I was like, *Oh, I'm scared because I don't want to set a precedent as being a needy writer and they tell their lit mag editor friends not to publish me anymore.* I was way too scared, and the poem probably still looks like that on their website. I say this all to say we've all done stuff like that before we understood, before we knew better. At the end of the day, your words really are precious and it's really important to remember that. And it's important to remember that they're yours and you have power over them.

Sometimes, I think submitters feel like an editor has a hierarchy over them, and that is just not true. The editor could be me and my pajamas on my couch, for example, reading through submissions with a double chin hunched over. They're literally just a person. They're a person, probably a volunteer, probably not getting paid. They're not going to really think twice about it. They read so many things, and so you actually have the power in that situation. I think that's really, really important to remember. If you want to send them an email and lie, and be like, I'll CC a lawyer to get me out of this contract, they probably won't even care because they're probably stressed with something else. Do the thing that feels best to you, truly, because one day you don't want to be like me looking back and being upset that you didn't. It's easier said than done, because it's harder to do because it's scarier. But your words really are precious and everything that's like housing your words, that's just an institution. And I don't believe in those. So I'm not anti self-publishing at all.

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I think what I've learned as I've been publishing is the people who read my work, who are my most loyal readers, are the people who are my friends. And so they're going to read them no matter where you put them, if you put them in an email, if you put them in a substack, if you put them in a zine or a book, sell it on Ingram yourself. They will read it and they will tell their friends about it. And that's been the number one thing that's happened. Genuine community in my writing life that I'm most grateful for. And all these people now in the Seventh Wave digital residency, they're all going to read your work forever no matter where you publish it because they're fans of yours. So, to that point, who are you writing for? Nobody really gets famous from poetry. Maybe if you're Ocean Vuong. But at the end of the day, it's the people you connect with that are going to read your work no matter what, and uplift you in that way.