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Faculty of Film, Arts and Creative Technologies

The Family Archive: Constructed Narratives, Exclusion  
and Loss

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Submitted to the Department of Film & Media  
in candidacy for the Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree  
in Photography & Visual Media 2026

## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Photography & Visual Media. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Student Number \_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the concept of the family archive as it exists in everyday lives, in the form of family images decorating the walls or dusty shoeboxes hidden in the depths of a wardrobe; but what is its purpose? It considers the purpose of the family archive and examines how a simple image can elicit deep emotions and provide us with complicated and sentimental narratives

Through a study of my own family archive and text from academics such as Roland Barthes, Marianne Hirsh and Paul Ricoeur, I would like to discuss the narrative surrounding its contents. This emotional and reflective study explores the questions that surround me as an adult and as an artist and it examine the effects of the archive on myself and my family. It explores the family archive as a constructed narrative that provides me with an understanding of my family and my own history.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Dr Justin Carville and Aoife Herrity for their help in completing my research and for sharing their vast knowledge with me. I would also like to thank the staff at IADT for encouraging me throughout my studies.

For Nana Kath, Aunty Jen, Papa John and my family for being supportive of my endeavours.

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## **Introduction**

The family archive may be something we are all familiar with, tucked away in drawers, shoe boxes and dusty rooms lie fragments of once vividly lived moments now yellowed and worn with age. Handwritten letters filled with intimate thoughts, documents discussing major life events and keepsakes that hold immense sentimental value. These personal and familial collections are what we call the family archive. Often forgotten, they are far more than a simple assortment of objects, images and documents; the family archive is a curated and forever evolving narrative of personal and collective memory. A moderately private museum which tells the story of not only individuals but of prior generations, stories of how they loved, lost and celebrated.

The family archive is an ongoing construct that influences personal and family identity. The ways in which families curate, build, and understand these archival materials shape anecdotes that affect the preservation of memory. These constructed narratives, whether intentional or not, significantly influence how families perceive their history and navigate their relationships.

In recent years, the idea of the family archive has taken on a different and more contemporary meaning. Many images are online and are lost into the vast cloud along with an endless number of texts, videos, and mentions. In we are what we keep Anna states that “There was an anxiety about what will be preserved and handed down to future generations in the digital age, and a concern that digital records would be lost or inaccessible.”<sup>1</sup> The digitalization of the family archive has both negatively and positively affected its meaning. Firstly, the archive is more accessible, family members from around the world can share images and stories digitally but, in my opinion, this takes away some

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Cordova, “Maya Angelou’s 2011 ‘Arizona Republic’ Interview,” The Arizona Republic, May 28, 2014, <https://eu.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/books/2014/05/28/maya-angelou-arizona-republic-interview/9682587>.

of the personal aspects to the archive, the physicality of the archive provides the viewer with a feeling of belonging a deeper emotional connection.

As topics of identity, heritage and belonging take centre stage in personal and public discourse, individuals are more frequently seeking insight and answers from their own family histories. In this regard, the family archive acts as a reflection, providing understanding not just of our origins but also of who we believe ourselves to be. “If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you're going.”<sup>1</sup> The family archive provides a glimpse into the past, remembering cultural traditions, migrations, languages, and even trauma that might otherwise be lost to time. They also raise important questions such as, what is chosen to be included in the archive? Who is remembered? In what ways do the narratives we share influence our perception of ourselves and our role in the world? Diane Taylor describes the archive as “a place of both promise and pain it offers the potential for recovery, remembrance, and identity, but also reveals gaps, silences, and exclusions.”<sup>2</sup>

This research will explore the complex role of the family archive, examining its significance not only as a tool for emotional connection and identity formation. By examining the layers of meaning seen within the family archive, we can better appreciate its power to bridge past and present, memory and legacy. This research argues that the family archive is not only a site of memory, but an active space where narratives are constructed, reinterpreted, and used to shape identity across generations. This thesis aims to examine how stories within the family archive are created, how they evolve and how they get passed down from generation to generation. In this thesis I will examine my own family archive which I analysed after my grandmothers passing and I will discuss the

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

narrative within and surrounding the archive and how it has affected my life and in my work.

**Chapter one** will examine the intricate world of narrative studies and how it directly impacts the storytelling and curation of a family archive as well as the collective memories of the family within the archive. Chapter one will discuss the hidden meaning and stories behind those archival images and documents that cannot be seen upon initial inspection and is looming over the images in the form of words and emotions. It will discuss the formation of my own family archive, and I will discuss my own emotional response to the material when I became the curator and partial owner of its contents. Chapter one will also examine and discuss the ethnographic research method and how I feel it applied to my research.

**Chapter two** examines how narratives are constructed. Using works by Jerome Bruner I will examine how the narrative can change and distort within the archive. Chapter Two will focus on exclusion from the archive. How does this exclusion impact the narrative and flow of the archive and its storyline? Who chooses what to remember and what to forget? I will discuss exclusion within my own family archive when my uncle was removed from the archive leaving only one image behind.

**Chapter three** examines loss in the archive and its relationship with memory and grief. Analyzing the curation of the family archive and my grandmother's role in its preservation, I will discuss how the archive is a tool for healing and dealing with loss. Chapter three will discuss the role and representation of death in narrative and photography by delving into *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes. I will examine Barthes' method of grieving and apply that to my own personal archive, and I will explore the feelings of loss and how I as an artist can learn from my own archive.

In short, this thesis aims to highlight the importance of narrative within the family archive.

It aims to show how an image is just the beginning of the story and many more memories and words arise from its presence

## Chapter One

My own family archive was stored within my grandmother's house. (Fig.1) Images stuffed in a box on top of the wardrobe in her bedroom, and my dad's childhood bedroom barely touched storing some of the most influential memories of my dad's life. The house was littered with objects; porcelain dolls lined up the shelves, and childhood drawings hung loosely on every surface. Downstairs, images of my family were seen on all four walls in the living room, each image framed and in a messy grid resting on the patterned wallpaper above where she sat. The wooden cabinet stored her life; important documents were messily stored in old squeaky drawers littered with mess and memories. The one shelf stained with rings of coffee from each cup of coffee throughout the years was paired with smaller dolls for a more relaxed look alongside her video picture frame. The fireplace mantle sat in front of a large mirror lay a pink fiber optic L.E.D lit decoration. It had sat there for years collecting dust and entertaining the grandchildren for as long as I can remember. My grandads memorial card sat alongside it, in the beautiful silver mirrored frame his portrait sat there with a short description of his life, I wish I had the words that were written but I have no idea where that frame is now, sandwiched beside the memorial was a gorgeous image of my grandparents wedding, their young cheerful faces smiling away not realizing the lineage they will have after this day, five beautiful children and many more grandchildren. In the image she wore a ribboned horseshoe adorned on her wrist. I remember the story she told me about how her mother wore it and her mother before her. It was a beautiful play on the tradition, something borrowed. Along the floor lied her red diamond and patterned carpet; the fireplace was never lit, but the tv was always on. Sat on the tv stand the pay as you go tv box was there sat beside a dusty jar filled with jewellery, most made by the grandchildren with rubber bands and beads but one of more importance, a red bracelet engraved with the word's "love" and the initials of both my grandparents. The large window lit up the whole room, a wide view onto her street where

the dog sat, aged fences with the paint chipped off and a blue rope older than me wrapped around the pillar to prevent the dog from running. As you walk out of the front garden, the walls are littered with badges. A huge A3 cork board littered with pin badges from all over the world, every event, every country and even some random ones. They were the first thing you saw as you walked into the house.

All the memories I have, though I wish I could relive them, are stored within the archive I have curated from both my nan and my dad. When my nan passed in 2018, I travelled to the UK to help clear out her home. The house was a council house, so we were given 2 weeks to completely clear out the house in its entirety. Dust particles filled the air as we removed each individual doll and image from her bedroom. The dolls were stored in my aunt's shed along with a cassette and stamp collection which are still there to this day. Traveling home both my dad and I's suitcases were filled with memories from the past 70 years of my nan's life as well as my dad's childhood and mine. Each pin from her famous cork board was removed and stored in a green plastic bag and given to me. This was a great honor as I grew up loving this collection and had already begun curating my own. My dad took the images to his home. He had a huge duffel bag he used as a teen and stored a collection of smaller plastic bags inside each containing images and documents from the past 7 decades. When I began to study photography, I wanted to use my skills to turn the archive into a more forever and longer lasting collection, so I took the archive home. I stored them in many ways, board game boxes, dental set boxes, and envelopes I had in my house. This collection of items and images has a very important and sentimental role not only within my family but within me, the pictures and objects have this immense sense of value due to the context and narrative they are provided to me with. The narrative of each image and the orality behind it is the true reason it has such a valuable meaning.



(FIG 1) *Nana Kath in her living room, Circa 2010, Bolton UK*

Within fig.1 objectively, the image shows my Grandmother Kath sitting on a white leather couch and her dog Buster sits at my nan's feet resting on a red carpet with a diamond pattern. My nan sits in front of a dark mahogany cabinet. On the cabinet sits a single Santa doll (maybe it's Christmas time), a collection of images, a stuffed tiger, a disposable camera, many jars, lotions, medicine, and a drawing of a bouquet of flowers above her head.

The image represents my nan's life, in her place of comfort where she watched her family grow up. The vivid memories I have of this place are sparked by an image, but the narrative behind it is much more impactful. When discussing this image, I am aware of my bias as I grew up as a part of this family and as a part of the archive itself. The image only shows so much but living my life I have seen this room, I've loved this woman I've pet this dog I've sat on that couch, and I've lived moments like this. My extensive knowledge of this archive gives me an in-depth understanding of the image that the viewer does not have. This image has a huge narrative surrounding it, and for me is the catalyst for a much bigger and more important conversation of the things that are not seen in the image but have just as much, if not more of a role in the importance and significance of the archive. This phenomenon is discussed by Marianne Hirsch in her book *Family Frames* where she claims that “Family pictures depend on such a narrative act of adoption that transforms rectangular pieces of cardboard into telling details connecting lives and stories across continents and generations”<sup>3</sup> When isolated, these photographs found within the family archive don't immediately disclose their meaning. They become family photos when they are claimed and actively discussed amongst those who value it. The saying we all use a picture is worth a thousand words for me, is a very accurate way to

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<sup>3</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames : Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Etc.: Harvard University Press, 2002). xii

describe the family archive.

According to (Cambridge Dictionary 2019) narrative by definition is a “particular way of explaining or understanding events”<sup>4</sup> Narrative is fundamental to how people like you and I make sense of the world, and it plays a crucial role in how families understand their pasts. Through the stories we tell about our families whether it be past generations, our parents and even ourselves we construct the identities that connect us to our past and our shared history. These stories provide meaning to our relationships and give us a sense of belonging. Narrative theory offers us insight into how stories are formed, how they are told and how they are passed down along the family tree to the next generations. Narrative theory helps us to delve into the question of Why? It provides reason for the meaning of certain events or the presence (or lack thereof) of individuals. Narrative theory helps to explain why these particular moments and people are remembered, how the memories attached are constructed and how does the orality of the archive shape a collective identity among the family as well as a personal identity. By examining the theories and processes involved in the art of narrative theory, we can uncover and reveal the ways in which the family archive evolved alongside the family stories over time. We can bring to light the impact of cultural and social forces on the constructed narrative of the family and how these stories become an integral part of the family identity.

In the journal *Narrative, Literacy and Other Skills*, Edy Veneziano and Ageliki Nicolopoulou describe and discuss the narrative ability and development within children. They do a short introduction to narrative skills. Veneziano and Nicolopoulou describe narrative as “an extended form of discourse in which temporally and causally related

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<sup>4</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, “Narrative,” @CambridgeWords, October 29, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/narrative..>

events, real or fictitious, are communicated to real or imagined listeners.”<sup>5</sup> Stories are told every day, whether true or not they can provide meaning and significance to everyday people, things and events. A normal day for one might be a significant date for another in terms of anniversaries, deaths or birthdays. The stories provide a backdrop into the lives of others and play a role in the cultural memory of groups including the family dynamic. “Narratives often report events that listeners have not directly experienced and thus, language is the main support to convey and understand these happenings.”<sup>6</sup>

Narratives are fundamental to how people make sense of the world, and it plays a crucial role in how families understand their past. Through stories we tell about the past and its generations, our parents and ourselves, we construct identities that link us to a shared history and give meaning to our relationships. Within the context of family histories, narrative theory offers insight into how these stories are formed, told and retold across generations. This theory helps to explain why certain events or individuals are remembered, how those memories are constructed, and how the act of storytelling shapes collective and personal identities. By examining narrative theory, we can uncover the ways in which family stories evolve over time, how they are shaped by cultural and social forces, and how they become essential to family identity.<sup>7</sup>

Sarah pink the professor of design and media ethnography discusses the importance of photography in ethnography in her book *Doing Visual Ethnography*. Pink suggests that

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<sup>5</sup> Eddy Veneziano and Ageliki Nicolopoulou, eds., *Narrative, Literacy and Other Skills : Studies in Intervention*, vol. 25 (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Amsterdam John Benjamins Publishing, 2019), 2, <https://www.asau.ru/files/pdf/2112596.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Eddy Veneziano and Ageliki Nicolopoulou, eds., *Narrative, Literacy and Other Skills : Studies in Intervention*, vol. 25 (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Amsterdam John Benjamins Publishing, 2019), 2, <https://www.asau.ru/files/pdf/2112596.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>.

the use of photography has been used throughout history as a mandatory element of the tool kit for researchers in many fields and especially among the ethnography community. She claims it's a more objective recording device used for the scientific documentation of both cultural and physical differences. Pink testifies that all types of photographs can enter the anthropological sphere regardless of intent and context.<sup>8</sup> Within my family's archive, the images weren't produced for academic use, and the intent behind them was to be used for our family's personal use and to reminisce about the past and remember the one we loved. The images within the archive were taken with no anthropological and/or ethnography background but are still being appropriated by myself, an artist, member of the family, and the self-described curator of the archive. The meaning of photographs are ever-changing, they are unforeseen and abstract, stealing their meaning from the eyes of the viewer. "The same photograph may have different meanings invested in it at different stages of the ethnographic process"<sup>9</sup> Avoiding showing my bias in the research is impossible, the emotions and relationship I have to these images is astronomical but I want to show the impacts of these theories on the archive in terms of its recipients and its meaning as a member of this current generation of the family. The research is also backed up by my photographic practices and the work I have been conducting for the past couple of years.

Ethnography involves immersing yourself in the culture of the group you are examining. This applies to my research as I have always been a part of this family since the moment I was born and I would like to examine my own archive under these theories and provide myself with potential answers and maybe even further questions. I feel that it is relevant for me to discuss this topic before I inadeptly analyse the archive as it provides a foundation for my qualitative research style seen through this body of work.

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<sup>8</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2013). 74

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2013). 75

Martha Langford explores the family archive in her work *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*. Langford asserts her opinion that the family archive is so special due to memories<sup>10</sup>, she says, “recognizing ourselves in others seems somehow to increase the significance of our photographic trove. Its predictability compensated by our greater sense of belonging and stability.” When looking at the family archive, we see ourselves in our families, we put ourselves into the scene, and we can hear the voices of those in the image, and we can smell the scent of the home the image was taken in. While the family album is a predictable collection with repetition among its poses, locations and people the images and objects hold immense significance and memory. The repetition and *boring* parts of an archive are overlooked due to its significance. Langford believes that the most important part of understanding the family archive is its oral scaffolding. The family archive is a very important tool for the creation and preservation of memory. It provides a consistent and long-term entrance into the past, and it provides the family with an oral and photographic framework that helps to preserve the memory of the family for generations to come.<sup>11</sup> When discussing the family archive, we talk about the impact and effects it has on the new generation, and this can be referred to as postmemory.

In the 1990’s, Author Marian Hersh introduced the term *postmemory* into the academic scene. She describes the term as a deep personal connection to the stories told within the family that the listener has not experienced in any way but still feels as though it is a part of their own memories. The term in Hirsch’s words “describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came

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<sup>10</sup> Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone : Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007). 3

<sup>11</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations* (McGill-Queen’s Press - MQUP, 2021).

before”<sup>12</sup> The listener remembers these events through the stories they have heard as well as the images they have seen growing up. The phrase was used to describe Hirsch’s feeling towards the Holocaust; she had never experienced the war first-hand but the stories her parents told her had the “textures and qualities of memories” as if she had shared these memories with her family. There was no word to describe the feelings she had, so she made one. In conjunction with photographic practices Hirsch believes that images of the past survive the destruction of war and death and can outlive the subjects within them.

Within my own family archive, I never lived in the same country as my grandparents, but I felt this sense of belonging within England. The stories they told happened decades before I was born and, in a county, I am not from, yet I feel as though I lived with them and shared those moments with the family. The images I now have within my own home provide me with a feeling of belonging and warmth as if I had taken the images myself, I feel a connection to the past even more now since my grandparents have passed. Post memory is seen through this work as I discuss my connection to the archive in a symbolic as well as a physical way.

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<sup>12</sup> “An Interview with Marianne Hirsch | Columbia University Press,” Columbia University Press (CUP, 2016), <https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/hirsch-generation-postmemory/>.

## **Chapter Two**

Narratives within family archives are not objective mirrors of the past, they are constructing frameworks through which families remember, interpret, and share their histories. These narratives are influenced by a selection process determining what is included, what is excluded, and how memories are presented. Essential to understanding these processes are perspectives from narrative theory, collective memory research and critical archive research, which together highlight the power dynamics and emotional investment that govern how family stories are created and sustained over generations.

In family stories, the way events are structured and the people that emerge from these stories play a crucial role in shaping family identity. Certain events may be emphasized while others are excluded depending on the values, beliefs, and emotions that the family members convey. For example, a family might prioritize stories of resilience and success over trauma if they wish to focus on how past generations overcame hardships rather than the moments of failure or loss. This selective process helps to shape the collective memory of the family by reinforcing certain family bonds. Family narratives can as a result, act as collective storytelling in which the history of a family is retold in a way that aligns what are shared values and identity.

Within my own Family Archive, the choices made by my grandparents and my father's generation shaped not only the content of the archive itself but also my personal sense of identity. An essential, though deeply significant absence within this family archive is the absence of my father's older brother, my uncle. I never grew up with images of him or any mention of his life. The only photographs I have of my uncle are from my dad's childhood. They are distant and incomplete snapshots of a time long gone. This absence was not simply a product of physical distance or time, but the result of a deep family conflict that was never discussed or addressed, either in family conversations or in the archive itself. My uncle's existence, along with his family, was erased from the family

narrative as though he had never existed in our collective history.

This removal of my uncle from the family archive wasn't just a simple absence; it became an invisible barrier that shaped how I understood my family and my place within it. The topic of my uncle was never brought up until I was a teenager, when my grandmother passed away. Even then, it was in the setting of a funeral, a time when family members are often forced to confront unresolved issues. It wasn't until that day that I was introduced to my uncle, a man I had never met or even heard before. In fact, I didn't even recognize him at first, only when my dad pointed him out in the crowd did I realize who he was. That moment was an upsetting and unsettling realization of how deeply family conflicts can affect not only relationships but the family archive itself. This constructed absence within the family archive had a profound impact on me and my cousins, the next generation. We grew up with an incomplete history, one where a once important figure in the family has now been erased, not through direct rejection, but through silence and exclusion. As a result, our understanding of family history was fractured. We inherited a narrative that lacked a crucial piece of information, my uncle's life, and his experiences. We are left to navigate the complexities of our family identity without this important reference point and in a way, we were being told indirectly, that this part of our history didn't matter, that it was too painful or controversial to be included in our collective memory.

This absence and its effect on the family archive reveals how constructed narratives are not only shaped by what is included but also by what is left out. The family archive, while offering a sense of continuity and connection, also bears the weight of silences of what remains unsaid and hidden. For me, the absence of my uncle from the family archive raised important questions: what happens to those who are excluded from the narrative? How does their absence shape the identity of those who remain? How do we reinterpret our family's history when parts of it are deliberately and/or unintentionally erased?

The butterfly effect of this exclusion stretched far beyond just my understanding of my uncle because it also shaped the way my family and I saw ourselves in relation to our larger family history. It wasn't until I was older and began to ask questions that I discovered the truth about this flaw, and by that time, the absence of my uncle had already left a permanent mark on how I perceived my family's story. In this sense, the family archive can never be a neutral or purely objective record of events. It is as much about inclusion as it is about exclusion, and the absence of certain stories or figures can be just as revealing about the family's identity as the stories that are passed down through the generations.



(FIG.2) *My Dad and his sibling*, circa 1980, Bolton UK

The image (Fig 2) itself is a classic representation of the family portrait from the 1980's. The frame it placed within has a matte finish with a gold embedded trim. The images which has been slid into the sleeve like frame has a simple patterned backdrop of a baby blue tint with white patches resembling a cloudy sky. The three subject (left to right) my aunt Jennifer, my uncle Martin and my dad John are organised from oldest to youngest and indirectly (or rather obviously) by height. The image at first glance is just an image of three happy children smiling to the camera and the assumption is that the image was created for its use in an archive as a documentation of these children in their youth which will most likely be looked back upon in the future. The clothing in the image is quite informal as opposed to those who wear their "Sunday best" in their family images, the casualness of the image evokes a sense of warmth as if you are looking at these subjects with a sense of belonging as they don't seem to be staged in the context of clothing.

As we see in this scan of the photograph with its partnering frame the image has slipped, this imperfection mirrors the now narrative surrounding the image as the suspended conversations around it have been tainted by the history around it even many years after the photograph was taken. In an ideal world this image would be used to represent a blissful and happy time in one's life, a representation of a time we should remember fondly; Childhood. This image a once wholesome representation of my grandparent's world, their children is now tainted with feelings of rage, sadness and despair after the events that occurred in the years following the images creation. My dad now looks at this image remembering the memories with his brother as dark and full of anger.

Paul Ricoeur's work, particularly in his work *Time and Narrative* (1983), offers another important viewpoint for understanding the narrative construction of family histories. Ricoeur explores the relationship between time and narrative theory, proposing that human beings experience time in a fragmented and discontinuous, but through narrative they can organize and give structure to their experiences. Through storytelling,

individuals impose order on the chaos of lived experiences. For Ricoeur the narrative is a bridge between the scattered and disjointed moments of lived experience and the ordered, meaningful structure of the story. By telling stories, individuals and communities can make sense of their past, give structure to their life and establish a sense of identity.<sup>13</sup> He argues that when we tell a story we're not just organizing events, we shape who the characters are through the stories told.

In the case of family histories, Ricoeur's theory helps explain why these stories are so central to familial identity. Family members retell their histories to create a coherent narrative that links generations, establishes community and reinforces a sense of belonging. The act of retelling family stories over time is a means of imparting values, beliefs and traditions, ensuring that the family's collective memory remains intact and relevant to the next generation. This process of storytelling not only involves the recounting of events but also a layer of interpretation. Each generation adds its own perspective and context to the narrative, shifting the emphasis of certain events or introducing new meanings.

For example, within my own family my dad emigrated from the United Kingdom to Ireland back in the 1990's. When my brother and I were born we became the next generation of the Cork family and the first of which in Ireland. Over time, the narrative evolved with my brother and I, and we added our own interpretations to the family archive based on our own contemporary issues such as national identity and cultural differences. Family narratives are never static; they are dynamic and constantly reshaped by the perspectives of those who tell them to gain new meaning over time.

Growing up, my brother and I often heard about my dad leaving the United Kingdom as

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 169–90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1343181.pdf>.

a turning point in our family history, how my dad left behind familiarity for uncertainty. However, as an Irish-born citizen, my relationship to this story was different. For me, Ireland wasn't a new land it was home. I started to frame the story less as one of loss and adaptation, and more as one of opportunity and potential. In doing so, I reshaped the narrative, aligning it with our lived experience. As Paul Ricoeur notes, each retelling of a narrative is a form of reinterpretation, where past events are understood through the lens of present experience. My interpretation of my dad's emigration, shaped by my Irish childhood, reflects a process Ricoeur calls *emplotment* "the kingdom of the as if."<sup>10</sup> This involves rearranging events to create a meaningful story that resonates with our own identities.



*My brother and I Christmas Day, circa 2015, Dublin Ireland*

This shift in the narrative also reflects broader societal changes. In the 1990s, migration to Ireland was relatively rare<sup>14</sup>, and integration came with certain challenges. Today, as Ireland becomes increasingly diverse, our story of emigration is viewed differently, it's no longer framed as an exception but as part of a wider, shared experience. In this way, my family archive is not just personal, but it's a reflection of cultural changes and adjustments. What began as a single act of migration has become a complex family narrative one that continues to evolve as we navigate questions of national identity, heritage, and belonging. Our version of the story doesn't replace the original it adds to it, showing how archives are living things, shaped as much by those who inherit them as by those who lived them.

The family archive serves as an effective and evolving repository of both personal and collective memory, capturing the complexities of identity, history, and belonging. Through the stories we inherit and share, these archives shape our understanding of ourselves and our place within our families. As the case of my own family demonstrates, what is included in the archive, as well as what is left out, plays a crucial role in constructing family identity. The absence of my uncle from the family archive, for example, reveals how silences and exclusions can have a profound impact on our understanding of family history and our sense of self.

By drawing on the works of narrative theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, this research has explored how family narratives evolve over time and how they reflect the lived experiences and emotional realities of those who tell them. These stories, whether filled with joy or sorrow, resilience or loss, are not only ways of recounting past events but also serve as acts of meaning making. They allow us to impose order on the fragmented and

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<sup>14</sup> "Migration - CSO - Central Statistics Office," [www.cso.ie](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ieu50/irelandandtheeuat50/society/migration/) (Central Statistics Office, October 17, 2023), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ieu50/irelandandtheeuat50/society/migration/>.

disjointed moments of lived experience, giving structure to our personal histories and shaping the identities of those who come after us.

The family archive is more than a collection of photographs, letters, and artifacts. It is an active space for memory, reinterpretation, and emotional connection. In this way, the family archive reflects the broader social, cultural, and historical changes that shape individual and collective identities. As families navigate the complexities of migration, cultural assimilation, and identity, the stories they tell within the archive evolve and adapt, making the family archive not only a tool for preserving the past but also a living, breathing record of the ongoing process of self-discovery. Ultimately, the family archive highlights the power of storytelling in constructing meaning, connecting generations, and fostering a sense of belonging, continuity, and identity across time.

### Chapter Three

The death of my grandmother marked a very significant time not only in my own life but in the family archive. My grandmother's death for me, symbolized the end of a chapter, a chapter within the family archive had closed and a new one was a beginning. As shown before, my nan was a central presence within the family and played a major role in the conservation and construction of the family archive. My grandmother functioned as both the subject of the archive and the glue. Her presence linked images to memories and family histories. Her absence didn't just leave a gap; it altered the structure of the archive itself. The images transformed from familiar sites of memory to a distant past that could no longer be accessed. While the images in the archive record my nan's life and the creation of the family, they simultaneously show how the stories can no longer be fully represented from the first-hand perspective of the beginning of the family. This chapter examines how loss disrupts narrative continuity within the family archive and recognizes how constructed narratives can respond to that rift. After my nan's passing, I found many images and objects that I didn't even know existed before her death. This was jarring as it gave me more context to her life after it was over. The emotional connection I had to these images even though I had never seen them before was monumental. By examining the images and conversing with my dad I learned new things about the family I never would have known before. My nan's role in this archive is irreplaceable but nevertheless I took the liberty of taking over and incorporating the archive into my studies.

My nan's home for me was the epicentre of the family. Although she lived in a completely different country to my immediate family it was still a sacred place for us and we visited regularly. The connection I had to her home was unmatched and it still to this day has a special place in my heart. My nan's death unfortunately meant that this home is no longer available to us. The stories and memories stored in its walls now lives on as anecdotes amongst those who were lucky enough to be a part of it. Her home was the subjects of

many images which of course are a snapshot of the bigger picture, but unfortunately against my will many of these images became tainted by loss and grief and those ones happy and funny stories now leave a bitter aftertaste. The loss of a monumental figure has forced my family and I to look at the images with rose tinted glasses in an attempt to deal with our grief and pass these stories on in a positive way. By researching my own family archive and its contents, in this chapter I will examine how stories and memories offer a way of engaging with grief and memory when images alone prove inadequate alone.

Death is a very momentous part of narrative. It is often seen in the media as a pivotal moment in a story and can shape the identities and memories of those surrounding it. In storytelling we see death discussed a lot it is regularly used as the climax to a story, whether a good resolution or not it can provide closure and simultaneously be disruptive. Death can shift the narrative and change its course dramatically. The anticipation or aftermath of death often structures narrative in time, as stories move backwards through memory or forward through expectation, revealing how meaning is constructed rather than simply experienced. Stories of death mediate the tension between silence and expression; narrative becomes a way of articulating and coming to terms with loss and ensuring the life of the person is not quietly forgotten. Death is no longer seen purely as a natural end but rather a sad and symbolic beginning to a new story and perspective created with narrative and memory. The way in which death is narrated is also significant. Who tells the story and what right do they have to do so? This is just as important as death itself and bring up questions about subjectivity, concern and representation.

Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*, discusses an old photograph he found of his mother after her passing. This image, which he called the Winter Garden Photograph brought up many questions for Barthes as he had found the image while searching through his mother's collection of photographs in her apartment where she had died. The image

in its true form is never shown to the reader but rather described. Barthes very briefly denotes the contents of the image as two small children near a bridge in a conservatory. He illustrates the physicality of the image by mentioning the damaged corners and the reflections of the light bouncing off the surface of the photograph. The description of the image is mainly focused on the connotations, the emotions and story behind the people within the photograph. Barthes describes his mother (who is in the image) as a young five year old child and her older brother (his uncle) who was seven at the time. He explains how his mother and uncle were united “by the discord of their parents”. Barthes highlights how he rediscovered his mother in the little girl.<sup>15</sup>

Barthes felt as though the many of the images in his collection could not accurately capture his mother's essence they “provoked her identity not her truth”<sup>16</sup>, but the image of his mother as a little girl was different, he could see the light in her eyes which he felt a connection to. These images don't tell the full story without the narrative that goes with it, the image to us would just be a normal and generic photograph with two children and without the context and narrative we would not be able to see the emotional value of the image. Barthes states he can't show the image as it is only of existence in his world. “It would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of a thousand manifestations of the ordinary”<sup>17</sup>. Telling the reader about the emotion and the visceral response to the image had a much larger impact on the reader as we do not need to see the image to hear the sorrow and pain in Barthes words. The context (narrative) of the image is what is important here, as Hirsch said through ekphrasis Barthes, “undoes the objectification of

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<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 70–92.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 71

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 73

the still photograph and thereby takes it out of the realm of stasis”<sup>18</sup>. The discussion of the image prevents this immobility or what Barthes calls “flat death” by describing the image in conjunction with the narrative brings fluidity and brings it to life.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, looking deeper into this image Barthes claims that there is two parts of the image, two sides to the meaning. Initially there is the “voice of banality” this is what the average person sees, the denotations of the image and the things that are visible and confined the curled edges of the frame. Secondly, we have the “voice of singularity” this is the voice of the family, the individuals who have a connection to the photograph. These people will see the layers of the story that are not confined to the frame. Stories of the life of the people within the image and the things they went on to archive. These stories may also include distressing one, perhaps the story of their death which is never physically seen in the archive.<sup>20</sup>

Barthes calls this “voice of singularity” the punctum. The punctum can only be described as a singular detail, a look or a certain aspect of the image that transcends the image and jumps out at you to create a connection or a feeling in response to the photograph. The image can create a personal meaning for the viewer that isn't related to any cultural norms or expectations. The punctum means that your interest in the image isn't simply liking or disliking it; it sticks with you, resonates with you and is now forever in your memory. On the contrary there is the studium, this is the signs and signifiers, visible thing in the image that represent something such as clothing or locations. The punctum isn't visible in the image; it is an emotional response to the image about something we can't see but we feel. This relates back to the image of Barthes mother as he feels something in the image that

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<sup>18</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames : Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Etc.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3-4

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 70–92.

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 76

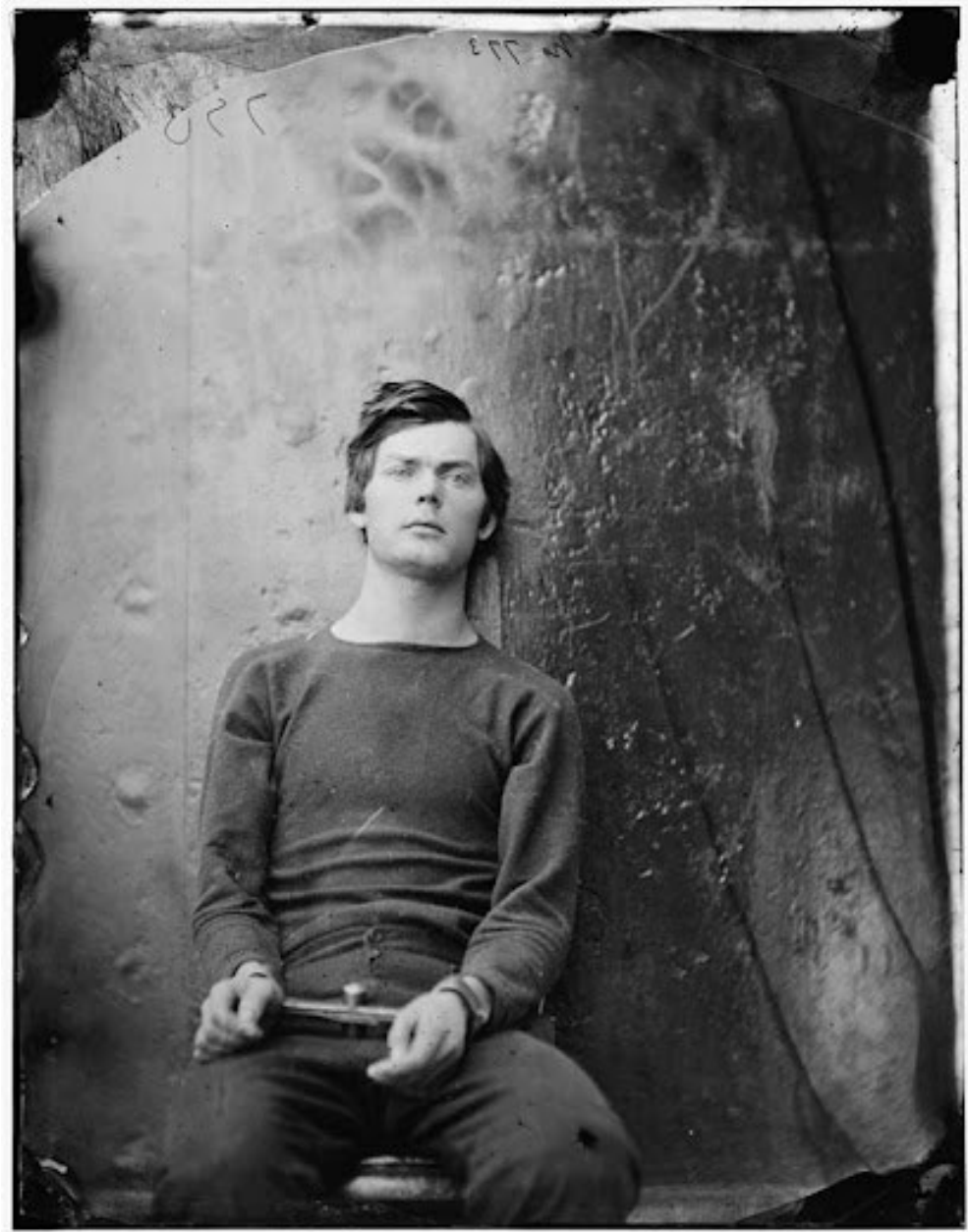
the viewer would not just by simply looking at this image. There are no aesthetic rules to the image but the punctum for Barthes is the feeling he gets when looking into the eyes of his mother as a child.<sup>21</sup>

The punctum in an image can change depending on the viewer, for example Barthes discusses the famous image by Alexander Gardner Portrait of Lewis Payne (Fig 4), he states that the punctum in this image for him is time. He states that he knew this would be the final image of Lewis Payne as he was going to die. “The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: The studium. But the punctum is: he is going to die”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 96-97

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 96



(FIG 4) Alexander Gardner *Portrait of Lewis Payne 1865*

I would argue that this punctum was able to be recognized by Barthes due to the narrative surrounding the image. Barthes knew based on the historical evidence that Lewis Payne had tried to assassinate W.H Seward who was the secretary of state in 1865. Knowing this we could see in conjunction with the handcuffs visible in the image that this act was grounds for death during that time. But this doesn't extinguish the value of that punctum, it still provides that emotional response and perhaps the narrative only enhances that emotional response.

Similarly, in his work *On the Invention of Photographic meaning*, Allen Sekula states that “all messages are manifestations of interest. no critical model can ignore the fact that interests contend in the real world”<sup>23</sup>. Generally speaking, no message expressed is neutral. All forms of communication are shaped and effected by the individuals interests and experiences. The narrative provided with an image shapes its meaning in the eyes of the viewer.

As mentioned before my nan played a very important role in my life. She was someone I looked up to and admired; I used to say I was a mini version of her. Looking through images from her lifetime is usually filled with many different emotions, I can laugh, remembering her funny stories but on the other hand as Bathes says about his mother “I was then losing her twice over”<sup>24</sup>. Looking through images of one you’ve lost in my opinion, if it’s very difficult. Greif can show up at any time in many forms and when you're looking” back on a life” that wasn't your own but” the life of someone I loved”<sup>25</sup> that disconnects from my nan can feel even more colossal just as much as it feels like she is right there beside me.

My Nan’s photographic collection played a huge part in my healing after her death, I remember when she had passed in 2018, I made a collage of the last selfie we had taken when I visited (2016) and placed it in a frame alongside an image of my birthday party back in 2009. I wanted to show the impact she had had on my life; the influence and love were there for as long I could remember regardless of location. Marianne Hirsch claims that” family pictures depend on such a narrative act of adoption that they transform a rectangular piece of cardboard into telling details connecting lives and stories across

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<sup>23</sup> Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” in *Thinking Photography* (London: The Macmillan LTD, 1982), 84.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 71

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 71

continents and generations”<sup>26</sup>. This image now sits above my bed almost a decade later.

Although my Nan and I were never living in the same house, not even the same country; I felt her presence, like I knew she would always play a part in my life regardless. Physical distance didn't minimize her role, but it made the moments we did have together more significant. An image from my birthday party is a physical reminder of what was one of the best days of my life (at the time). My nan had surprised me by visiting us at home, and I was overjoyed, and for every child, taking time out of the school day to have your parents deliver cake for your birthday was magical. I had not only my nan and my parents, but my brother was also present as well as my classmates. For me this memory is solidified in my mind, I don't think I'll ever forget that day and the events leading up to it; and this image is just a reminder. The image represented more than just a celebration, but it was a rare moment of togetherness that I shared with my nan. This experience has remained vivid in my memory, not because of the photograph but because of the emotion attached to it. The photograph is now a reminder of that memory. It points back to a lived experience that continues to exist independently to the image. After my nans death the image has taken on another layer of meaning, it is a reminder of her absence, and this highlights how a photograph can mediate and evoke memory rather than contain it.

“Overwhelmed by the truth of the image”<sup>27</sup>. This for me rationalizes my emotions when examining the family archive. But what is the truth about the image? There are two facts in this image that are true together: I love my nan; nothing could ever change that. She is and will always be remarkably important in my life, but she is also gone. I can never

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<sup>26</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames : Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Etc.: Harvard University Press, 2002), xii

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 76

question her about these images again; I must rely on the stories she told me while she was alive and the recollections of those who were lucky enough to know her. And this is how narrative and photography help not only me but many others to grieve. Coming to terms with the loss of a loved one is tremendously difficult but being able to see their face and their story provides a sense of comfort that can't be recreated. Barthes argue that "when the image is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning"<sup>28</sup> but I disagree. In my experience, grief is not pretty, it's not aesthetic, and it can be ugly. But photographs provide that beautiful aspect. We are lucky to have those physical reminders of our loved ones and even if they hurt us, they emphasize the importance of life, to live it to the fullest. My nan did exactly that, she had a beautiful family and a happy home, she fought against every tragedy that came her way and I am honoured to have a constant reminder of her.

The Birthday image in the frame is a very important one for me as I'm seen inside its edges. This prompts the question; what is the punctum? What about this image is jumping out to me and creating this visceral reaction? For me, it lies in my face. When you look for the real emotion in an image, we tend to look for the eyes. Eyes are very expressive and can usually tell you how a person is feeling. In this photograph, that is true for my nan. My nan looks happy as she crouched down to put her arm around her granddaughter. Her eyes are bright, and she looks as if she's about to laugh. For me, the young child, my eyes are hidden. They're covered by a birthday mask, decorated with colourful balloons and stars. Were both holding a goodie bag presumably filled to the brim with sweets that read Happy Birthday. For the viewer it's easy to assume that it's the child's birthday, so

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980; repr., London: Vintage Books, 1993), 76

this photograph is viewed as a happy memory even by those who don't know the participants. But seeing that huge grin across my face with very tooth is visible is a true representation of my joy, even while my eyes are obstructed you can see the happiness on my face. That detail resonated with me as it is not only a joyous occasion, but it represents the love and excitement I got when visiting my nan, the love I had for her home and the family.



(FIG 5) *Roisin and Nana for Roisin's Birthday 200*

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has demonstrated that the family archive is inherently narrative, functioning as a site where memory, identity, and absence intersect. The images within are a trigger for stories and memories that have been told and remembered within the family. The family archive is an important and significant collection in a lot of families, and it provides the next generation with a way of working through grief and provides them with a sense of belonging. Narrative is pivotal in our everyday lives, and it gives us the opportunity to remember stories in a way that enlightens, comforts and perhaps scares us. We tell these stories using the visual evidence provided to us in the archive. My own archive was a catalyst for me; it provided me with the motivation to continue my practice and to learn more about my own history and how it has and how it could affect my future.

Exclusion within the archive, in my case, was used to protect me. My family wanted to protect my brother and I from the harsh truth of my uncle, but the lingering question is, Was it worth it? I would like to question this further. Now that I know why he was excluded; can I look at the what ifs? What if he were never excluded? Would we have his family images remixed with ours even though his physical absence was still ongoing? What are his thoughts on this situation, and would he ever discuss it with me? The fact is this constructed narrative affected my view of the family, and for a long time, I was unaware of the structure of my family for many years and was deeply affected by his sudden appearance in my life, even if it was for a couple of hours.

After researching narrative and learning more about how the human mind connects to images, it opened my mind to the endless possibilities of one image. A simple image of my nan in her home provoked an entire research project for me. I realised through the course of this research how many conversations and memories linger in the air surrounding an image that may seem boring and irrelevant to another person. This simple image brought back memories of the entire house as a symbol of beginnings; I could see

her house and feel it just by examining one photograph of the corner of a room.

Growing up, I had always felt distant from my family, as I had lived in another country. I was torn between two lands, England and Ireland, and yet I had always loved both. This research has provided me with the understanding that distance means nothing; photography can transcend time and space. It is available to us all no matter where we are, who we are and what we are doing. Although the family archive is a private and personal collection, it is never forgotten. The archive may be damaged or lost due to conflict and disaster, but its contents will never be completely forgotten. They are passed down and around among families and are used to remember those who may not be here anymore.

Examining Camera Lucinda by Roland Barthes gave me the opportunity to use my own family archive as a tool to talk about and come to terms with her passing. The images have always been an important part of my life, but finding similar situations and using those words to solidify my feelings was very beneficial. Examining a seemingly normal image that has been present inside my bedroom for the last decade was an emotional rollercoaster; learning about the exact aspects of the image that speak to me and being able to communicate them in a way that is understandable has had a direct impact on my view of the archive as a whole. The punctum was a term I knew little to nothing about, yet it is now something I search for in many images I examine. It raises the question of why? Why do I like this image so much, and what feeling does it evoke? It has enriched not only my view of the archive but also the way I tell the stories. It forces me to be open and honest with myself and my feelings. The punctum provides me with a confidence in my work, as I can find it in the depths of an image of myself and even in an image taken long before I was born.

Conclusively, this research has highlighted that the family archive is an ever evolving and

emotionally charged collection where memory, exclusion and identity are constantly negotiated; it is not neutral or fixed but rather fluid. Through personal exploration and academic engagement, I have concluded that the family archive is far from simple; it is a complex collection of images that shapes how I see my past, my family and myself. This knowledge will continue to affect my practice and will allow me to approach images not as snapshots of time but as catalysts for narrative, vulnerability and possibility.

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