

## Chapter 20

# Understanding, Reactivating, and Reproducing Autobiographical Memory: Discovering the Historical Family Archive

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter engages with the potential for historical personal archives to prompt autobiographical memory through discovery, digitisation, and processes of sharing. It uses one specific archive of photographs, accumulated by the writer's grandfather over 30 years and spanning different configurations of family and place, to analyse how personal memory and meaning are reproduced through photographs over time. Digitising analogue photographs draws them into new dialogues through the application of contemporary ways of seeing and presenting. This chapter interrogates how by extending possible audiences and enabling photographs to be seen in the present, personal and collective memories are renewed and altered as the memory text is changed. Personal archives generate different forms of autobiographical memory. This multiplicity is engaged with furthering understanding of how histories of seeing as well as belonging are recorded. Through these processes, this text examines what futures for archives such as these could look like.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The past becomes something new when contemporary ways of seeing are applied. It is this ever-changing and porous boundary of meaning I seek to interrogate in this chapter, by scrutinising how historical personal photographs function to conserve, provoke and reproduce autobiographical memory within and beyond the family unit. Photographs enable collective remembering. As objects created from past moments deemed significant enough to record, memories stick to photographs, accumulating, merging and becoming altered when pictures are viewed collectively, in different forms and over time. Memory

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is a connective that enables individuals to assimilate past into present so that they may have a relationship with it (Zelizer, 1995, p. 214). Personal photographs have a similar function, capturing us and our surroundings at different life junctures, they serve as extensions to memory and validate the years behind us. But these are malleable objects and the remembering they prompt is fragile, dependent on a multitude of unacknowledged contextual factors. There is a borderline between memory and photography which sees the past become translated through the camera. The access point of the photograph is reconfigured when its presentation is changed; the memories retrieved through analogue archives adapt through digital transformation.

It is the versatility and potentiality of the family archive, and its connective relationship with personal memory, that this text engages with. A year ago, I discovered my paternal grandfather's archive in my parent's garden shed, a large collection of over two thousand 35mm colour slides which include his family's journey to live in Kampala, Uganda in 1958 and their subsequent decade there, where he worked as a surgeon living with his wife and three children. The archive documents my father's family over three decades, as captured by my grandfather. Often family photographs are valued less for their quality than for their depiction of personally resonant scenes; they gain value through confirmation of history and identity (Holland, 1996, p. 117). Conventional family events are recorded in the archive, but other photographs document for occupational purposes and general interests. This is significant because while the archive records family life, it simultaneously chronicles my grandfather's curiosity, and excitement regarding the act of capture. The amalgamation of subject matter means viewed decades later and through my eyes, the archive defies easy reading.

Upon its discovery, I have been digitising the photographs, and this requires decisions to be made regarding sequencing and collation. The archive has become active again, and the stories and memories it prompts are dependent on the particularities of this modernising process. Situated within the family, these photographs can be used to piece together autobiographical narratives responding to different versions of experience, truth, and memory. Situated outside of it, photographs can be used to question and stretch the idea of what autobiography is; whilst representational images chronicle visible existences, photographs record histories of seeing as well as belonging. In this chapter I re-share my grandfather's archive of photographs with family members, engaging with photographs from my own understanding of their significance, and working outwards to explore the utility of personal historical archives in the present. Using conversational methods as well as theory and analysis, this chapter utilises my positions as photographer and theorist as well as a family member with personal knowledge of histories and relayed stories. Through this process, the archive becomes a starting point to engage with the layered complexity of photography, memory and the autobiographical.

Can photographs from the distant past be recycled to activate more recent memories, and how closely do new understandings match the story behind originals? Does re-sequencing or sharing photographs individually or out of order, change the memories they elicit? In the present, all immediate family members involved in my grandfather's archive are alive and split between two continents, my divorced grandparents live on separate islands in New Zealand along with their two daughters (my aunts), whilst my father lives in the UK. The logistic organisation of my family informs a process of discovery and circulation filtered through digital platforms, with myself as mediator. Memories are reactivated when historical photographs are viewed in the present; during the process my grandfather expressed happiness at having personal history "brought back to life and given new meaning" (T. Martin, personal communication, 17 April, 2021). My aunt thought the slides had been lost many years ago, contributing to the feeling of lost memories being unearthed. Retrieval of the archive felt significant because it drew

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