Family Archives and the Rhetoric of Loss

by Alexandra Hidalgo

Malea Powell begins her account of her archival work on Charles Eastman by lamenting what gets lost when we take the stories that were originally told "around kitchen tables, on porches, at powwows, in archives" (115) and deliver them in writing. She reminds us that "when talk turns into text, something happens to it—something else arises as the words get inscribed, revised, polished, distressed, and re-presented" (115). Although I have revised and polished the words you're hearing, I am also trying to transcend some of the limitations of print by showing you images, moving and still, of the family archives I refer to, the objects they have yielded, and the people who populate these places. It is not quite a kitchen table conversation but it does hold a level of intimacy, like family archives themselves.

The family archives we will visit in this video article are my own. The person we will primarily seek inside them is my father, Miguel Hidalgo Briceño, the economist, novelist, inventor, and gold trader who disappeared in the Venezuelan Amazon when I was six years old. In a hotel room he left behind a backpack, jars of Amazon honey for my mother and me, and the finished manuscript of a novel he'd been writing for years. For over three decades I have tried to find him. Not just the actual person who vanished (and I have looked for that too) but the essence of him, the heart and mind of the man who left so much love and mystery behind. Besides getting to know the person who meant so much and was gone so quickly from my life, I have spent years collecting information for an in-progress memoir about him.

Others in Rhetoric and Composition have brilliantly tackled the family archive. Wendy Sharer, Kathleen Wider, Barry Rohan, and Gail Okawa, among others, have written accounts of archival treasure chests found inside their relatives' homes. Unlike them, who have tied their findings to the rhetorical moves the relatives they're studying made when they were alive, I am interested instead in the void created by my father's disappearance. I theorize how my decades-long search through these family archives helps build a rhetoric of loss. Through this examination of loss, I also make arguments for the value of exploring our personal histories as part of our research and I suggest strategies for tackling the gathering and interpretation of the histories held in the homes of those we love.

The methodology I use follows the one suggested by Patricia Sullivan and James Porter when they argue that "[m]ethodology is not merely a means to something else … It is itself an act of rhetoric, both with our participants in research studies and with our colleagues in a given research field." In this case the participants are our relatives and friends, whose homes become the site of our archival search, as well as those whose histories we are researching. Both interactions require careful ethical considerations and often elicit strong emotions on both sides.

I define family archives as the homes of family and friends that hold key pieces of the history we are researching. Unlike traditional archives, the majority of these pieces are uncatalogued and they who house them may feel profound emotional attachment to them. The archivists in this case are our relatives and friends, and our personal connection to them is the key to accessing the information. There are no rules beyond the complex and capricious give and take of affection.

As Lucille Schultz argues, "Archival research can be a lonely enterprise" (ix), but familial archives are often crowded places, brimming with reminiscence of both happy and painful stories, some of which are tied directly to the story researched, others only tangentially connected. As Janet Hoskins found when interviewing Kodi women and men, "People and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined they could not be disentangled." Going through the objects at a family archive tends to lead to impromptu interviews and storytelling that both enhance and at times distract from the process of engaging with the pieces being researched. If we're allowed to take the piece home, the loneliness of archives may emerge as we analyze them. In this case, however, the loneliness is different, as it is loneliness in our own homes or offices. Loneliness governed by our own rules. For pieces we cannot remove from the family archives that house them, such as this statue of my great great-grandmother at my cousin's house, we can ask to photograph them and also learn to interpret and analyze the piece and to engage with the family archivists at the same time.

Like Victor Villanueva and David Gold, I came upon the archival nature of this project through serendipity. In December of 1997, my paternal grandmother Olga was dying of cancer, and I flew home to Venezuela during my Christmas break from Ohio University to take care of her and say my goodbyes. Her sprawling Caracas home, where three generations of my family lived and where my father had been living when he disappeared, was filled with hardly used rooms and closets populated with curious, dusty objects which had occupied many of my childhood afternoons. Knowing that the house would change after her death, I photographed each room. I asked her to pose for me in the library, and after I took the photos, her mind, in and out of dementia, became overrun by one of her fixed ideas. Throughout the day these strange ideas would overtake her (Should she buy the church down the street? Should she adopt a street child?) and no matter what we replied, she'd talk about them for hours.

This time the idea was that a closet in the library held something of great interest to me. After trying to change the topic for a while, I opened the closet to show her that it was just old books. My eye was immediately drawn to the big orange water bottle my dad would use when we went hiking. Next to it was his red shirt and his fencing uniform. I saw a couple cardboard boxes filled with papers at the bottom of the closet. I was about to go through them when Grandmother moved to a different fixed idea, and much like my three-year-old son does today, demanded my attention with such tenacity that, in spite of my pounding heart and the cold sweat pouring from me, I closed the closet door and returned to her.

The hours until Grandmother was safe in my aunt's company were some of the longest of my life. I secretly returned to the library that evening and opened the boxes to find various manuscripts of novels Dad had been working on, alongside two school photos of mine and a handwritten letter to his mistress with photos of a trip they took together a year after I was born. While his mistress was not a secret—that particular infidelity had been the main cause of my parents' divorce three years before Dad disappeared—she'd always been an abstract idea for me. And now here was her yellowing image, and more painful still, here was my father writing an angry, pleading, never-sent letter to her at a time when he'd, much to my enjoyment, brought musicians to our house to woo my mother back. I took out my school photos—the tangible proof of my life mixed with his—and closed the box. Being my father's only child, I felt no remorse in secretly placing both boxes in my Ohio-bound suitcase weeks later, but it took eight years for me to again gather the presence of mind to dig into the world they contained.

As Kathleen Wider explains when discussing the shame she felt at realizing that her grandmother had been a vocal supporter of eugenics, we need to remember that in order "to reach even a semblance of understanding of a life, [we have] to acknowledge both its light and dark dimensions" (71). The darkness one finds in family archives wounds us with revelations that are part of our heritage, of our very selves, even if they took place before we were born.

In Wider's case she researched the history of eugenics and concluded that her grandmother's "position was inseparable from the ideas of her time" (71). One way to come to terms with what we find in a family archive is to familiarize ourselves with the times and issues they contain so we can try to see the world through our relatives' eyes. My research did not reveal anything shameful or shocking about my father besides his infidelities, of which I'd already been aware. The devastating revelations involved my grandmother. On paper she was exactly the person I remembered, a celebrated writer of historical fiction during the Spanish Republic, then a nonfiction writer, journalist, lecturer, and socialite in 40s and 50s, when she was married to a prominent doctor in Washington, DC. Her views, unflinchingly feminist and promoting the value of creating stronger ties between her native Venezuela and fellow Latin American countries, were ahead of their time and admirable.

It was the other version of my grandmother, the one that emerged over and over in the many interviews I conducted with family and friends to help me make sense of the archival findings, that broke me. The emotional and psychological pain she had inflicted on her children and grandchildren, and which I had managed to mostly evade, is something I'm still grappling with a decade after the revelations began to surface. Unlike Wider, I cannot turn to the larger context of the societies my grandmother inhabited to make sense of her behavior. Her actions were as unacceptable then as they would be today. The curious thing about a family archive is how much you can lose through what you find. The day Grandmother pointed me toward the closet in the library she also unwittingly started me on the path that would destroy my sense of who she was, fracturing

20 years of beloved memories. And yet, what I lost in remembrance, I gained in accuracy. Like Wider, I've had to come to terms with the fact that there is value in knowing a person for who she was, no matter how unbearable some parts of that person may be to us.

As with Wider, Gold, and Okawa, the archival pieces I found had been partially curated by family archivists. My great grandmother had kept two scrapbooks of articles about my grandmother, and my grandmother had in turn kept folders filled with articles about my father's disappearance, as well as his invention, which measured people's brain waves and used images to help them release stress. Grandmother had also gathered his book manuscripts and a poem he published as a five-year-old in his school's newsletter. Although both women died before I began this project in earnest, I consider them my research collaborators.

Living family archivists have also shared pieces with me through the years, not from organized collections, but from forgotten closets, drawers, and bookshelves. My aunt Yarima, who still lives in Grandmother's house, has through the years given me many pieces, such as a cane with a sword inside it that my father inherited from his uncle, countless photographs and letters, and Dad's yearbook, which allowed me to find and interview his old high school friends. My mom gave me letters, cards, photos, and articles about my father. Moreover, her home was the place where I began my own archival work by, as a six-year-old, holding onto a stone with a face my dad and I had found hiking and a cloth, he, my grandmother, and I had woven together on a toy loom. My mother's sister, Jenny, found the only existing recording of my father's voice on a cassette tape my mother made for her the year I was born. Dad's best friend David and his wife Kathy surprise me every few years with a magical package in the mail. From them, I've received a drum my dad played as a child, a Mariachi hat he wore to a costume party accompanied by a photo of him wearing it, a souvenir coin with David and my dad's name (misspelled) on it, and the only surviving footage of him, line dancing in the Hamptons. Dad, the only dancer dressed in dark colors and long pants, is simply part of the crowd. There is no closeup of his face for me to revel in, but I get a sense of his environment, of the world, so surreal to behold today, he navigated as a young man.

From the newspaper clippings, manuscripts, books, letters, and recordings, I've managed to weave a long narrative about my family. The file is 617 pages and over 367,000 words long and I draw from it as I work on my memoir about my father. The objects, such as the cane, woven cloth, stone, drum, and hat have played a pivotal role in the decor of my adult homes. Hoskins tells us that "[b]iographical objects share our lives with us, and if they gradually deteriorate and fade with the years, we recognize our own aging in the mirror of these personal possessions." My father, who disappeared at 42, never managed to age enough to fade and deteriorate alongside his possessions, but I aim to do so surrounded by what he left behind, woven with the objects that tell the parts of my own story that are separate from his. More than the articles and letters, these objects keep my father present in my daily life and that of my husband and sons.

The objects' presence is a constant reminder of his absence, a rhetorical performance of loss that allows some physical version of him to populate my adult memories in spite of his disappearance.

Access to family archives brimming with the objects that tell the stories we long for is obtained and maintained through love, respect, and expressions of gratitude for the generosity of those who share the secrets of the past with us. In spite of our best intentions it is also at times a thorny journey through tricky family dynamics and old disagreements. The very act of going through archival pieces together may reopen wounds that eventually close archival doors. How to open those doors again depends on each family's particular dynamics and is a complex rhetorical act that, I argue, require es the same technique that should be used for making sense of the archival pieces we recover. Powell refers to it as "feeling" the archival pieces, letters in her example. She says, "I simply sit and think and feel in relation to the materials at hand" (120). Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch present a similar approach they call strategic contemplation, which "asks us to take as much into account as possible but to withhold judgment for a time and resist coming to closure too soon in order to make the time to invite creativity, wonder, and inspiration into the research process" (85).

The findings we make in family archives are laden with complex, overriding emotions that it may take years to digest. There is no pretense of scholarly objectivity when we're researching our ancestors because our own sense of who we are is tied in the mix. Strategic contemplation and "feeling" the objects, both alone and through dialogue with our family archivists can help us disentangle our emotions enough to find threads of cohesiveness in what we've unearthed. By keeping family archivists involved in the drawn-out, contemplative process of making sense of what we've found, we may be able to keep archival doors open to us and even reopen those that have closed over painful findings and disagreements. Even though I absconded with my first family archive findings, I have spent years making sense of those and subsequent findings in the company of family and friends. Motherhood in particular has shifted my sense of who my father was. Through my own aging, my understanding of my father has also aged, and by sharing this constantly evolving version of him with my family archivists, I try to show them how much I value their work and generosity and keep my father present for them as well.

Wendy Sharer explains that when first writing about her grandmother's story she downplayed the personal connection, fearing that the work would not be considered intellectual enough otherwise. Eventually, however, she came to reject the sense that our families are "beyond the boundaries of valid research" (55). If we are going to write passionate, electrifying scholarship—and I believe those are characteristics we need to value in our research—we are likely to find much of it inside closets and under beds. The family archive allows us to use material evidence of many kinds to discover the stories that shaped us, and to use those stories to make sense of questions in our field and beyond.

For years after my father disappeared he would come to me in dreams and I'd ask where he'd been. His answers were mostly inconclusive and unsatisfying, but his presence would linger for weeks, making me strangely giddy. Three decades later I have not found my father and I know now that I never will. Neither the person in the flesh, nor a comprehensive picture of the brilliant, wounded, magical being he was. And yet, the man I've been researching and constructing since I was a child has been a constant companion, guiding, questioning, and frustrating me the way my real father might have. Family archives help us deal with loss by giving us access to objects and stories that help us piece together an insufficient, constantly evolving replacement for what is gone and by inviting our family and friends to join us in that ongoing journey.

Video
The video footage featured in this film was filmed by Alexandra Hidalgo and Nathaniel Bowler.

Additional footage by Romina Bacchillone.

Footage of line dancing in the Hamptons used with permission from David and Kathy Tyson.

Photography
The photographs featured in this film were primarily taken by Alexandra Hidalgo and Nathaniel Bowler.

Additional photography by Antonieta Aagaard de Cardier, Caroní Arias, Glen Brening, Helena Golding, Antonio Nicolás Briceño Braun, and others whose identity my archival work did not reveal.

Soundtrack
"Beyond" by Esther Garcia.

Downloaded from jamendo.com.

Works Cited
Gold, David. "The Accidental Archivist: Embracing Chance and Confusion in Historical Scholarship." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 13-19. Print.

Hoskins, Janet. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Kindle File.

Okawa, Gail Y. "Unbundling: Archival Research and Japanese American Communal Memory of U.S. Justice Department Internment, 1941-1945" *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 73-80. Print.

Powell, Malea. "Dreaming Charles Eastman: Cultural Memory, Autobiography, and Geography in Indigenous Rhetorical Histories." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 115-127. Print.

Rohan, Barry. "My Grandfather's Trunk." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 93-106. Print.

Royster, Jacqueline Jones, and Gesa E. Kirsch. *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012. Print.

Sharer, Wendy B. "Traces of the Familiar: Family Archives as Primary Source Material." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 47-55. Print.

Sullivan, Patricia and James E. Porter. *Open Spaces: Writing Technologies and Critical Research Practices*. Westport: Ablex, 1997. Kindle File.

Villanueva, Victor. "Colonial Memory, Colonial Research: A Preamble to a Case Study." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 83-92. Print.

Wider, Kathleen. "In a Treeless Landscape: A Research Narrative." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. 66-72. Print.

Schultz, Lucille M. "Foreword." *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. Eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. VII-XI. Print.