Reframing Archives:
Individuals & Imaginative Inventories

By Dharini Chand

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Conception | **Prologue**

I want to begin by archiving the moment that led to my creating this project, ironically during an oral history interview. In September 2021, new to OHMA[1] and new to the United States of America, I was conducting a peer interview as part of my coursework. The strangeness of 'formally' recording, and of being in a new environment away from home, along with worrying about the new recording equipment, and the need to sound sensible and confident in the interview had caused much chaos in my mind. After a certain point, I was at a loss of what to ask next in the interview. In that frantic moment, my mind sought a solution in something I knew better than oral history—archiving. It had been my profession for six years prior to starting the program at OHMA.

I proceeded to ask my interviewee that if she had to create an archive of her life, what all would she include in it? Up till this point my questions had been life history questions. I did not know much about my interviewee, prior to the interview, and my questions mirrored those that most people have already been asked at some point in their life, when someone is getting to know them. It was easy to deduce from my interviewee's responses that their answers were similarly not new and had been used before.

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[1] Oral History Master of Arts Program at Columbia University in New York City.

However, when I asked my interviewee the archiving question, for the first time in the interview they paused to reflect. Something about that moment was very appealing—both, as an oral history student and as an archivist. That wordless moment conveyed more than what my interviewee had been telling me till then. The question changed much—the direction of the interview and my focus—giving me a renewed sense of encouragement and hope because I knew I had found a research topic that would stay with me and one with which I would want to stay.

Design | **Introduction**

The focus of this thesis is to experiment with creating a potential prototype for a new method of conducting oral history interviews, in particular life history interviews, and briefly studying its utility. Oral history is the practice of recording interviews with individuals about their experiences in the past, and oral historians are those who record, analyse, and preserve these interviews. Life history interviews are what they sound like—interviews that record an individual's life. This new method differs from existing oral history interviewing techniques by incorporating the action of archiving in the interview process, wherein the interviewee performs the role of an archivist for their own life.

Traditionally, an archive is made up of those records that individuals, communities or organisations create and keep in the course of their everyday life. Archivists are professionals who collect, assess, organise, store and provide access to these records. Records in the archive are often referred to as 'items'.[2] To compare this with a traditional archive, the archival items here are any aspects of the interviewee's life. These items are not restricted to only physical and/or storable items that are commonly seen in archives, like photographs and documents. They can also be people, places, life events, hobbies, emotions, opinions, sounds, smells and so on. In a nutshell, I am aiming for the word 'archive' and 'item' to be evocative, and, the archive resulting from the interview to be a collection of anything that is significant to the interviewee.

Through this methodology, and for the purpose of this thesis, I am interested in studying three aspects from the resulting interview that will contrast this approach to a traditional life history interview. The three are: a) the role of memory; (b) how interviewees decide, and possibly realise, what goes into their archive; and (c) the role of identity and its visibility and invisibility. I discuss each in turn below.

First, memory plays a key and common role in both archives and oral history. They both are two ways of accessing, recording and retrieving memory. The method of conducting the oral history interview and the method of archiving respectively

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[2] Items in an archive are further sorted into collections and catalogued. Cataloguing these items, within their collections, creates an inventory, which is essentially a list of archived items.

determines how memory is accessed and recorded. I want to see how memory is differently accessed by combining and contrasting the two in this methodology. As an archivist, I saw oral history interviews as a technique of archiving since it recorded individuals' memories in their own narrative.

Now as an oral history student, I am attempting to see if archiving can be used as technique for oral history since I believe that a sizeable part of an interviewee's memory does not get recorded in a traditional life history interview largely due to it being often chronological in nature and focusing largely on memories about different times in their life. While this serves the purpose of the life history interview, it omits certain kinds of memories which I believe this archive methodology can yield. I refer to these memories as those that are neither dominantly known about the interviewee nor are they generally expressed or shared by the interviewee.

Second, the newness of this method and the resulting responses are likely to surprise the interviewees themselves—in that, they may discover new things about themselves, even things they already know, simply by having to decide what goes into their archive. For this, I will rely on my interview question guide. This different method, coupled with questions they have not been asked before, will lead to findings different than what a traditional life history interview produces. Reflection and imagination are likely to be the driving force behind this. Although reflection is part of any oral history interview, the direction of this reflection will be different, because

of thinking about their archive, and imagining the same will further deepen their reflection. I propose this will positively impact the interviewee's creativity and discovery with respect to their archive and their responses.

And third, as members of society we all decide identity—our own and each others—or have it decided for us. Especially while curating our own identity we tend to focus only on certain aspects like our occupation and education. This has become the most accepted way of putting forth our identity. The rest of our identity is rarely documented. I propose that juxtaposing this known, curated identity of the interviewee (popularly referred to as bio), with their oral history interview using the archive methodology will prove to be insightful in how a large part of our story and identity remains unseen or is edited out by us. Much like an iceberg, our dominant identity is the tip—the only part of us that is visible, while the the rest of our identity remains invisible.

This methodology will therefore differ from a life history interview in the following ways: (a) it won't be chronological; (b) it will include both, significant and seemingly not so significant memories; and (c) it will not try to capture the entirety of the interviewee's life, but a representation of the interviewee. The methodology will differ from archiving in the following ways: (a) the archival items won't be only those that are physical and/or storable in nature; (b) the "archive" and "archivist" will be

interviewee themselves; and (c) the end result will be an oral archive, not a physical archive.

The goal of this thesis ultimately is not to determine whether this is a 'better' method for conducting interviews, but to determine that this is a useful method that can yield information other than a chronological pattern that is commonly seen in life history interviews. In the next section, I further develop these concepts.

Pre-construction | Concepts & Theories

The following is an attempt at comparative mean-making—I will first provide the traditional definitions of the words and then juxtapose them with how I will incorporate the practices differently in my thesis, supported by literary findings. In being able to see differently or reframe existing practices, it is helpful to use traditional definitions as a base to work off. Definitions, according to bell hooks are "vital starting points for the imagination". She further says "what we cannot imagine cannot come into being. A good definition marks our starting point and lets us know where we want to end up. As we move toward our desired destination we chart the journey, creating a map."[3] Using the definitions as starting points brings to the fore a clear commonality between oral history and archives, which is memory.

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[3] bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022), 14.

Archives as memory | **Memory** as archives

I'm interested in seeing if this archive methodology can create a map i.e., a map that shows the route to the records we hold in our memory. These records are created as a result of the information our senses gather, which are then stored in our brain in the form of memory. As stated by the Derek Bok Center at Harvard University, "In its simplest form, memory refers to the continued process of information retention over time. It allows individuals to recall and draw upon past events to frame their understanding of and behavior within the present. Memory also gives individuals a framework through which to make sense of the present and future."[4] The functioning of memory is characterised by three main processes which are encoding, storage, and retrieval (or recall).[5]

Similarly, in Les Années, Annie Ernaux says about the continuous processing of informations that "memory never stops. It pairs the dead with the living, real with imaginary beings, dreams with history."[6] Futher, bell hooks talks about memory in a way similar to what this project is trying to achieve, "We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering." Perhaps it would then be accurate to say that our brain is like a

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[4] https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works, accessed November 7th, 2022.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Annie Ernaux, *The Years* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017), 8.

recording device and our memory is a continuous archive, expanding and modifying through our life.

I say this because archives too, function similarly to memory. The International Council of Archives defines archives as "contemporary records created by individuals and organisations as they go about their business and therefore provide a direct window on past events. They can come in a wide range of formats including written, photographic, moving image, sound, digital and analogue. Archives are held by public and private institutions and individuals around the world."[7]

Like memory, archiving can also be categorised into three main process - cataloguing, storage and retrieval. A step-by-step comparison can be drawn as follows. For memory, encoding refers to "the process through which information is learned. That is, how information is taken in, understood, and altered to better support storage."[8] For archives the process of encoding involves sorting items (since not all items that come to archive are retained) and cataloguing the retained items by understanding and recording the necessary details to ensure proper retrieval and storage. This cataloguing or listing of items creates an inventory, which is later used to search and locate items. Archives may further choose to create 'collections' by grouping similar items together. Some common collections found in archives are books, photographs and documents.

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[7] https://www.ica.org/en/what-archive, accessed October 10th, 2022.

[8] https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works, op. cit.

As individuals, we often find ourselves creating similar collections. While these are either physical items or digital collections, the items in our memory are often not organised or listed. It would take a certain amount of thought and/or reflection to assemble them. Even though these are significant to us, they are hardly recorded, especially in a way that is accessible to others. Further, we tend to share a limited, formatted and edited version of ourselves. A recurring example of this is when people are asked to provide a bio of themselves, usually in the 'about' section of a website. Everyone invariably follows a set format wherein they mention their work, education and other qualifications. This carefully curated identity ends up becoming the dominant identity of a person. I explain later about how life history interviews can further this dominant identity.

Related to identity, a very interesting and important question that arises at this stage is - why do we retain what we retain? For archiving, Eric Ketelaar coined a word for this called "archivalisation". He says it is "the conscious or unconscious choice to consider something worth archiving" and therefore precedes archiving. He further adds that apart from the technical aspect, archivalisation should also and especially be understood socio-culturally.[9] This is particularly compelling because I find that, like individuals, archives also have a certain identity.

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[9] Eric Ketelaar, "Archivalisation and archiving", *Archives & Manuscripts*, 27(1) (1999), 56.

This identity depends on the story they are trying to tell or the legacy they are trying to create and preserve. Broadly archives can be identified as corporate archives, community archives, national archives, and so on, while each will their own specific identity. This identity of the archive then guides the archivalisation process for the archivists. Similarly, through the interviews I want to see if the identity of the interviewee plays a role in determining the archivalisation process for my interviewees and which factors, socio-cultural or other, may affect this process, and if this interview methodology can put aside the weightage of these factors to produce a less curated version of the interviewee's identity.

After deciding what to retain comes the next stage in the process - storage. For memory, it refers to "how, where, how much, and how long encoded information is retained within the memory system."[10] In archiving, storage is one of the most important steps that ensures the longevity of the item and makes possible its successful retrieval. Steps are taken to optimise storage to ensure maximum perpetuity. This includes temperature control, pest control and fire hazard control. Retrieval can be jointly defined for memory and archives as the process through which individuals access stored information. In archives this often involves searching the inventory, using a location tracker on a computer or a unique numbering system.

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[10] https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works, op. cit.

Oral history as archiving | **Archiving** as oral history

The retrieval stage is where oral history as interview gets incorporated into the methodology. Retrieval in an archive usually takes place when someone, for example, a researcher, requests access for a certain item. Here, the oral history interview becomes the access point to the interviewee's memory. The archive methodology then acts as a device or a tool to facilitate a route or a way to the items or records stored in our memory archive. Everyone has an archive and everyone has a story. While a life history interview gets to the story, the back-end archive that supplies information for the story is what I am trying to access through this method. Since the interview methodology is key for this, it will be helpful to understand oral history interviewing next.

The Oral History Association defines oral history as "a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events."[11] The standard process generally involves an oral historian, the interviewer, who is trained to ask questions, and more importantly trained to listen, in order to effectively record first-person narratives. These interviews are can have several genres. The four basic types are: subject-oriented histories, life histories, community history, and family history[12]. From these, this thesis is focusing on life histories, as mentioned in the beginning.

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[11] https://oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/, accessed September 8th, 2022.

[12] Thomas L Charlton., et al., *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology (*Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 27.

David Dunaway provides three types of life histories (a) a standard biography that includes oral history interviews (b) interviews of several people who talk about the life of the subject and (c) "oral memoir" which comes closest to the topic. It entails the subject telling their own story that can be supplemented by providing explanations and footnotes.[13] The word supplement is key here. We often use and see archival items as "documentary evidence of past events."[14] In oral history interviews these items supplement the interviewee's story—the interview takes place and based on the narratives the interviewee shares, they may choose to additionally share objects that supplement these narratives, some common examples being photos or letters.

This methodology aims to make these supplementary items the focus of the interview, with the oral narrative then becoming supplementary to it. This is best explained using the example of an archiving technique called photo/object elicitation. It often happens that there are items in an archive that do not have a visible significance or context. Archivists will then seek out individuals who are likely to have information about them, and hope to find answers by showing them these items. As an archivist, this method was my absolute delight. It brought out many new stories and information, about the item and beyond. Another way to use this was to show such individuals a collection of archival items, whose significance was known, to see if they brought out any more memories and stories.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives, accessed October 10th, 2022.

This is also why I referred to archives being the back-end to our story. In this regard, the interview will be first be aimed at knowing what these items in the interviewee's archive are, and second, through those items know what the interviewee's story is. In doing so, it will be possible to know the major and minor elements that contribute to the interviewee's story and not just the major elements as seen in life history interviews. To make this possible, I've tried to be abstract with the word 'item' during the interview. This is to enable the interviewee to think and talk about their archive in an inclusive way, without omitting aspects that are not tangible items.

As mentioned earlier, the items in this archive can therefore be anything that the person chooses to include. A projected potential archive could be made up of people, places, events, experiences, interests, hobbies, ideologies, sounds and smells, as well as standard items like objects, documents and photos. This methodology will then create an oral archive, instead of an oral memoir, of the interviewee's life. Dunaway says that the oral memoir, is the "as-told-to narrative of a life" where "the subject's own words are the foundation of the text, which may be enriched with documents and archival photos."[15] This oral archive will therefore contrast this by seeking archival items first and then enriching it with the interviewee's narrative.

Lastly, I want to bring forth the aspect of 'silence' that is an important consideration in oral history practice. Freund says "Silences, oral historians fear, may signify a loss

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[15] David King Dunaway, *The Oral Biography. Biography 14, no. 3* (1991), 256–66.

of information, a threat of incompleteness, a breakdown of rapport, a loss of trust, or an interviewer's ineptness – all constitute threats to our identities as skilled interviewers and people who want to be liked by others." He further says that we respond to silence by using theories and methods that will "attempt to contain silences and keep us in control of knowledge about our interviewees. Our conflicted attitudes toward silence pose a fundamental ethical problem: in our emotionally charged quest for a complete and perfect interview, we are insufficiently prepared to accept our interviewees' silence as a form of agency in the interview situation. Thus, next to methodological and theoretical responses, we need to develop an ethical response to interviewee silence, an ethics of silence."[16]

Though I have similarly been affected by silence in my initial interviews, it is pertinent to clarify that the idea behind this methodology is not to find a way to avoid or overcome silences that are invariably part of any narrative. Through my practice I have realised that silence is a choice made by the interviewee and a likely product based on the kinds of questions asked. This methodology is not an attempt to successfully elicit information or overcome silence. It may produce its own silence, or it may mitigate it. The focus will remain on recording a representation of the interviewee's life and not the entirety of it. Next I will elaborate on the process of conducting the interviews.

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[16] Alexander Freund, "Toward an Ethics of Silence? Negotiating Off-The-Record Events and Identity in Oral History." *Oral History off the Record*, 223–38.

Procurement | Methodology

I considered several ways to conduct the interviews that best suited time limitations, the ability of interviewees to participate, and the potential for useful results. Here I summarise these possibilities, why I rejected some, and why I chose the one I used. In totality, I conducted five interviews using this concept - three of which were part of an initial pilot study and two of which were conducted recently.

My initial idea was to ask my interviewees to take time to reflect on what they wanted to include in their archive and share that with me prior to the interview. I wanted to be as creative and flexible with this archive and hoped for the same from my interviewees. I envisioned this archive as either a list, a drawing, a collage, a mood board, a digital file or a combination of some or all. I also saw it being in the form of, or a mixture of, words, art, audio, images, videos and so on and so forth. My long-term goal was to create a website that could make the creation of such an archive possible. The idea for such a website was expensive to execute and sustain, but I hope to build the website in the future, for it to become an activity for individuals, by themselves or with others—friends, family, therapists and any one else.

I wanted to use such an archive created by my interviewees as the starting point for the interview and ask them about the significance of why they chose the items they chose. My reasoning behind this was that it would be better to have my interviewees take the time to reflect prior to the interview so that they had enough opportunity to

include everything that they wanted to. I also saw the creation of such an archive as a form of self-expression and was keen to study this aspect along with the interview. However, I realised that this method would have given them the opportunity to pick and curate what they wanted to say, which would go against what the project was trying to achieve, especially in terms of identity.

This methodology did not work for other reasons as well. I had used the invitation letter for the interview as an explanatory write-up, which I felt was sufficient in conveying the idea of the project. I had also spoken to my interviewees and answered their questions about it. However, in testing this approach, I soon found that my interviewees were still unsure about how to go about the archiving process on their own and did not seem keen to engage in the pre-interview reflection. The ambiguity of the project for them proved to be especially challenging in getting to the next step, of scheduling the interview. I ultimately decided to change the process to shift the archive creation and reflection to the interview space.

Ironically, I had approached three archivists to be my interviewees. I felt that since they were well-versed with the concept of archiving, this project concept would seem least vague or abstract to them and they would be able to grasp the idea quicker than anyone not familiar with archiving. Much later I received helpful feedback that quantifying the number of 'items' could have made it a less intimidating and a much more manageable task. Though I changed the method, I went on to incorporate this

suggestion in my interview question guide. This was especially helpful for my interviewees since it made reflection and recall during the interview a much less overwhelming task. It also did not hamper my project as I was not trying to achieve a 'whole' or 'complete' description of my interviewee's life, hearing just some examples of the kind of recollections and responses this methodology brought about were sufficient.

Soon after changing my approach, I managed to easily schedule interviews with three participants (of which two were archivists) and conducted a pilot study using this archiving methodology. The outcomes from these interviews were instrumental in taking this project forward. They have been discussed later in the 'Interviews & Excerpts' section. The highlight of this process for me was undoubtedly the interview question guide that I created and used. This has largely stayed the same throughout. Since I was trying to encourage my interviewees to feel like archivists, I tried to model these questions as closely as I could to an actual archive.

This approach resonated strongly with me, especially as an archivist, since it made possible for my interviewee to effectively mimic an archivist even while not being fully aware of what it meant to be one. I realised that many people will not resonate with the technical words used in the questions and I sought ways and words to simplify these technical terms in the interview. The most frequent example for this is the word 'item'. I frequently reiterated through the interview that it does not only

mean physical and/or storable items or objects and that it can refer to any aspect of the interviewee's life.

The questions I asked during these interviews were:

• Please introduce yourself in any way that you want to

• If you were to create an archive of your life what would you include?

• How did this reflection make you feel?

• Why did you include what you included and what is the story/significance?

• How accessible is your archive to others?

• Are there long-term visitors/short-term visitors?

• Would you like to keep access to certain items/collections restricted?

• Which items are fragile and need to be handled with care?

• Which is the biggest collection in your archive?

• Which is the smallest collection in your archive?

• Which items do you want to deaccession and why?

• Which items do you want to focus on?

• Which items do you not want to focus on?

• Which is the oldest item in your archive?

• Which items have you inherited?

• Which items would you like to pass on to someone else?

• Which is the most valuable item in your archive and what makes it valuable?

• Which items did you not archive?

- Which items would you want/wish you had in their archive?

- What values guide these decisions?

- Take a walk around your archive. How does it make you feel?

- Curate an archive tour highlighting some items. Which items would they be?

- If you were to reintroduce yourself, what would you want to say?

This method was fairly successful and my interviewees especially responded positively to the interview question guide. In particular, they appreciated the questions being unexpected and their unexpected responses to such unexpected questions. They found their responses to be authentic and surprising as a result of this. For me, their interpretations of the questions, especially given the technical and archive specific wording, was pleasantly surprising and I would look forward to hearing their take on it. Apart from the beginning of the interview that had a more open ended approach while talking about what would be included in their archive, the rest of the questions were not as open ended and their responses to those were short and brief, but varied and generative. I retained these questions for the thesis for this very reason.

For my thesis I also wanted to emphasis more on identity, so I decided to do a two-part interview with each interviewee. The first would be a standard life history interview and the second would use my archiving methodology. I was also looking for participants who were not known to me since I felt this impacted my previous interviews where all three interviewees were well known to me. In the end however, I

decided against this method since it was too time intensive to ask a participant for two interviews, and more importantly it was seeming very difficult to find someone, who didn't know me, to commit to two interviews, especially since the interviews would be personal in nature.

I then decided on the methodology I used. I conducted two interviews. Initially I was planning to do three, but post the second interview I realised I had reached the conclusion I desired for this thesis. I had initially decided that the interviewee's relationship to me outside the interview was not a consideration. However I ended up choosing friends I knew relatively well. My reason for this was that I already knew the dominant aspects of their life and this would give me a gauge as to how effective this methodology was.

This would be somewhat similar to the two-part interview, wherein here my pre-existing relationship with them would suffice as the first part. Another step I took to further concise the two-part interview idea was to ask my interviewees to send me any bio of theirs before the interview, which would stand-in as their identity that is more dominantly known. I did not specify what the bio should or should not include. I wanted to see if the bio they send me is similar, and in-line with what we generally see—consisting of a person's occupation and education. I could then draw contrasts from seeing how differently the same interviewee is portrayed - first in their prepared bio and secondly in their oral archive.

Some other changes I made for this methodology were as follows. Along with the invitation letter for the interview, I also sent them a short video titled, 'What is an archive?' by the National Archives UK,[17] to familiarise them with the concept of archives and have a visual idea of what they look like. This video, even though brief, gave an accurate description of how I wanted my interviewees to view archives. I also changed the initial questions of my interview question guide. After the first introduction question, I mentioned my project idea in a line. I then asked them the following questions:

• How did you feel when you were asked to be part of such a study?

• Do you have any questions before we begin?

Both of the above questions were aimed towards starting the interview in a gentler way and building trust with the interviewee by asking them how they felt and if they required any clarifications. I then moved on to the archive creation. I began this process by asking questions about two very different kinds of memories of their life, which were:

• Could you begin by telling me some of the highlights of your life? You can take time to reflect, grab a pen or paper, anything that works for you.

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[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URhWOKyve-I

• We sometimes experience moments that we wish we were able to capture or bottle up so that we can preserve that particular moment or feeling. Can you recall any such moments?

Post their responses I then went on to tell them that the diversity of their answers sets the tone for the kind of archive this project is trying to create—one that can consist of the important things, not so important things, significant to us, but not so significant to others things, random things, small things and so on. I would then ask them if there are any other items that they would similarly want to include, and that they can be as many in number. After getting a sense of their archive I would then continue to the remainder of the questions in the initial interview guide, starting with "How accessible is your archive to others?"

While conducting the fourth interview I hit a roadblock just before this point - when I asked my interviewee if she wants to include any more items. She went on to mention some moments that were similar to her responses for the previous question about wanting to preserve particular moments or feelings. I did not prompt her further and in hindsight I felt I could have used my discretion as an interviewer to do so. The same thing occurred during my fifth, and last, interview. My interviewee similarly responded when asked if she wanted to include any more items. This time I decided to guide the interview slightly by specifically and individually asking her whether there

are any people, places, emotions, opinions, sounds, smells, physical objects and so on that she would like to archive.

In doing so I reached the conclusion for this thesis. I realised that my interviewees were not likely to explore multiple facets of their archive on their own, but by prodding them, they were likely to be easily able to do so. As mentioned earlier, I knew my fifth interviewee fairly well and I was able to tell that through the items she picked for her archive and her responses to the rest of the questions, she also provided her reasons for doing so which brought about aspects of her life story. This achieved the aim for my methodology in trying to create an oral archive where the focus is on the archival items and the oral narrative is supplementary to it. I further elaborate on the outcomes of the interviews below.

Construction | **Interviews & Excerpts**

I want to share specific moments from each of the five interviews that I found particularly striking and insightful for this thesis that helped me gauge the merits, demerits and usability of this methodology. I will state them interview-wise, in the order in which they were conducted. My **first interview** was with C[18] who is an archivist, and one my close friends. This was my first interview using this archive

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[18] I have used only the starting alphabet of all my interviewees' names.

methodology and it left me feeling disappointed and embarrassed, since I felt both of us weren't at ease, and I, as an interviewer, handled the interview clumsily.

C was uncomfortable because of finding the interview process very 'formal', especially since it included a legal release. In this situation, knowing the narrator so well was a disadvantage because I could realise that she was not sharing as openly and I naively saw that as reflection of my skills as an interviewer. I didn't give myself enough space to improvise or focus on listening because of the immediate disappointment.

In the interview I invited her to to think of her archive and there's a clear indication of her discomfort and hesitation since she mentioned only three phsyical items. However some moments from the interview especially resonated with the project, "If someone else were to do it they would probably pick a different set of items or memories to highlight (of her life)", which ties in well with how, we decide our identity I want individuals to be the ones deciding the elements of their story. She also called it an "autobiography of sorts" which is a good way to describe the project.

I particularly liked when she said that, "I would like the items to show the multifaceted nature of me as a person, and my personality. A lot of people think that maybe I'm studious, nerdy or that kind of stuff. But a lot of them don't know that I do have a spiritual side and I'm not your regular plain Jane girl that you've probably

thought of me, I do have a side that is geeky and nerdy and history loving, but there is also a side where I could be any normal girl that you know, so I'd like objects in my archive to showcase that about me." She added that people assume her to be a certain kind of person, "maybe they are living all these years with a notion of me in their heads." I also noticed that she often said, "since this is about me" and the context in which she would say it made me feel like this interview was her first instance of being able to control her identity and story.

Midway through the interview I realised that she thought this exercise was only about physical items (which is largely why I felt I had handled the process clumsily). My realisation came about when I asked her if there are any items she has inherited. She said, "more than items it is also traits and gestures and things of the personality, but since we are talking about these archives holding objects so to say it would definitely be all these lovely illustrated atlases, books on science, the human anatomy, paintings by all the Italian masters and all these have been lovingly bought by father and I've spent days of my childhood pouring over these books and yeah they truly hold a special place."

I then clarified that it doesn't have to be only physical items and that led to some very reflective answers for the rest of interview, like the one to the next question which was, "what is the most valuable item in your archive?" To this she said, "In that case I am surprising even myself by picking this example of the most prized item in my

archive so to say, but it is going to be my faith." Her surprise at her answer reinforced my belief that my interviewees would be able to discover new things about themselves.

Another interesting thing she said was, "if I had to think that someone is going to come in here and have a look at these very things then it takes me aback..its like hey, perhaps I don't want this on display or perhaps I don't want this to be accessible, those are second thoughts I'm getting on doing this exercise of walking around in my archive." She then spoke about how a curator is responsible for why a certain item gets chosen and in hindsight I found that so interesting. A curator chooses items for display and is likely to highlight the best ones, but an archivist saves the good, the bad, and everything in between that has significance and representation, which I hope the interviewees also do in this project.

My **second interview**, was with M, who is a human rights lawyer and she talks about the kind of agency she had in that choice. "I think my parents had an idea around certain professions being more respectable and dancing was not one of that for them. I am not saying that my becoming a lawyer was a complete act of coercion and I had no say but these things are often very grey and I got pushed away from dancing because of my parents' dissuasion and I was young and craved their support and validation a lot more than I do right now and that is how I ended up becoming a lawyer."

She went on to talk about how this still bothered her. "I think in law I eventually found something that excited me and interested me but I still have many days when I look at what I enjoy the most and what I'm really passionate about and I have these questions and I wish I had followed my heart there and maybe I would not have become a successful dancer but there would have been this satisfaction that I did exactly what I was most passionate about and I think law is a secondary passion and I'm not complaining, sometimes we just have to do jobs to pay the bills, I'm not saying this is a miserable situation, but I definitely think my career choice was dictated to a large extent by my parents' ideas of what would be respectable in Indian society."

Not surprisingly, she had introduced herself in the beginning of the interview by saying, "My name is M, I'm from India, I've been based in the US for a little over two years now, I'm a lawyer by training and I work in the human rights field." This tied in really well with my question of how much of our identity is really ours. She had been my friend for over a decade at this point and I did not know that dancing held such an important place in her life. Later in the interview she reflected that, "so often the only context in which we ask people to talk about themselves is in a interview, so there is a natural, ingrained format on how you speak about that..and it is very rare for people to get to know you beyond what you do." This response fit in perfectly with my project's aim to seek what is beyond such formatted identities.

I experimented with using sensory prompts in my interview with her. In some moments it felt like a good fit, but largely I don't think it yielded much. I have mentioned before that our senses and minds are recording devices, and I wanted to explore this more. In this interview I asked her, "what sound do you identify with?" To this she said, "the sound of a soft jingling anklet. At least that's a sound I desire to be, but maybe I'm more like a noise." My next question was, "what is a smell you would identify with?" To this she said, "a fancy perfume." I also asked, "who do you want to be seen as?" To this she said, "contributing to the lives of people, and the world at large.."

Another question I asked her was, "how does your archive make you feel when you are walking around?" She said, "it makes me wonder how much of this will a person be able to put together without the context, so the things that are communicated through a book for example, or a person's autobiography. I don't know if by just seeing these objects a person will be able to piece together my story or who I am. I think it would still require some context or explanation from me about my story, my words about why these things matter." To this I asked her if oral history would help in giving context, to which she replied "for sure." Her response aligned well with what this methodology was attempting to do by first recording the archival items and then using the oral narrative to supplement it.

My **third interview** was with H, an archivist and oral historian. In this interview I asked a question about 'repeated stories', which was something she mentioned in context to her work as an oral historian. I then went on to ask her what her unrepeated stories were. While this was an impromptu, in-the-moment question and seemed alright to use with her, given her familiarity as an oral historian, it may be too direct a question to ask someone else.

I appreciated how, through her archive, she showed herself being empowered and vulnerable at the same time. She said, "I don't want to be seen as a good girl. I was a good girl while I was under my father's rule and I don't want that anymore." When she spoke about the kind of things she wouldn't want to archive, she said, "people won't see me as H who has her life sorted. I'm not perfect, but they will stop focusing on what I've achieved so far and start focusing on those things." This is another aspect of identity that I was trying to highlight, what aspects do people focus on, with regards to us, and what parts of us would we like to shift the focus on.

It was particularly wonderful to see how the question prompts brought about answers that ranged from being light hearted to being heavy. In H's interview when I asked her what the smallest collection in her archive was, she said, "my social life". Later when I asked her what things would she wish to have in her archive, she said, "I wish it [life] would have been a little more happier." As an interviewer I greatly appreciate

the range of answers this methodology is able to bring and I see it as one of its biggest strengths.

My next interview was with A and it was the first one I conducted after tweaking my methodology. It was my **fourth interview** in overall. As mentioned earlier, much to my amazement, the method still seemed incomplete and left me feeling disappointed post the interview. I started the interview by asking her to introduce herself in any way that she want to, to which she said, "I am currently a creative arts psychotherapist who basically works at the intersection of creative arts and mental health. I am also an artist, I am an Indian classical dancer and currently living in the UK and I work in different areas from art, mental health and research and that's me." By providing her introduction, I am attempting to provide context for you, the reader, to be able to gauge the merits and demerits of the method.

I went on to ask her about the highlights of her life, I particularly liked how she asked "does it have to be positive?" She went to mention stammering as the first one. She then mentioned some 'positive' highlights and post which she said "I am not just the girl who stammers, I can do a lot more." When asked about the little moments that she would have liked to capture she recalled time with her grandparents (who had now passed away) and moments of being amidst nature. These were insightful to know about the kind of things she cherishes.

This was particularly amplified when I asked her if she were to put representative items of her life into a box, what would would they be? To this she said "On the box I would like to put a quote, I don't know why that struck me first. Its a Franz Kafka quote - *You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.* I would like to think that's how I live. Maybe it is too soon to say that but I feel like it happens that way. I've sort of been fascinated with this even before I understood my life or I was able to comprehend. But this quote has stayed with me so I think I would like this of the box."

She then listed what she would like to include in the box, "a book of Rumi's poetry, the people in my life who have shaped me, been integral in seeing me for who I am and giving me strength - mom, dad, my grandparents and my close friends, one *ghungroo* [dance bell], my journal and a drawing of an image of myself that I call 'Maya' which is a resilient self that I've created as result of stammering and other things, and oh, a nose pin as well." Even though I knew her fairly well, I would have only been able to get the *ghungroo* right, if I were asked to list items that represented her.

On being asked how accessible her archive is to other she said, "I would like to call it the selective permeable membrane, like the one in the cell. It is sort of like that. I

mean of course, you get a broad idea of it—the only thing that is accessible is probably the broad idea of me and who I am, the dancer, etc. But the little things of Rumi, or my journal, or my friends, or the people in my life who have shaped me, all of that is not very accessible I would say. You require clearance for that! [laughs]." This again reinforced how much of our identity we consciously edit out and how only the visible tip of our identity is visible to the world at large.

When I asked her about any items that are fragile and need to be handled with care, she said, "I think my identity as a person who stammers and who I am needs to be handled with fragility in a way because its something I keep working with, I keep experiencing on an everyday day-to-day basis thing. So I think that identity of mine has to be dealt with in a fragile nature in a way. Yeah." These kinds of responses are generally not seen in life history interviews, even though these aspects of the person are strong undercurrents to their life and vital to their identity.

As seen with the three other interviews previously conducted, this interview also had a range of responses, including some unexpected and light-hearted ones. For the question about the smallest collection in her archive she said, "sports-wise I have nothing to offer. I have one medal which I also got by fluke!" On being asked about the kind of items she would like to focus on, she responded with stating her ability to invite drama in her life. An example she gave for this was accidentally dating a criminal. The next question about items she would not want to focus on retracted the

interview to a more emotional space. She responded by saying her school life because it was a time where things were not in her control and she would rather focus on things that are in her control.

I ended the interview by asking her for feedback on the process so I was interested in knowing what the experience was like on the other side. To this she said, "I think I really enjoyed the process. I think it's interesting because it almost seemed like a therapy session. It's something that we therapist do—we talk through images, we talk through metaphors when we're trying to talk to a client and understand them. It really seemed like that for me. I was able to think, I was able to ponder over, I was able to question a lot. I think in a way it helped me look at myself. So I thank you for that." She also said that this process reminded her of narrative therapy, which is something I always associated with this project as well.

She had briefly interned at an heritage management firm and had some experience with life history interviews. I asked her if she found any similarities or differences in this archiving method and life history interviews. Her response was that, "I think this had a lot more to offer in a way, the kind of questions you asked made me want to think—questions about things that I would like to focus on, the things I would like to keep in my archive, things that I don't want anybody to see, these are not questions that you ask in a life history history interview, right? In a way I felt these really allowed me to go somewhere to think and to come back, and so it was sort of

provocative and I really liked that. And I mean provocative in a good way. Like sometimes you need to go there. Otherwise you can't be safe and say okay, just give me how much ever information you're giving. Even for the individual answering here, when you ask such questions they are made to think and they are like—oh okay, yeah, that's also there. So I think that way this definitely has an impact."

In the end she had reintroduced herself as "Hi everyone, my name is A, I am a lot of things, I'm an artist, a therapist, a fighter and a drama queen and I have a life that is colourful in monochrome." I want to juxtapose this with the bio that she had sent to me prior to the interview:

"I'm a Mental Health Professional with 5+ years of experience using different creative arts therapy modalities in various settings ranging from psychiatric institutions, schools, shelter homes, and care homes. With a zest for academic research, I intend to present and advocate for multiple lived experiences. Apart from being an avid traveller and performer, I believe I am a perennial learner, perpetually exploring the various facets of the world in depth. This is also reflected in the journey of my career. So far, I have explored various fields of works inclining towards interdisciplinary work. While I come with a background in performing arts and history, I have found my calling in the work that sees the intersection of expressive arts and psychology in a therapeutic setting."

My **fifth interview** was with S and was the last interview for the thesis. The interview began with her introducing herself as "My name is S, I'm from Bombay, India. I work as a branding designer and illustrator and I work independently by myself." S mentioned that she often engages in self-reflection and this was evident from her interview. In particular, when I asked her if she had any thoughts about being a participant in such an interview, she mentioned that she was quite interested because she felt that "something like this would open a lot of aspects about myself to myself as well, which I'm always up for because I really believe in a lot of personal growth."

When I went on to ask her about some of the highlights of her life, she asked if it can be "anything that comes to my mind" to which I responded with a very enthusiastic "yes!" As mentioned earlier, the main highlight of this interview was being able to know her life story from the items she picked. This happened right from the beginning. The first highlight she mentioned was the kind of friends she has made in life. Her reason for picking friends started the process of the oral narrative giving context to the items. She said, "I don't think I was born into a very idealistic sense of a family. I never grew up like that, I never grew up in a very family-esque household, so I always sought out to find what family meant to me outside home."

She went on to say, "I realised through the years that I used to find that in the friendships that I was trying to make, so I feel like one of the biggest things of my life today, obviously we all say that the basics of your life are your work, your family,

your friends, or your your relationships but I genuinely mean it when I say that I feel my friends are the kind of family that I've made for myself and something that I really, really cherish and value over a lot else, maybe more than others would, and not taking away the importance of what friends mean to other people, but I feel friendships for me are definitely a lot more important than maybe my own family today."

Her next highlight was her love for art. When I asked about the moments in life that she would want to preserve, she spoke about the rare times where she draws for herself and not anyone else, about being at home with her partner on a normal evening, laughing in each others' company on the couch, and every birthday in her life, and not wanting it to ever end because she finds herself being a different person on her birthday since she allows herself to feel important, which doesn't come easy as a self-depreciating person.

I then explained that the project was trying to create such an archive, that included everything from the bigger things to the smaller things, like the things she had just mentioned. When I asked her about any other items she would like to add to such an archive, she continued to mention moments, like the joy of alone time and personal space, the "grave happiness" of eating a slice of cake, being around any animal, and the moment she and her partner and got their own home which was especially

significant to her since she didn't have any positive associations of a home growing up.

At this point I felt the interview was heading in the same direction as the fourth one had and I took the opportunity to instead ask her specifically about physical items. One of the things she mentioned was "a *sari[19]* that my best friend and her mom made for me. They made it from scratch for me before my wedding to kind of commemorate that I'm actually half Gujarati and half Bengali and because I'm not so close to my father, I've never been able to embrace my Bengali side as much, but they both are Bengali. So they made me a *sari* in a Bengali style before my wedding so I could commemorate or have something to embrace the Bengali side of myself and to have as a memento from my wedding." It was wonderful to see how the story behind the *sari* had given such context to her life.

This theme followed throughout the interview. When I asked her if she would want to archive an places, to this she said, "In terms of places I think it would definitely be the place I was born in, which is Chicago, because I think I was only like a year old over there but I do have very vivid memories as a baby of what that was, what that apartment was, there were tulips outside, and I think places where I've visited my family, in my upbringing in America, which is a lot of places in America like Miami and Washington. Because I feel like America was a very big part of what my childhood was and what life looked like at that time till the age of ten. A lot of what

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[19] A type of traditional Indian clothing for women.

I've lived over there has kind of moulded me as a person today. Then I would say Paris because that was the first trip my mom was able to make happen for me and her, all by herself, and then I think Bali because my best friend and her whole family just took me along with them because they had a complete all expenses paid extra ticket and just wanted another person to come."

Another example was when I asked her what bits of her personality would she want to archive. To this she said, "I'm very, very, very adaptable and very adjusting to anything that happens in my life. Not to gloat but it is something I feel very proud of that I'm able to do because I've had to shift many times in my life, people have changed, houses have changed, schools have changed. Everything has constantly changed, the course of my life has changed, parts have changed. That is why I have become very adaptable and very adjusting."

Her responses often drew connections to her family which showed the depth of the impact of it in her life. When I asked her what she would not want to archive, her response was "my parents marriage for starters […] and I think a lot of, like a lot of, lot of, lot of, lot of memories with my dad like it's very unfavourable and a lot of it still affects me today, so that's just not something I would want to include." For fragile items in her collection she said, "I think anything to do with my mum, like anything to do with her, whether it's an item or whether it's like a memory or whether it's a piece of information. I think anything to do with her would be something I would

want to be taken care of." The smallest collection in her archive was "time spent with family."

This was juxtaposed by her attempts to mitigate this impact. When asked about what she would want to focus she said, "I think for me it's that in spite of having such a bad history with my parents for more than a decade or a little lesser than two, I have not let that affect what life can mean to me outside of a home, whereas home is supposed to be like your sanctity, that it never felt so, so I tried to make sure that I can make what my life can mean to be outside of that. And I like to think I made my life what it is because of that. That is one, and the second thing is because the marriage I saw was not good proof of what a good marriage could be, I still put my trust into into a man I met and also the fact that he comes from a magnanimously huge family and I did not have that experience and I did not have that comfort. But I think I was just willing to give it a shot and to make sure it works so I think that is definitely a two way process, him and me, but it's also like my internal will of how much I'm willing to push the comfort level in that sense."

At the end I asked her how she found the interview process and she said, "really nice because I'd almost hoped that it would be something like this that would help me also —I feel any experience like this only leaves you feeling like you know yourself a little better. It's almost like you knew all of this about yourself, but you've kind of brought it to the surface and it's nice. I'm really glad you asked me to do it.

She reintroduced herself as, "Hi my name is S and I'm a 28 year old artist living in Bombay and everything I do is in excess. Draw, feel, love, cry, everything is in excess. Yeah." Her familiarity with self-reflection was also visible in the the bio she provided before the interview which stated:

"S is a visual designer and illustrator based out of Bombay. She likes to believe that she has a unique (read weird) perspective on everyday things and on life at large. Whether personal or professional, her work is soulful, emotional and a part of who she is. A lot of her work revolves around her personal experiences, mental health and light-hearted ways of dealing with the baggage we all carry. Oh also, she loves cows, sprinkles, and naming fruits — yes, in that order."

I felt her interview deeply highlighted two things: (a) it was possible to elicit an insightful understanding of the interviewee's life through their archival items; and (b) this insightful understanding of the interviewee's life was far more nuanced than simply telling someone about the past. This reminded me about the time I was writing my Statement of Purpose for my admission application to OHMA. I had been trying to write it in vain since weeks and it kept falling short of what I was trying to say. I then happened to see a writing video where the person said to be impactful we should "show, not tell" about ourselves. This methodology and the resulting interview with S seems to be doing just that.

Post-construction | Conclusion

Combining and contrasting oral history and archiving has been very interesting in many ways, both personally and academically. My knowledge and comfort with archiving gave me the confidence to discover newly through oral history. In doing so, it has been fascinating to see how I have been able to combine this learnt knowledge with my new learnings and still discover newness in what I already know and what I could possibly know.

One of the key learnings in this regard has been the use of photo and object elicitation sessions that I learnt and used as an archivist, and now as an oral history interviewer. The interviews were successful in yielding information other than what a life history interview would do. In particular they retained the sense of intimacy that such interviews bring, and at several points even amplified it.

Through this methodology, I successfully managed to to study the three aspects of the interviews that I wanted to contrast with life history interviews. Beginning with (a) the role of memory: the interviews were able to bring out memories unlike the chronological recollections seen in life history interviews. Archiving turned out to be a successful technique for oral history as illustrated by the interview excerpts above. There was a wide range of the kind of memories that emerged from using this

methodology, and they provided an adequate and accurate representation of the interviewee.

Next was (b) how interviewees decide, and possibly realise, what goes into their archive: the interview questions played the biggest role in this. All the interviewees mentioned that the kind of questions asked in the interview impacted their reflection and recollection, and in turn their responses. I was particularly impressed by the different ways in which each one my interviewees interpreted the questions, often leading to surprising answers, both for me and them. Most of them reported that the interview left them with the feeling of knowing themselves better.

Lastly, (c) the role of identity and its visibility and invisibility: this methodology made it possible to know the interviewee's identity, from them, at three occasions - (1) the bio that they sent prior to the introduction (2) the introduction they gave in the beginning of the interview, when asked to introduce themselves in any way that they want, and (3) the reintroduction they gave of themselves when asked to do so at the end of the interview. The identity of theirs that came through from the interviews was much more varied and these three identities proved to be a good juxtaposition to them. Through this, it was easy to see how most parts of our identity are invisible, while only a small, carefully selected lot of our identity is visible.

While the method was successful overall, there were some potential limitations for it. The most prominent one being that my interviewees were very similar to each other— they were all female, all from India, all from the same socio-economic background, all around the same age, and all humanities students. They were also all known to me prior to the interview. In hindsight, I can see how some of the context in the interview was left unsaid but easily understood by me, owing to my already existing relationship with the interviewees. In the future, it would be interesting to see how this plays out in interviews with strangers, and later with people from various backgrounds and locations, where much shared context would be missing.

The other possible limitation could have been the methodology itself, with the interviewees not being able to create the kind of diverse archive that the project was attempting to create. This was especially observed in the fourth interview, and as the interviewer, I struggled to figure out how to overcome this. However, the last interview brought about the solution to the problem where I, as the interviewer, was able to play a more visible role in the co-creation process of the interview. The result was an evocative and generative oral archive, which aptly concluded this thesis.

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