The fixity of the photo album and the diary or chronicle, both print-based memory machines, have obscured just how fragile and momentary our family histories really are. When you start to explore a family’s history you find that there are moments of clarity brought about by recollection which are always temporary and are constantly displaced by new pieces of data. My grandfather was a somewhat vague but fairly fixed character in my mind until about 6 years ago when a woman rang my father and announced that she was his half sister. This new information profoundly reshaped my understanding of who he was. And then the more I looked into the past, the less certain it seemed. The name Gye, which I’d always believed was French, turned out to be Chinese—an anglicised version of Ah Gye. I started to see family as a kind of memory machine whose operations were similar to the computer—moments of coalescence alternating with dissolution as new data reshapes our understanding of our families. This opened up possibilities for thinking about how we might preserve our family history in electronic media in a way that more closely reflects its dynamic nature.

Halflives attempts to reflect on the construction of our identities through family remembrance in an online environment. Part genealogy and part theoretical speculation, the site draws on Derrida’s theory of hauntology, Barthes’ reflections on photography and a range of family documents and photographs in order to explore new ways of understanding the past.

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