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## Picturing a History

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## PICTURING A HISTORY:

*A Narrative Analysis on Family Photography, History, and Identity*



By Bella Feinstein

Picturing a History

Senior Projection submitted to  
The Division of American Studies  
Of Bard College

By  
Bella Feinstein

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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*Making something coherent is not being faithful to life. - Luciana Alonso*

This project is dedicated to the people (in my family and beyond) who have helped to shape Me- my past, my present, my future. May the inconsistencies of life continue to challenge, enrich, and color our world.





### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

Myra Armstead: whose help guidance throughout this process cannot be fixed into words. Thank you for listening to my stories and thank you for sharing your own.

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Mom & Dad: who have made this all possible. Thank you for always believing in me, for loving me, and encouraging me to paint a brighter picture.





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*Prologue:*

WE desire an understanding of self. WE desire an understanding of the past. WE desire the ability to be remembered. The family photograph as a text, tells us something that the outside world cannot. In a photograph, we have the ability to connect to a place, a time, a person. But the photograph has limitations- it leaves things out, it distorts and distills, it simplifies and flattens.

This story is a first hand account and a first attempt to chronicle my families history. When I returned to Seattle for a month over winter break, I went searching for answers about my past. I yearned to know the characters that made identity. My family has always been such a huge part of my life, and as my four years away from them came to a close, I felt the urge to try and apply what I had learned from studies to my life. The following chapters of this thesis are told by me, from me, about me moving through this research and the writing process. Many of the texts that are cited in this project came to me at pivotal moments in my life. They have shaped and informed my way of thinking. The photographs that I uncovered throughout this process have become so much a part of my existence that for months I have carried them around wherever I went, showing them to people and hanging them on my walls.

I recognize that I cannot capture all the complexities of these stories (my family's story and the larger thematic topics that this project touches on). There are moments when I gloss over important events or weigh less emphasis on seemingly essential details. This is not intentional but rather a testament to the living nature of this project. I recognize the privilege that I have to be writing this story. I am so thankful for the connection that I have to my family and resources I

have been given. I recognize that family and family history is a sensitive subject. What I want people to keep in mind when reading this story is: What does it mean to have a photograph: why are we so bound to them and what do they tell us? What is history: how is made and how is it told? And finally, what does it mean to interrogate the past? These are just some of the questions that came to mind when working on this project. I urge the reader to think about them deeply.

I would also like to make mention that this story focuses only on the maternal side of my family. My father's family is not mentioned anywhere in this piece but that does not mean that they are any less a part of my identity. In an ideal world, I would have the time to trace both sides of my lineage, but the past is gone forever, we cannot return to it, nor can we reclaim it now as it was. We can only attempt to picture it (pun intended).

## **Introduction:**

To interrogate the past, is to reveal gaps in the stories that we tell about ourselves and to each other. It was Michel Trouillot who wrote, “narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based, could be proved correct”<sup>1</sup>. Stories, are constructed mechanisms employed by all humans to ground experience: we tell stories in order to ‘fix’, we tell stories in order to mark time, we tell stories in order to mark our existence. It is through the process of storytelling that we come to make history. But history itself is lived experience, and no two people encounter the same event in the same way. Trouillot suggests that the vernacular use of the term “history,” means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts; both “*what happened*” and “*that which is said to have happened*.” These conflicting perspectives suggest that in every circumstance there are multiple accounts of the same event. The stories that make up history are told with linearity. They are to be supported by fact and collaborated by evidence. But if what one person experiences is not the same as the other, than is there ever really a “singular truth?” What the narrative assists in doing, is distilling a relative understanding of truth (as it is seen by the individual). Narrative places things into a neat frame and make constant.

A photograph does much of the same thing. A photo gives off the illusion of being a simple “transcription of the real.” The immobilized features promise a concrete account of events that we can not return to. We take for fact what appears in the frame. But, much like a narrative excludes the possibilities of other voices, the photograph excludes the possibility of other truths.

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<sup>1</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.

The camera is pointed, the people are posed, the moment is ruptured. The portrait-photograph is a unique text that intersect with a number of the image repertoires which come to form identity. As Roland Barthes notes in his book *Camera Lucida*, “in front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes me”<sup>2</sup>. The photograph, much like the painted portrait, is a mode of self representation and self preservation. It is a manipulated medium that allows us to create a visual understanding of the “self,”- one that will coincides with the “profound” self narrative we create. This is the mythic heritage of photography, “that dominates lived reality, even though it can exist in conflict with it and can be ruled by it.”<sup>3</sup>

In the twentieth century, family photographs have become an integral right of family life. A family portrait displays both “the cohesion of the family and acts as an instrument of its togetherness.” While seemingly conventional in form, the family photograph intersects with “the personal, the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, and the historical.” As a text, the family portrait can tell a story about a individuals experience in relation to a larger social fabric. Its existence, perpetuates myths of the past while resting the fine line between remembering and forgetting.

The collecting of family photographs assists in the making of the family itself. These images, bound in albums, provide a narrative of origin and a mechanism of peering into the past. It is the inclusion of some images and the exclusion of others, that allow the family to paint a satisfactory

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1980. p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 2012

portrait. The maintenance and perpetuation of these images help trace a families progress over time. But these albums, like photographs, and like narratives, are constructed. They are manipulated. They leave things out. In the following pages, I will reveal to you a story of my family. In the process of sharing this story, I have selected narratives to tell, photographs to share, and sources to support. In short, I have *pictured a history* for myself.

## CHAPTER 1: Looking

*“I had understood that henceforth I must interrogate the evidence of Photography, not from the viewpoint of pleasure, but in relation to what we romantically call love and death...”* - Roland Barthes

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Last spring, I studied abroad in Florence, Italy. I'll admit, my intentions for going abroad were a little more complicated than wanting to eat pasta all day and drink fine Tuscan wine (although these things did factor in). I think I went to Italy to find my family- more specifically my mother. She had studied there for a year when she was my age. She always talks about this time being the best year of her life. I wanted to go to Italy to experience what she experienced, to see what she saw. Subconsciously, I was choosing to go to this city to connect to her. My experience in Florence was nothing like the image that I had conjured up in my mind. Seeing as it was the year 2018, the city itself had changed drastically from when my mother had studied there in the early 1980's. The tourist industry now dominates. Most everywhere you go people will speak to you in English. There are

boutique coffee shops that sell acai bowls and hemp seed smoothies and the nearly 50 plus study abroad programs located near the city center make it feel as if you are in a simulated college town. At first, I think I was disappointed to find that the Florence I was



living in was not the Florence my mother had known and loved. There were so many moments when I felt like I wasn't having an authentic experience- moments where I felt like I was an

imposter in a country that I had genealogical roots to but couldn't speak the language, let alone escape my American culture. I was frustrated and to a degree, I was unsatisfied. However, as my time carried out I began to connect to the space in my own way. I began to look around the city, to think about its history, and as a result think about my own.

Seeing that Florence is the birthplace of the Renaissance, it was impossible to escape the works of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo Da Vinci. I only took art history courses during my time there. My apartment was within blocks of Brunelleschi's Duomo. Dante's house was perfectly tucked between a lingerie shop and the Conad grocery store. The Ponte Vecchio was my closest access point to the "other side of the river". As I got more acquainted with the town and its history, I could visualize the streets of Florence in the 15th century. On my morning walks to the bus stop, I could see Michelangelo wheeling the statue of David from his workshop to Piazza della Signoria (a four day long venture). I could imagine the framemakers stretching canvases in Piazza Santo Spirito or the franciscan friars filing one by one into the Basilica di Santa Croce. In Florence, unlike in any other city I have ever been to, the past was present. And to a vary degree, I was living in the past- absorbing all the stories and artwork it had to offer.

One morning, my art history class met in the Loggia dei Lanzi- the covered archway outside of the Uffizi. For the last week, the class had been observing the evolution of Renaissance portraiture. On that day frigid day in February, we were going into the massive museum to see Piero Della Francesca's, *Duke and Duchess of Urbino*. The portrait, which was completed somewhere between 1473-1475 c., stands on a pedestal and is housed in a glorious gold frame. Federico da Montefeltro was one of the most successful mercenary captains of the Renaissance period he over the court of Urbino from 1444 until his death in 1474. The portrait



was commissioned as a commemorative piece meant to honor the passing of the late duchess. It is believed that the artist deciphered her profile from a death mask. Dressed in their most formal attire, both the Duke and Duchess took regal as they tower over the bird's eye view of the landscape. Historians have confirmed that the Duke had scarring and other wounds on the right side of his face (he was missing an eye and part of his nose). Unlike standard portraiture of the era, the Duke is facing left towards his wife (separated by a partition). This was done intentionally by the artist to hide the scarring and accentuate the flattering features of the Duke. This piece has been referred to as one of the most celebrated portraits of the Italian Renaissance. Its unique history and detailed symbolism has stood the test of time. As I stood in the crowded gallery, I thought about this. These two individuals died long ago, but their images remain ever present. They mark a decade in history, a style of painting, a family.

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Beyond being a constellation of Renaissance portraiture, the Duke and Duchess tell us something important about image in the 15th century. Firstly, the fact that the painting was intended to be a commemorative piece speaks to the desire that we humans have to be remembered in time. Secondly, the manipulated pose of the Duke, one which hides all his physical flaws, speaks to our fascination with being preserved in a “likeable” and “desirable” fashion. Say what you will about Renaissance art, Madonna and Child paintings aside, the portraiture of the period brought about a new understanding of self- representation. To be captured in painting was to immortalize yourself in history.

Naturally, this became a game of politics among the elite. To have your portrait painted by a famous artist was to make a statement about your place in society. For the Medici, the

family who maintained political rule over Florence for most of the 15th century, Botticelli was their artist of choice. The decision to make him the artist in residence was as much a political partnership as the treaty between two empires. As an artist, his main duty was “to balance the temporal with the memorable: to wrest from the unpredictability of life and the shadow of mortality in an image worthy of being passed down to future generations”<sup>4</sup>. A painted portrait told a story about status, genealogy, and legacy in a physical way- within the four corners of the frame, one could remain present even once they had passed.

It was not until the invention of the camera in 1816 that individuals were able to capture themselves in entirely realistic form. In order to take the first portraits around 1840, the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in the bright sunlight for hours<sup>5</sup>. Like sitting for a painted portrait, getting your picture taken was actually a painful process. Not only did the camera have physical restraints, but the cost of having your photo taken was astronomical. Once again, portraiture was a medium reserved for the upper class and to have photos was a elevated symbol of wealth.

The 19th century brought rapid advancements in technology and the camera became a more fluid instrument in society. The chemicals materials used to process photos were drastically improve upon and the camera was made into a portable device. Soon, photographs offered a tangible reproduction of life. What pictures could communicate with ease, which painting could not, was a literal interpretation of the present. Photographs authenticated the past and provided material connection to it<sup>6</sup>. Even the acoustical sound of a camera itself summons a rupture in

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<sup>4</sup> Rubin, Patricia. *Images and Identity: In Fifteenth Century Florence*. Yale University Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1980. (p.13).

<sup>6</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

time. Roland Barthes, calls the camera the “clock for seeing”, he says “...for me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches...perhaps in me someone very old hear the photographic mechanism...”<sup>7</sup>. Cameras- in short-are an mnemonic device that mark time and produce an image of it. Furthermore, the ability to reproduce and disseminate these images allowed people to educate themselves on places and people that they had never actually experienced. It was during the 19th century that humans were able to assemble a mechanism for “looking” into the past.

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When I went home for winter break this past January, I was looking for a way to tell my family story. Seeing as it was something that I had felt compelled to do for years, I decided to take a leap of faith and try writing about my family for my senior thesis. No one warned me how difficult it would be. Despite being scared shitless that my family would react terribly, I could not shake the feeling that I had a really powerful story in front of me.

Whenever I sought advice on how to tackle this monstrous feat people's first reaction were, “start with an interview” or “record their stories”. But you see, the thing about that is, I had heard the stories. I had asked the questions. I had grown up among all these people for twenty-one years. I was searching for something tangible. I was looking for proof. It wasn't until I started looking at photographs that the story I was yearning for really came to form.

My Grandmother has lived in the same house for the past forty years. The home, sits in the middle of the block far from the street. The color has changed over time, but when I close my eyes and think about that house, it is always in a shade of yellow. It almost looks like a toy

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1980. (p.15.)

house. There is one large french window on the first floor and then a door on the second floor that once led to a balcony. Two small windows rest on either side of this entrance. The grass that sits in front of my Grandmothers house is always green. Despite the harsh climate of Spokane, Washington (hot, hot summers and cold winters) the lawn is always in perfect condition. She takes pride in that lawn. She used to water it herself every morning, but now a neighbor does it because of her bad back.



I can smell the inside of that house. It is so familiar to me and it never changes. Something between must and fresh baked goods. I bet most describe their grandma's house that way. If anything it smells old- like there were many lives that lived there. That is because so many did. This was the house where my grandparents raised their ten children. The first five, were born in a different house on Hermina St., but this house is the backdrop for all of my family stories. The center of the home is without a doubt the kitchen. It is easily the smallest room in the place but it is the most lively. A round table sits to the right of the entrance and the fridge to the left. There are a string of cabinets that line the side of the wall and then the space opens up to face a door. The door technically leads to the basement, but it is always been closed. For as long as I can remember this door has been covered in images of my family. I don't know who started it or when, but this wall has become something of a living family tree (each year new photos are added as other fade with time). There are

classic school pictures, there are passport pictures, there are Polaroids, there are Christmas cards, and there are even printed out instagram pictures. Most of the photographs are of my grandmother's grandchildren. She has twenty-three of them.

Ever since I was young I used to stare at this wall and study the faces of my relatives. I loved replaying moments in mind. I could hear the sound of my aunt's laugh as she blew out the candles at her birthday party. I could feel the hot summer day when my cousins and I couldn't leave the pool at lake Coeur d'Alene. The wall has always been something I look forward to seeing. We call it the wall of fame, and to be quite honest, it is a wall of fame. If your picture makes it up there it means you have earned a place in my grandmother's heart.

When I arrived in Spokane on that cold January night, I was there to complete a task. I was there to spend time with my Grandmother, yes, but I was also there to find answers about



my family history. Just a week before, I had been digging in my basement in search of my favorite coat, when I came across a shoe box with a plastic bag full of pictures. As I leafed through the images I recognized the faces in the frame, but they were all taken in a time that I seemed to know very little about. Until that moment,

I had never seen a photograph of my mom as a child. I had seen images of her in her twenties and the occasional portrait from high school, but I had never been able to visualize my mother's youth. In a card stock polaroid with the date 1967 printed on the side, my grandmother and my

mother are sitting side by side on a couch. My mom is no more than four years old in the image. Her gaze is pointed directly at the camera and she is wearing a huge smile. Her hands are tucked neatly into her lap. You can almost feel her excitement through the little gaps in her teeth. My Grandma is situated just a few inches to the left. Her hands are reaching for my mother as her eyes wander. She is not looking into the camera. She is not smiling. Her hair is wrapped in a headscarf that accentuates her crude jawline -she looks frozen by the flash. I have no idea where they were or what they were doing, but in that moment I connected to the black-and-white photograph. The contrast between my excited mother and my distant grandmother said something to me about the restraints of their relationship. In the image, I saw myself as a little girl. I saw my mother in my grandmother. I saw the year 1967 and I felt the scratchy synthetic fibers of the couch. It was then that I realized, if I wanted to piece together my history I needed pictures to paint the scene.

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In 1888 George Eastman created the Kodak camera with the slogan, “you push the button, we do the rest.”<sup>8</sup> His intended consumer was not professional photographers but instead everyday people. It was in that moment that portraiture began to leave the studio and enter the home. Very quickly the camera became “the family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation.” Images of weddings and family gatherings allowed people to memorialize events of importance and persevere family history. In her book *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch writes, “family photographs are the primary means by which family memory is continued and perpetuated, by which the family’s story is told.”<sup>9</sup>As

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<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 2012. p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.7.

industrializing countries of Europe and America became fixated by the notion of a “nuclear” family, photography became essential tools in creating cohesive narratives for people to share. Photographs became a rite of family life. What the family album offered was a “portable kit of images that bear witness to the connectedness of relatives.”<sup>10</sup>

While the ideology of family is as much subject to particular historical, social, and economic circumstances as the lived reality of family life, what remains constant across disparate cultures, is the desire to identify a story of origin. For centuries humans have shared oral histories about their ancestors. These stories are used to inform us about our present and provide a narrative of the past. While oral traditions are a fundamental feature human life, family photography creates a visual train of our genealogy. In the photograph of a late relative, one is able to identify features of themselves and place a specific moment in time. Immediately, the photo summons an emotional response and pulls the viewer into the past.

In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes, “what the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike any other medium, the photograph has the capability to recreate a moment in time without the moment in question ever occurring again. This feature of photography is what intersects intrinsically with memory. The photograph offers an immobilized image that authenticates the past and encourages a narrative reading of it. Barthes writes, “Show your photographs to someone- he will immediately show you his: “Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child,” ect; the photograph is never anything but an antiphon of “Look,” “See,” “Here

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang.

it is.”<sup>12</sup> Displaying a photograph encourages people to engage in storytelling, and “telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves.”<sup>13</sup>

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The next morning, I awoke to the smell of the fresh waffles coming from the kitchen. I stumbled down the stairs to find my grandma and my Aunt Jennette talking around the table. They dished me up a waffle and a cup of coffee. We chatted about little things and then I ran upstairs to show Jennette a photo I had found of her and my Uncle. “WOW!” she exclaimed, “look at how young we are! This is when we were living in Harlem. Francis could not have been more than 8 months old.” She proceeded to tell a story about the apartment that they were living in on 125th and the time they had a birthday party in the park. I had never heard this story before and seeing the way that my aunt lit up as she was telling it, made me think that she had forgotten it until now.

I finished breakfast and then went upstairs to shower. There are three bedrooms upstairs, and each of them have housed more people at once than the Spokane city hall. We like to joke that the upstairs is a station stop: four of my cousins have stayed there post college, my uncle with his three children, my aunt with her dog and furniture. So many people have called this part of the house their home and the mismatched design is proof of it. No two sheets are the same, there are skateboard posters hanging next to a sign that says “but first, coffee”, and there are old latin textbooks nestled between copies of *Twilight*. While a fresh coat of paint might suggest otherwise, the marks of each family member remain visible on the walls.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.5

<sup>13</sup> Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets: Act of Memory and Imagination*. Vero, 1995



Having a suspicion that there would be photographs in the “master bedroom,” I first started going through the closet. There were boxes and boxes of old books, my grandmothers red hats, and dusty electronics. It took a solid twenty minutes of digging before I found anything. Beneath a stack of my Grandfathers Latin textbooks, I found a manila folder with loose paperwork. Filing through bank statements and letters, I opened an old birthday card to find a stack of photographs. Few of the images had dates on them, but evidently they were taken over several decades.



In the stack, there was a photo of my Aunt Mary, Jane, and Toby in front of the yellow house. They are smiling ear to ear as they display their Easter baskets full of colorful eggs to the



camera. Another image of my mom and her brother in the front yard, show them both dressed up for a school dance. My mom is wearing a floor length white dress with huge puffy sleeves. Her hair is feathered and the old cadillac parked on the street makes me think this was taken sometime in the seventies. I

found images of kids around a Christmas tree, pictures from birthday parties, and others from a picnic in the park. They were all so conventional and could have belonged to any white-middle class family anywhere in America.

As I was chronicling my personal history, I was also piecing together an understanding of the time period. It was the early 1960s in Spokane, Washington. In the decade preceding the Second World War, the home was the center of American life. Capturing simplistic family moments was not only a way to preserve family narrative, but it was also a form of public participation. Photographs represented a families narrative cohesion and were “an instrument of its togetherness.”<sup>14</sup>

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World War II exposed an ugliness within us all- it revealed contradiction, hate, and unspeakable harm. In attempt to create stability and national unity, America turned to the family for answers. The family provided affection, consistency, and connection- all of the things that country lacked during wartime. Image proved to be an essential tool for asserting the importance



of family life. Pages of *Life* magazine were littered with cartoon depictions of the model American family and soon the family was desirable commodity that promised social prosperity. It was in this decade that we saw the rise of the baby boom, suburbia, and mass consumerism. The 1950s were about presentation in almost every way. From the shiny Cadillac cars to newly polished kitchen appliances,

consumer culture was inescapable and highly participatory. These images helped to solidified gender roles: the man was someone who was loyal to his family but indulged in luxuries outside

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<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 2012. p.8.

of the home, and the woman was of the home. During this decade, “the current of the mainstream was so strong that you only had to step off the bank and float downstream into marriage and motherhood.”<sup>15</sup>

As the American family fortified an image of excellence in the public domain, crafting an image in the private sphere became equally as important. People wanted to depicted images of their families living out the “American dream.” Photography became the primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation. Images immobilized flow of family life into a series of presenatable images that could be displayed in an album. Marianne Hirsch establishes the “familial gaze” as a specific genre of photography that provides the family with an image to live up to. She writes, “the particular nature of the familial gaze, the image of the ideal family and of acceptable family relations, may differ culturally and evolve historically, but every culture and historical moment can identify its own ‘familial gaze.’”<sup>16</sup> Due to the fact that the family intersects with various social institutions, family photography can offer a prism through which to study culture and time. Symbols such as clothing, cars, and even the quality of the photograph can provide us with a contained image of culture. This allows us to assemble our own understanding of the past and tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives<sup>17</sup>.

Hirsch suggests that “...photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life”<sup>18</sup>. The beauty of photography is that is can be manipulated to cover up unflattering parts of family life.

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<sup>15</sup> Harvey, Brett. *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History*. Harper Perennial, 1993

<sup>16</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post-memory*. Harvard university Press, 1997.p.11

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.7.

An image of a mother and daughter smiling on a bench, suggests that the two are connected and content in a specific moment. However the image is posed, it is immobile. This unique feature of photography creates two separate realities: the reality of what was happening behind the camera, and the reality of what the camera has captured. Both of them are “real” in their respective ways, but one is frozen while the other is lived. Hirsch argues that, “since looking operates through projection and since the photographic image is the positive development of a negative, photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not”<sup>19</sup>. Photographs give us a chance to construct a visual interpretation of how we think we should look. More often than not, the image that we see in a frame is nothing like reality. Barthes identifies there is a distinction between “my (mobile) image” and the “my (profound) self image”. He writes, ‘myself’ never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (the reason why society sustains it), and “myself” which is light, divided, dispersed...”<sup>20</sup> In reality, our understanding of ‘self’ changes from day to day, hour to hour. Humans are inconsistent and ever evolving. What a motionless image provides us with is an anesthetized and fastened down perception of self.

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At a coffee shop called Vessel on the corner of Monroe and Mission St., I sat on the phone with my Uncle Nick. He is the youngest of the ten children. He was born on St. Patrick’s day in 1982. My mom loves to tell the story about the night Nick was delivered. She and her brother Austin were out celebrating at *Jack and Dan’s*, when they got the call that my grandmother was in the hospital. My mom, a senior in High School, rushed to the delivery room

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<sup>19</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post-memory*. Harvard university Press, 1997.p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1980. p. 12

and held my Grandmother's hand as she gave birth to her tenth child. Nick lives in LA now. He is the only one of the children that does not live in Spokane or Seattle ( I think he wanted a little more space). Being tenth, Nick has more parental figures than siblings in his life. My eldest cousin Angelo, is just a few months younger than Nick. Technically speaking, Nick was closer in age to his nephew than he was to any of his brothers.

As the youngest, the story of Nick's life in the house on Nora St. stands in total opposition to those of my Aunts and Uncles. By the time my Grandmother gave birth, she was

already in her mid-forties. She had a job at the Montessori school- St. Aloysius and a good portion of her children had left the house. St. Al's, which is how we like to call it, is a part of my family story that can't go without recognition. All of the kids attended school there from pre-k to fifth grade and the only thing separating the grassy green playfield from the family house is an asphalt alley way. We used have Christmas dinner there every year. There came a point when the extended



family was too big to house in one space, so my Grandmother would use her key and we would borrow the cafeteria. I have so many good memories of these Christmases. My aunts would use the industrial kitchenware and serve dinner from behind the counter and after we would all play a competitive round of H-O-R-S-E in the gym. My Grandmother taught at St. Al's up until her retirement in her mid-60's. After raising ten-children, she went on to work with more snot-nose kids till her body physically couldn't take it anymore. While Nick was growing up in the house, my Grandmother maintained a stable income. She was present for his baseball games and active

at PTA meetings, in a way that she had not been for the other nine children. As I was talking to Nick over the phone, the one thing he said was, “my mom had my back.”

The first of the five children: Austin, Stacie (my mom), Shelia, John, and Lucy were all born between 1963 and 1978. The second group: Joe, the twins- James and Jane, Mary, and Nick were all born between 1979 and 1982. There is a clear distinction between the photographs of

my mom’s childhood and those of her younger siblings. In the pictures of my mom’s youth, my grandparents are usually present with a child in their arms. Often, they are more dressed up and posing for the camera. In the photographs taken in the 80’s, the second set of five are usually playing together- without adult supervision-



typically in more casual setting. As I looked more closely at these images, I began to see two very separate families. When my mom talks about her childhood, she does with fondness and admiration- for the most part that is. But when my younger aunts and uncles reflect about the past, they usually have a more jaded telling of their upbringing. I never understood how siblings could have such a variance in stories, yet as I looked at the photographs I saw the difference in a very obvious way.

In a black and white Polaroid, taken in front of the house, my grandfather is holding up the arms of his namesake John. He is wearing grey trousers and nice leather shoes. I find myself looking at this image of my grandfather for quite some time. I never really knew him. He died when I was only three years old. He has always presented as an enigma to me; in the sense that





his presence is always felt but never known. My mom speaks so highly of her father. He was an academic is how she describes him. Always in school, my grandfather was a few credits shy of getting his law degree when he decided to shift his interest to Latin. When he felt he had mastered the ancient language, he took to English. Gathering from what my relatives have told me, my grandfather was a supremely curious man

who loved to learn but he was never very good with money.

My mom says she remembers income was the most stable when my grandfather was working as a bookkeeper. She cannot remember the year, but judging from the photographs, I would assume that family was managing their money well at the end of the 1960's. This is the time period where I found the most pictures of my grandparents together. Together they pose for the camera in front of the house, my grandfather in a suit and my grandmother in a blue fitted dress. My mom, Austin, and Sheila are at their feet, and my grandmother cradles Lucy in her arms. They are the embodiment of a middle-class American family- a family where the kids are kids and the parents are their protectors. While this image gives off the illusion that inside the home the family acted in perfect harmony (we all know) appearances are deceptive.

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Beneath the conventional and opaque surfaces of a family photograph is a “complicated story of familial relation- the passions and rivalries, the tensions, anxieties, and problems that

have, for the most part, remained on the edges or outside the family album.”<sup>21</sup> Photography acts as a deceptive screen that excludes the chaos of daily life and creates an image to be admired. The “familial gaze” as Hirsch calls it, “dominates lived reality and is survived by means of its narrative and imaginary power.”<sup>22</sup> Photographs aid us in the creation and continuation of family myths- the stories which come to form parts of our identity. When looking at images of my youthful grandparents, I saw a representation of family life- one which stood in accordance with the social understanding of ‘family’ and my own understanding of family. The intersection of public and private influences make the family album a “ junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious.”<sup>23</sup>

Memory is a tricky thing. Each time a memory is recalled it is done so differently. As time moves forward our memories of the past become more fictitious than factual. As Patricia Holland has suggested, “our memory is never fully ‘ours’, therefore, “nor are pictures ever unmediated representations of the past”. When looking at photographs “we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a ‘real’ one.”<sup>24</sup> As particular instruments of remembrance, photographs are an “imagetext” that are situated at the brink of memory and forgetting. Their power to provoke storytelling allows a memory to be sustained, but it also encourages a fabricated telling of that story. Because an image is only a selective snapshot of time, surrounding influences are left out of a frame, while the static image is evidence that something happened or someone existed. Barthes claims that this is the inherent burden of photography.

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<sup>21</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 2012. p. 7

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 12



While valuable and tangible, photographs also have the power to carry intense weight. Say there is an image of a time you would rather not remember. The mere existence of that photograph authenticates that past despite great efforts to forget it. Hirsch uses the term “postmemory” to describe the fractured relationship that many Holocaust survivors have with family photography. She writes, “in the face of monumental losses, photographs carry an emotional weight that is often difficult to sustain...postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to the object or source is not mediated through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.”<sup>25</sup> The experiences of those who came before us can never fully be understood or recreated, but they can be reimagined through the use of image. In particular to children of Holocaust survivors, postmemory characterizes the narratives which precede their birth and are often masked by trauma. Photographs begin to fill holes in the “absent memories” which are either too painful to recount or hidden in secrecy.

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In a manic state, I began to tear apart the upstairs in search of more images. I opened closets that I didn't even know existed, made my way through the dusty crawl space (which I knew for a fact was haunted), and dug through endless boxes just to find more images of my family members. Each time I uncovered something, I encountered a new feeling- sometimes sadness, sometimes frustration. In an image, I was reintroduced to people who I thought I had known all my life. In an instance, my grandfather became a present person in my life- his story, his trauma, his shortcomings were as much a part of my story as they were my mothers. And as for my grandmother, her history (which continues on in the present) became so much more

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.15.

layered. Photographs from her early childhood in a work camp in Poland alluded to a family secret that had been well masked. These moments, captured in image, had affected my life but in a way that I didn't previously understand. Seeing them, gave me a history of looking.

## CHAPTER 2: Painting the Past

*“Late in my mother’s life, she told me something about Klara that was like a turn of the kaleidoscope, changing an exquisite image into a less pretty one” - Janet Malcolm*

When I close my eyes I can see my grandmas face. I can trace the lines of her pain through the small creases around her mouth. My grandma is the most important person in my life. She is a force. She has eyes that make you feel her gaze, either soft and loving or hot and angry. She has seen so much with her eyes and felt so much with her body but she chooses to say very little.

My grandmother immigrated from Eastern Europe to the U.S. at the end of World War II. She was around ten years old when she came

through Ellis Island to New York City. For the most part, her story begins on U.S. soil although there are a few images which place her in a foreign country.

When I was looking through a dresser in the living room I came across a copy of her original passport.

Faded in color, the small passport booklet shows a

picture of my grandmother in a floral dress. A big white bow is holding back her hair and she is no older than six. The stamp at the bottom reads, November 6th, 1950 and typed on a solid black line is Hannover, Germany. In the photograph, she looks like she might be trying to smile.

She was born Genowefa Lenzaka somewhere in the Ukraine in 1941. Where exactly, has been up for question amongst my family members for many years. I have always been curious about the story of my Grandmothers immigration. It seems to be an integral part of her identity



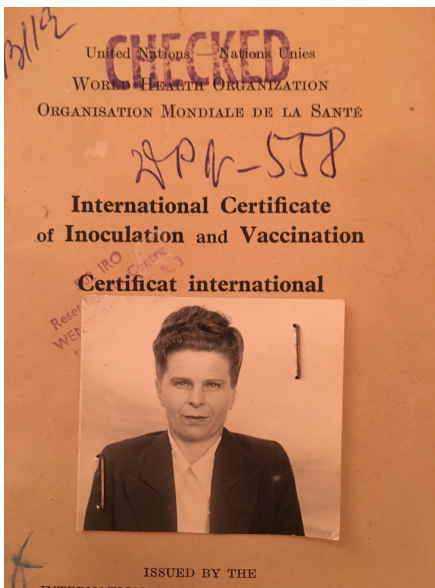
yet something that had never been explained in full. When I set out write this paper, I wanted to see if I could try and piece together a narrative of her past. As I saw it, if I wanted to better understand my relationship with my mother, I needed to understand my grandmother. In many ways, my desire to cease her past was a selfish attempt to explain parts of my own identity. Just last week, days away from completing this project, I was on the phone with my Aunt Sheila. I had just finished a chapter that recounted a version of my Grandmother's immigration story, when a thirty minute phone call added more complexities to the story than I could have ever imagined. Apparently, a distant relative had come across a ransanckled box of documents while moving things in her basement. In the box, she found a photograph of the ship that brought our family to the US, immigration forms, and other memorabilia. Within seconds my Aunt texted me copies of the documents. I was bewildered and also a little frustrated. How could the story, as I understood it, be completely negated by a few images that now decided to appear? I wondered if I should just up and delete the entire chapter I had just written.

I stayed on the phone for a couple more minutes asking my aunt as many questions as possible; "where do you think grandma is really from?" and "what really happened?" We went back and forth relaying the parts of the story we each thought to be *true*, and then my Aunt said something along the lines of, "I've been trying to do this for years now...trying to understand her story and procure the documents. Things are so scattered, so hidden, so inconsistent...I think at some point everyone creates their own idea of what happened." I hung up the phone not really knowing how to make sense of the conversation. I could not deny that what my Aunt said had *truth*. I began to question all my intentions for doing this project. Whose story was I trying to

tell: for what reason and for whom? And, why was I so fixated on situating on getting the full picture?

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For as long as I can remember we have celebrated my Grandmother's birthday twice a year. The date on her drivers license reads December 6th, 1941, but the birthday she prefers to celebrate is on December 20th. Although there is only a few days difference, my Grandmother has always relished in the fact that she has two birthdays. When I was young, I was endlessly jealous of her. My great-grandmother (her mother) Rozalia Zmyslony was widowed not long after giving birth. Her husband Lez, was enlisted to fight in World War II and never returned.



The morning I left Seattle to go back to school, I uncovered an original copy of her immunization papers. Stamped to the front, is a black and white passport photo. In the image she looks just like my grandmother, just harsher and more distinguished. Rozilia (Roseley) was born in 1910 at the start of World War I. Her immediate family was killed during the Russian Revolution of 1917. She was orphaned by the age of nine. She lived to be ninety-six years old. My memories of my great-mother

consist mostly of her home during Christmas and The Sound of Music. Every-year she would put up a fake Christmas tree and cover the limbs with plastic tinsel and then ask each of us kids to pose in front of it. When my brother and I used to visit, she always slipped five dollars into our

pockets. She was always very kind to me, but even from a young age I could feel the tension that existed between her and my grandmother.

In the previous chapter, I spoke about the ways that family photography is used to create a cohesive narrative of family history. These images, bound in album, record and reaffirm family myths as generations pass. However, family photographs are preserved with the intention of creating a favorable portrait. What exists outside of the frame is often less favorable than the narrative bound in image. As I was going through the multitude of pictures I had collected, I began to see physical gaps in my family history. I would uncover an image of my grandmother in Poland, and then there would be some of her in Metaline Falls, and then the images skip to her wedding day. Huge portions of her history seemed to be missing from the photographs, and it caused me to wonder: what wasn't I being told?

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It is important to note, that human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. In the recording of any event there is a distinction between: “*what happened*” and “*that which is said to have happened.*”<sup>26</sup> As history solidified into a profession in the end of the nineteenth century, the role of the historian was to “reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth.”<sup>27</sup> However, what gets recorded as fact is not always “true,” but more often an individual “truth.” In his book *Silencing the Past*, Michel Trouillot suggests, “silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded. There is no perfect

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<sup>26</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1995

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

closure of any event.”<sup>28</sup> This dual participation inherent in creation of history implies that there are **always** multiple tellings of same story.

When the Nazi army invaded Ukraine in June of 1941, Rosalie was forced to flee. Along with my infant grandmother, the two escaped to Poland where they found refuge in a small farmhouse owned by sympathetic poles. I unsure of the actual timing of these events or how they came to find refuge, but it was in this farmhouse that my Grandmother met her second husband Igneous Zmyslony. One morning over breakfast, my grandmother started to tell me about the day that her mother married Igneous. She said she could clearly remember being at a courthouse where there were a bunch of people arguing in a language she didn’t understand. Her mother told her to wait outside as the vows were being said. I am unsure what prompted my grandmother to tell me this story, but as she recounted it, I could visualize a smaller version of her confused self standing outside a courthouse somewhere in Poland.

There is a long standing debate in my family over whether my great-grandmother Roseley was really jewish or not. I would say about half of my family is totally certain that she was born jewish, but because of fear of persecution she (like many others) masked her identity. In her final days of life, she was diagnosed with a rash on her arms particular to Eastern European Jews. While this prognosis did not confirm anything legitimate about my great-grandmother's identity, it did spike speculation that there might be something she was not sharing. Last winter, I sat with my mom, grandmother, and Uncle in a hotel room. My Uncle asked his mom to share a story about her travel to the U.S. In a matter of minutes, the conversation went from a peaceful mediation to a fiery disagreement. Nick was a strong

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

proponent of my grandmother being from Jewish descent and my mom was not so easily convinced. As the two bickered back and forth as my grandmother sat directly between them not saying a word.

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A family without secrets does not exist. Anyone who has sat through an uncomfortable Christmas dinner or encountered an unfavorable fact about their favorite Uncle, can attest that there are some things better kept quiet within the family. In her book *Family Secrets*, Annette Kuhn writes, "...secrets are the otherside of the family's public face, the otherside of the stories families tell to each other and the world about themselves"<sup>29</sup>. Secrets, whether intentionally hidden or willfully forgotten, are inherent facets of the stories that we tell about ourselves. Much like the way a photograph fixes an image of "self", the stories we tell about ourselves, to ourselves and to others, are crafted to satisfy a fastened down perception of the "self". To a degree, we crave an identity that is constant or at least one that can be traced through time. But as Barthes suggests, "my (mobile) image never coincides with my (profound) "self" image, for one is shifting with situation, age, and emotion and the other is grounded in the events of the past."<sup>30</sup> This paradoxical characteristic of "self" is the reason humans create stories (privately and publicly). Like a photograph, these stories help us create a fixed an understanding of self image. Trouillot writes, "narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. They necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets: Act of Memory and Imagination*. Vero, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1980.

<sup>31</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.p.5



My grandmother doesn't like to talk about her life before coming to America. When her children and grandchildren prod and ask questions, she will sometimes provide a simple anecdote, other times she will shut down completely. Over the years, each of her ten children have attempted to record elements of her journey. Every time they do, new truths are revealed while others are refuted. As these competing narratives continue to emerge, the conversation surrounding my Grandmother's identity has become more controversial than constructive. As I admittedly sought out to do the same thing as my relatives, hoping to arrive at a clearer answer, I began to question the ways that stories are told? What makes some narratives more potent than others? How are these stories manipulated to highlight a specific *truth*? And what does it mean to silence the past?

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Together, Roseley and Igneous would go on to have three more girls; Christy, Lucy, and Elsie. The first two were born in Poland during the war. Polish implication in the Holocaust remains a topic of much historical and political debate. Just in February of this year, Polish president Andrzej Duda, approved a highly controversial bill that barred the used of the term "Polish death camp" or "Polish concentration camp" in any setting. The passage of this legislation was intended to make clear that it was German forces, not Polish, that should be held responsible for the mass execution of thousands of jews. The passage of this new law, threatens to paint an a national narrative of the Poland as solely a victim to aggressive Nazi regime, not an active participate. This notion threatens to silence the painful experiences of many. While current developments surrounding this dark history bring up issues of accountability, nationalism, and history, it is an undeniable fact that a variety of internment camps operated on Polish soil during

World War II. Between 1939 and 1945, thirty separate camps were established to hold 50-60,000 German war prisoners.<sup>32</sup>

My grandmother spent a significant portion of her childhood in one of these labor camps. Details about where the camp was located or what their living conditions were like have never been revealed. I did however, find several photographs of her in what I could only assume be the camp. When I presented my grandmother with a black and white image of a young girl and boy she instantly remembered when and where it was taken:

“This was in the first camp we were moved to,” she explained with conviction, then said “I didn’t even know the boy, someone just asked us to pose together as if we were siblings.” There is another image of my grandmother and her young sisters dressed in formal clothes holding hands in front of a brick building. The youngest, Christy smiles while the other two look blankly into the camera. My grandmother’s face is cold, her body tight as she links the hands of her sisters.



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My grandmother says she can remember when she arrived in New York City. She says that she had never seen so many different types of people, so much life. Her, her mother, Igneous, and the two young girls stayed in an immigrant hostile for a period of time, until Igneous informed the family that they would be moving across the country to Washington, State.

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<sup>32</sup> John, Tara. "Poland Just Passed a Holocaust Bill that is Causing Outrage." *Time Magazine*, [time.com/5128341/poland-holocaust-law/](http://time.com/5128341/poland-holocaust-law/).

They took what small belongings they had, and rode the northbound line from New York City to Metaline Falls, Washington. My grandmother says she can remember that train ride- it took them three days. She said she loved every minute on the train, and to this date she prefers the train to any other mode of transportation. Metaline Falls, is a small town that nestles the border between



the U.S. and Canada. According to a 2017 census, the population of the town was 245 inhabitants. While in current times the town would be considered desolate, evidence of early indigenous people in the area date back to some 12,000 years ago. The first substantial influx of new settlers came

around the late 1850s when gold was discovered in the area. In the second quarter of the century the Metaline Mining District became the state's largest supplier of lead and zinc<sup>33</sup>. Igneous moved the family here so that he could work in the thriving mines.

My grandmother was enrolled in a small school and forced to learn English on her own. She says that she picked the language up quicker than her mother, so for a period of time she was the family translator. I found a photograph of the 1954 sixth grade class at Metaline falls middle school. In the image all the young children are smiling, showing off their best dressed attire. My grandmother stands dead center. She is the tallest in the class and clearly the most developed. She is not smiling like the rest of the children. Instead she stares blankly at the camera with her

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<sup>33</sup> Nordstrand, John. "Metaline Falls- Thumbnail History." *History Link*, 2009, [historylink.org/File/9216](http://historylink.org/File/9216).

arms crossed behind her back. There is nothing about this photograph that makes me think she maintained the same innocence and lightheartedness of her classmates- she looks pissed.

While in Metaline falls, Igneous and my great-grandmother welcomed the birth of their third child Elsie. They had to drive to the neighboring town of Ione, Washington because there was no hospital in Metaline falls. Strapped with a new baby, my great-grandmother was miserable in the two-hundred person town. She yearned to move to the more lively city of Spokane (2 hrs away) and before long the family packed up and did just that. It was in Spokane that my Grandmother would complete High School. She attended Holy Names Academy and became a faithful practitioner of Christianity. In Spokane, my Grandmother was able to assimilate better to American life. Roseley purchased a home in Vinegar Flats, a small neighborhood outside the city center, and thus the narrative of their life in America began.

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The narratives we tell about ourselves are inextricably linked to the stories of others- in fact they are derivative of the stories of others. Maintaining a historical narrative provides a sense of social inclusion, recognition, and remembrance. While collective identity takes various forms (from religion to race), being able to identify a “shared history” gives people something constant to uphold amongst the inconsistency of life. Family narratives, like national narratives are constructed to tell a story about (our) history. These stories become intrinsically linked to our notions of ‘self,’ as that they assist in grouping some people together, while pushing others apart. It is in this way, that history becomes a powerful weapon of inclusion and exclusion. What gets

included in the narrative often serves to collaborate a specific *truth* while silencing another. Trouillot writes, “ at best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won.”<sup>34</sup>

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Thinking back to the phone call I had with my Aunt Shelia, I came to realize that she- like me- was searching for a origin story that could satisfied a perception of her mother’s past. She, like me, was also relying on images as a way to connect the dots. My Aunt Shelia is what you might consider the unofficial family archivist- although I now challenge her as a close second. When I went to Spokane in search of images, everyone told me to go directly to the source; Shelia would have the most extensive inventory of family memorabilia. I won’t forgetting asking my grandmother before I went rummaging through the upstairs, if she had any old family photographs I could see. She told me, with almost a begrudging tone, that Shelia and Lucy had come to the house and taken most of the images; “ahh heck, those two came and cleared out the whole upstairs, I don’t know what’s up there and what’s not” she said. It became clear to me, that ownership over these images was a source of competition amongst my Grandmother’s ten children. I learned to tread lightly.

During the week I was in Spokane, I made it a point to have dinner with as many of my family members as possible. While I did not want to conduct formal interviews, I did want to see what stories would come forth when I prompted people with pictures. Some of the stories that I unearthed, could fill an other sixty-pages of text. From the photographs, I learned more about the Grandfather that always mystified me. I learned about his history and the stories of those that preceded him. One night, I went over to my Uncle Toby’s house for sloppy joes. After we ate, he

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<sup>34</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.(p.5)

brought out three shoe boxes brimming with photographs. Most of them were of him and his siblings in their adulthood, although there were some rare copies of my Grandmother and her mother that I had never seen before. We used the long dining room table and spread the photographs across the surface. There seemed to me an endless array of images. I worked quickly to make note of the ones I thought were valuable.

After we left, I reflected on how rare it was to possess all these family images. In the boxes, there were close to two hundred photographs of different family members in different phases of their lives. It was so fun to see the young faces of my Aunts and Uncles and recall the number of celebrations that we shared together. It was then that it occurred to me, how rare it was to have all these images binding us together. It was a wonderful thing to see, but it also led me to question why none of them had been bound in albums?

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Trouillot suggests that *silence* enters the process of historical production at four crucial moments: “the moment of fact creation (*the making of sources*); the moment of fact assembly (*the making of archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”<sup>35</sup> While there are always multiple accounts of any event, the creation of a linear narrative flattens the ambiguity of life. The process of historical production can be equated to the curation of a photograph or a family album. What gets included in the frame is done with the intention and purpose. It is this moment and not others, it is this person and not others, it is this narrative and not others that we chose to remember.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.26

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In a polaroid photograph I found in the basement, my mom and her siblings surround an older man sitting on a couch. Two kids are perched on his lap and my Uncle John sits to his left. The man's features protrude to a sharp edge and he looks as if he is trying to force a smile. My mom is sitting on the floor directly in front of him. She is holding toys in her hands and smiling blissfully. I don't recognize the man. I cannot place him in my family tree. When I presented the image to my mom, she took one look and turned the picture over. "He was not a good man," was her only response to the image. With that, we went back to looking at other pictures. However, the reaction on her face suggested to me that the image had upset her. It was as if the photograph *pierced* her. In fear of upsetting her further, I chose not to ask any questions. I figured, if the man in the photograph was something she'd rather not discuss, I shouldn't pry. However, as more and more pictures of the man began to surface, I had no choice but to confront them head on. The silences of the past were grounded in my present and there was no way I could not see them.

Igneous is the most intrusive of the three main rock types. Igneous is also the name of my "step" grandfather, or rather the man that my grandmother married to escape Nazi persecution. He was the man that brought my grandmother and her sisters to Metaline Falls, Washington. He was the man in the background of many of my mother's childhood photographs. He was also the man that no one wanted to talk about. I tried. I really did- to get someone in my family to tell me something about this character who obviously had impacted the lives of my family members, but whose existence was surrounded in silence. Just yesterday, I asked my mom once more for just a little bit of information about Igneous. I knew it was a long shot, but his

presence continued to appear throughout my research process and while I had tried to write this story around him, I he was quite literally a ROCK in my way. While I was one phone, I posed the question very bluntly, many too bluntly; “so did Grandma Roseley and Igneous stay married...what was his deal.” There was a pause on the other end of the line and then she said something to me that spoke more truth than the truth itself: “ You don’t want to know about him...” She said “ I don’t want to tell you.” With that the conversation shifted back to what she was making for dinner. I don’t know who Igneous was or what really transpired in the past. I might never know. What I do know is, that despite every attempt to silence his existence, he came to life in the images I uncovered in the attic.

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Annette Kuhn suggests that in the process of creating a family album, the family is in the process of creating themselves. She writes, “family photos are about stories of a past, shared (both stories and past) by a group of people that in the moment of sharing produces itself as a family.”<sup>36</sup> The family photograph as a text attempts to immobilizes the flow of life into a series of snapshots, and perpetuate familial myths while seeming to record actual moments in family history.<sup>37</sup> These images and their preservation, allow us to create a collective understanding of the past. However, Trouillot questions, “when does the life of collectivity start? How do we decide-how does the collectivity decide- which events to include and which to exclude.”<sup>38</sup> The formation and preservation of historical archives function very similarly to the family album. National Archives are institutional mechanisms that collect and organize artifacts and that reaffirm truths about a nation's history. These archives- like the family albums- are created and

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<sup>36</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.



fixed. They are made with the intention of bringing people together and providing a common history. Incriminating faults or disheartening truths are often excluded to the outsides of the frame in an attempt to paint a pleasing picture of the past.

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The story of how my grandparents met is a family favorite. My Grandfather, John Francis DePaolo, was the son of an Italian immigrant and a Blackfoot Native American. His father, John DePaolo Sr. owned and operated a successful Italian grocery store in Spokane. One spring day, my grandfather was delivering milk to the door of a house when he met my grandmother. He was sixteen years her senior. He asked her out on a date, and the “rest was history” (according to the family narrative). There are a few images of my grandparents on their wedding day. I found one when I was going through the boxes upstairs. The house is littered with photos of my Aunts and Uncles on their wedding days, but there are no framed images of Mr. and Mrs. DePaolo.



Tucked away amongst the rest of family snapshots, I found a photo of my youthful grandparents. My grandmother looks beautiful in a white dress and red lipstick, my Grandfather handsome with gelled back hair. They look happy as they cut into their wedding cake. My Grandmother could not have been more than twenty years old when they married. Her life as an independent woman began with her union to my Grandfather. It was not long after the wedding ceremony that they welcome the birth of the first child Austin. From that moment forward, Genevieve Zymsoly,

became Genieneve DePaolo. She was no longer an immigrant from a wartorn country, but she was a wife and a mother.

### CHAPTER 3: We All Start Somewhere

*“We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparent and know ourselves and our history is complete”*. - Gertrude Stein

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My mother has this kind of magnetic beauty. She has this big voluptuous hair that starts at the top of her head and makes its way into a perfect swoosh at the end. She washes it maybe once a week. When she wakes up in the morning it's already perfectly coiffed. After she goes for a run it seems to radiate, and when she is mad- I joke- it grows three times the size. People always comment on the hair. If I've lost her in the supermarket, the only way I can make her distinguishable is to use the phrase “the lady with the hair” and then they know. As a little girl, I used to study her face for hours. She has this little beauty mark that grazes the top of her upper lip. Once she told me that she got the mark from drinking coffee that was too hot. I use to envy this mark. Sometimes



in the mirror I would draw one on to look just like her. My mother demands the attention when she enters a room- it's almost as if she expects everyone to already be looking at her. She not arrogant though. She's approachable and inquisitive. When she locks eyes with someone she has given them her full attention. I am her first born, I am her only girl.

Over the summer, I read the book *Anywhere But Here* by Mona Simpson. It was one of those moments when a text became an extension of self- I saw myself in the book and I learned through it. Written mostly in retrospect, the story is narrated predominately through the eyes of a

precocious young girl named Ann. Adele is Ann's mother. She is a larger than life character who is constantly teetering the line between friend and parent to Ann. The story follows the mother daughter duo as they make their way from Bay City, Wisconsin to Los Angeles, where they hope to strike it big.

The book is divided into nine parts and each section is narrated by a different female in the family. There is Ann, Lillian (her grandmother), Carole (her aunt), and then a final chapter narrated by Adele. The intergenerational storytelling takes the reader back and forth in time while also painting an intricate picture of family life (the trials, the tribulations, the love). Ann is an archetype for a certain kind of teenage we see a lot today, a girl who is very skeptical about the adult world, even as she acknowledges the desire or need to navigate her way into it, and with the desire to turn out better, or, more bluntly, at least not quite as fucked up as her parents. Her constant inquiring about the women in her family lead her to uncover the similarities and differences that define them. There are moments of resentment, jealousy, and longing. As I read this book I identified deeply with Ann. Not that my life resembles anything close to hers, but I connected to the way that Ann wanted to make sense of the obscurities around her. She wanted to understand the mystery that was her mother.

I did not realize it then, but reading this book brought me face to face with many of the themes in this project; mother-daughter relationships, intergenerational experience, and the American Dream. It is the hopeful wishing that comes with each new generation, that keeps parents striving to do better for their children. As a species we want to progress, we look longingly for a future that is brighter, more colorful, and more prosperous than the past. If there

is any country that emphasizes the troupe of progress it is America. The notion that in this country anyone can achieve greatness, pulls people from across the globe to it's humble shores.

When my great-grandmother brought her family to America, she was hoping to give her children a better life than the one she had -a life marked by the survival of two World Wars. My grandmother, who was not entirely sheltered from the pains of war, worked hard to protect her ten children from the cruelties of the world. And my mother, who comes before me, has done everything in her power to give me the things she only dreamt of. As I traced the history of my family in backward motion, I began to see the ways these women (and their experiences) had come to impact my life. Despite evidence of their progress, the pains of their pasts were clearly a part of my history. I began to wonder, how much of our “self” is formed by those that come before us?

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Back in Seattle, I was browsing in a bookshop with a friend. At that point, I had yet to determine the full scope of my senior thesis, however at that I knew I was going to write something about families, history, and narrativity. As I paced the aisles I admired the books, taking them on and off the shelves and peering into their insides. In the fiction section, stumbled across a gigantic book titled *Making of Americans* by Gertrude Stein. I was captivated by the title and the abstract quote that graced the cover: “once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard...” I picked up the book and began flipping through its nearly nine-hundred pages.

Those who have ventured to read any of Gertrude Stein's work, know that her prose can be slow, cyclical, and at moments incomprehensible. While considered on of the greatest authors

of the 20th century, much of Stein's work is distinguished by its limited vocabulary and vague abstraction. Written between 1906 and 1911, the *Making of Americans* might never been published if it weren't for the persistence of Stein's close literary companion Ernest Hemingway. The first edition of the text was published in 1925 and the novel attempts to detail the "history of a families progress" in the United States. I'll admit, I did not read all nine-hundred and forty-eight pages of this book. No, to read it all would have taken a year and even had I tried, comprehending Stein's text to any degree could take close to a lifetime. However, what I did gain from the story of the Dehning and Hersland families was a portrait of family life that resembled something similar to my own. The central plot revolves around the union of Julia Dehning to Alfred Hersland. Both parties are first generation immigrants from Europe to the U.S. Their families left the "old world to make for themselves each one a sufficient fortune."

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When my great-grandmother moved to this country, she had with her four young girls to look after and a husband whose temperament was unpredictable at best. Once the family moved to Spokane, Igneous struggled to find work. He would split his time between Spokane and Mediline falls, where he continued to work in the mines. My great-grandmother refused to idle. My mom says she can't remember a time when her grandmother wasn't working two jobs at once. Her first position was at *Pacific Fruit*- an industrial grocer down on East Main whose brick facade remains a historic relic of the city. She worked here for many years. My mom says that their the house was always filled with the best fresh fruits thanks to her Grandmother.

Recognizing a potentially lucrative housing market in Spokane my great-grandmother also began making investments in local property. The first house that she purchased was 313

East Baldwin street, then it was 412 East Carlisle, and then 242 North Astor street. When I was on the phone with my Aunt last week, she recounted these addresses with ease as if my great-grandmother was sitting over her shoulder making sure she didn't skip a beat. On top of managing her properties, Roseley worked at Jack Louie's Chinese restaurant on Division. According to my mom and aunt, my great-grandmother ran the kitchen at Jack Louie's, teaching everyone how best to prepare the traditional Chinese meals. When I asked my mom about her grandmother, she used the word "force" to describe her. Funny, because that was the same adjective I used to describe my own grandmother. "She was a *force* who worked very hard to give her kids a better life than the one she had" said my mom.

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Stein suggest that within us, we carry the experiences of those the come before: "we, living now, are always to ourselves young men and women. When we, living always in such feeling, think back to them who make for us a beginning, it is always as grown and old men and women or as little children that we feel them, these whose lives we have just been thinking."<sup>39</sup> These stories come to shape parts of our identity, but they are conditional upon origin- there must be a starting point in order to trace back. It is through telling and retelling of our ancestors stories that we connect the past to the present: "...we make our elders to be for us the grown old men and women in our stories, or the babies or the children. We will always, in ourselves, be the young grown men and women"<sup>40</sup>. While phrased in a confusing manner, Stein highlights, the way that lived experience is retained in the family. It is through the experiences ( good and bad) of our ancestors, that history continues to live and breathes.

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<sup>39</sup> Stein, Gertrude. *The Making of Americas*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1995. p.4

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.6.

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Today, if my Grandmother really tries she can still speak some sentences in Polish, German, and Russian. She openly admits that America is not her country of origin. From time to time she will make reference to the “old country.” My mom says that her mother’s identity as a immigrant was not lost on her as a little girl. She remembers not being allowed to do many of the



same things as her peers. Her mom never let her stay the night at someone else house, never let her throw away tarnished clothes, and always made sure that she saved her the scraps of bread. My mom describes her mother has being tough. She says that she rarely shared much emotion and if something was bothering her, she would not show it. My grandmother is that same way today. If she is angry, it is her eyes rather than her words that show it. She has a way of masking her emotions. She stoic and composed. I used to envy this about her. I see these traits in my mother. I wonder if I will possess them?

I cannot begin to comprehend the act of feeding, washing, nurturing, and entertaining all ten children. I am not sure how much my Grandfather helped out with the household chores- but I assume only very little. As I mentioned before, my Grandfather was a professional student and an antique dealer. He worked odd jobs from time to time, but his salary was certainly not consistent nor substantial enough to feed twelve months. At a certain point, my Grandmother was forced to look for work outside of the home. She was able to find position as an evening janitor at the University down the street. Between maintaining the house, raising children, and



multiple pregnancies my grandmother had her hands full trying to keep the family together. My mom says that she ran a tight ship- no time for funny business. If you were old enough to play down the street with your friends you were old enough to help with the dishes and fold laundry.

Being the eldest girl, a lot of the household responsibility fell onto my mother from a young age. She will recount stories about cleaning floors and helping change diapers when she was as young as five years old. In many ways, my mother was a parent before she was child. She loves to remind me of her past and compare it to my present, “Oh you don’t understand how lucky you are, I did not have the things you have.”



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It is the promise of progress that that draws families from across the world to the prosperous shores of America. It is in this country, and not in others, that ordinary families can strive for a chance at success. Alexis de Tocqueville once wrote, “if there be a country in the world where the doctrine of sovereignty of the people can be fairly appreciated, where it can be studied in its application to the fairs of society, and where its dangers and its advantages may be foreseen, that country is assuredly America.”<sup>41</sup> Writing from the vantage point of a individual who just experienced the perils of the French revolution, Tocqueville visits America to see the countries own democratic awakening. As Tocqueville see it, in America the true spirit of

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<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis De. *Democracy in America*. Perennial Classics, 1969.

democracy can flourish because, "...in America most of the rich men were formerly poor; most of those who now enjoy leisure were absorbed in business during their youth"<sup>42</sup>.

Through the experiences of hardworking families that the progress of history can most clearly be observed. Stein writes, "...here on my scraps of paper for you is not just an ordinary kind of novel with a plot and conversation not to amuse you, but a record of a decent family progress respectably lived by us and fathers and our mothers, and our grandfathers and our grandmothers...I tell you all about us, and wait while I hasten slowly forwards, and love, please, this history of this decent family's progress"<sup>43</sup>. As Stein, sees it, the stories of the old people in a new world, and the new people made out of the old, that the *making* of the American identity beings. On the first page of the book, she writes, "It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete."<sup>44</sup>

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From a young age, I understood that my mother had to worked hard to give me a better life. She attended Gonzaga University, which was minutes from the house she had grown up in. The only way that she was able to afford the tuition was thanks to my grandmother who was still employed as a night janitor at the university. My mom always says that her father pressed the importance of education. Being the bookworm that he was, he made a point of sharing the value of learning. All ten of my mom's siblings would attended college. This fact has been iterated to my brother and I, time after time. After college, my mom took what little money she had saved

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<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis De. *Democracy in America*. Perennial Classics, 1969.

<sup>43</sup> Stein, Gertrude. *The Making of Americas*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.



and moved to New York. She would spend the next twelve years on the East coast, working various jobs and forging a path of her own. Seeing that she still had young siblings back in Spokane, she would write home about her adventures. When I was going through old

boxes, I found numerous letters that she wrote to her family; “ *Dear Mom and Dad...I am thinking about you. I hope you are doing okay. I am writing to say how much I miss you. Things are going well over here, I went to Long Island this weekend to enjoy the beach. Say hi to everyone for me. See you soon. Love, Stacie*”. Later, at least four of the ten children would follow my mom to New York.

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## Epilogue:

If there is no perfect closure to any event, than finding an ending to this story would be unfaithful. This project is *living* and will continue to *live* within me. As I sit hunched over my keyboard, looking for the right way to summarize my year long journey into the past, I choose my words wisely. I could tell you that this is a story about narrative, about self-preservation, about self-presentation, about the “American family”, about “my family”, about *me*. But to refine it to one of those things would be unfaithful. While I do want this project to touch those topics, I believe this thesis has been entirely and completely about me learning. *Learning* to look at history- to question and observe its hypocrisies, *learning* to ask difficult questions- to others and to myself, *learning* to connect, *learning* to learn. I am not trying to make a sweeping statement about the importance of education, I am however, hoping to express the satisfaction that come with learning to *reflect*.

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