FAMILY OF STRANGERS
My great-grandparents left Guardiagrele, Italy for the United States in 1909, and a powerful longing for that town—and for Italy in general—has been passed down through the generations. Interested in my family’s nostalgia for a place it has not experienced, I travelled to Guardiagrele to produce an experimental film and photo essay. My work investigates the concept of constructed memory and explores the impossibility of knowing what my life would look like if my family hadn’t emigrated. Ideas of belonging, identity, fantasy, and memory guided my work.

Located in central Abruzzo on the edge of the Apennine Centralo Mountains, Guardiagrele has been occupied since prehistoric times, and its architecture predates Rome. Though the majestic views of forests and valleys would suggest otherwise, the soil around Guardiagrele is rocky and arid, which perhaps contributed to the development of artisanal trades instead of a farming economy. The city is known for its copper and iron work (records of this trade can be traced back to 13th century). Yet with little agriculture, few other jobs, and debts to northern Italy, this region plunged into a deep depression that has lasted for nearly 150 years. My research into Guardiagrele’s history validated the family legend that my grandparents left because they were starving.¹ Waves of emigration hit the region in the 1870s and have continued into the present, and the population of Guardiagrele has declined as a result.² Today, the majority of residents are retired. Those worked in more prosperous Italian regions or spent years abroad take pride in their decision to spend their final years relaxing in their childhood homes. With few foreign tourists to normalize our presence, my family and I encountered a warm welcome. The elderly men who congregated outside our apartment

¹ [http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1999/3/99.03.06.x.html](http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1999/3/99.03.06.x.html)

befriended us, and I was shocked to realize that everyone I’d met had either lived abroad or had family elsewhere. This, I was told, was the secret to Guardiagrele’s relative financial advantage over crumbling ancient towns in the region.

Aside from a few buildings, Guardiagrele was largely spared from the World War II bombings, so the present-day streets look almost identical to their ancient selves. This led to an abstract sense of personal connection. I knew that my great uncles and great grandparents had walked the streets I was exploring, which lent itself well to filming abstract details of ordinary happenings.
I rented an apartment, inserted myself into the everyday happenings of Gurardiagrele, and used my film and still cameras to document my imagined life. My mother’s sister accompanied me to Gurardiagrele, and we introduced ourselves to four generations of Italian cousins who didn’t know we existed. We found a connection that transcends geography and logic. Within my family of strangers, I followed that visceral connection, and set out to manipulate the concept of a photo album by making memories of a life I haven’t actually lived.

Broadly speaking, my work at Michigan investigates how trauma, culture, and memory are passed between generations, and how photographs—family photographs in particular—construct myths. This project is an extension of my thesis, which explores the physicality of memory and examines how past experiences are transferred between family members through empathy and imagination.

Scholar Marianne Hirsch, whose work combines feminist theory with memory studies, describes photography’s role in the construction of family myths: “Photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not. Photographs are agents of both remembering and forgetting. We remember the narratives that are preserved through imagery and forget undocumented experiences.” This project was conceived of with Hirsch in mind, but rather than constructing family myths that are closely linked to reality, I decided to delve into fiction.

In *Hold Still: A Memoir With Photographs*, photographer Sally Mann more personally articulates Hirsch’s concept, “Photography would seem to preserve our past, but I think that is a fallacy:

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photographs supplant and corrupt the past, all the while creating their own memories. As I held my childhood pictures in my hands, in the tenderness of my 'remembering,' I also knew that with each photograph I was forgetting."

Some of the essential questions I considered when creating this project were: If I documented and told fictitious narratives, would strangers believe them? Could the act of imagining impossible “what if’s” be constructive? In *Rethinking History*, historian Keith Jenkins describes, “History is dependent on there having been a past, and that there is evidence of some sort to prove it.” If I had evidence of something that doesn’t exist would I be creating history? Would my imagined life's photographs be any less “real” than the images I've made of my “real” history?

Historian, Pierre Nora says that Memory overtakes history in the significance it holds for the culture, which allows for a transformation from the historical to the psychological. One of my goals for this project was to transform the psychological to the historical, in other words, I wanted to make history with my imagination.

My experimental film is a 24 channel video depicting mundane details of my imagined life that happen throughout the course of a day. In contrast to the wider shots of my photographs, I filmed the mundane actions my eyes focused on, the kind of seemingly irrelevant moments that get lodged into memory: the wiping of lips on a napkin, fresh sheets descending on a bed, a hand gesticulating in conversation, flashes of light on an old man's face as he drives at night. The film will be installed as a never ending loop of change. Each clip fades in and out of static, and all monitors run continuously, playing different memories at random. I envision the film and still images being shown together, having complimentary conversations about the construction of family narratives, and the disorder and malleability of memory.
My still images were licensed by the New Yorker Magazine and featured during my weeklong takeover of their Instagram feed, @newyorkerphoto. My still images also received an honorable mention in the IPA Lucie Awards, and are a finalist in the New York Photo Awards. They were exhibited in a group show at Van Vessem Gallery in Providence, RI in August, and will be shown in The Powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn, NY later this month.