

ANTHONY
ROMERO

WITH
DEANNA LEDEZMA
AND
JOSH RIOS

THE
PLACE
WHERE
THE
CREEK
GOES
UNDER-
GROUND

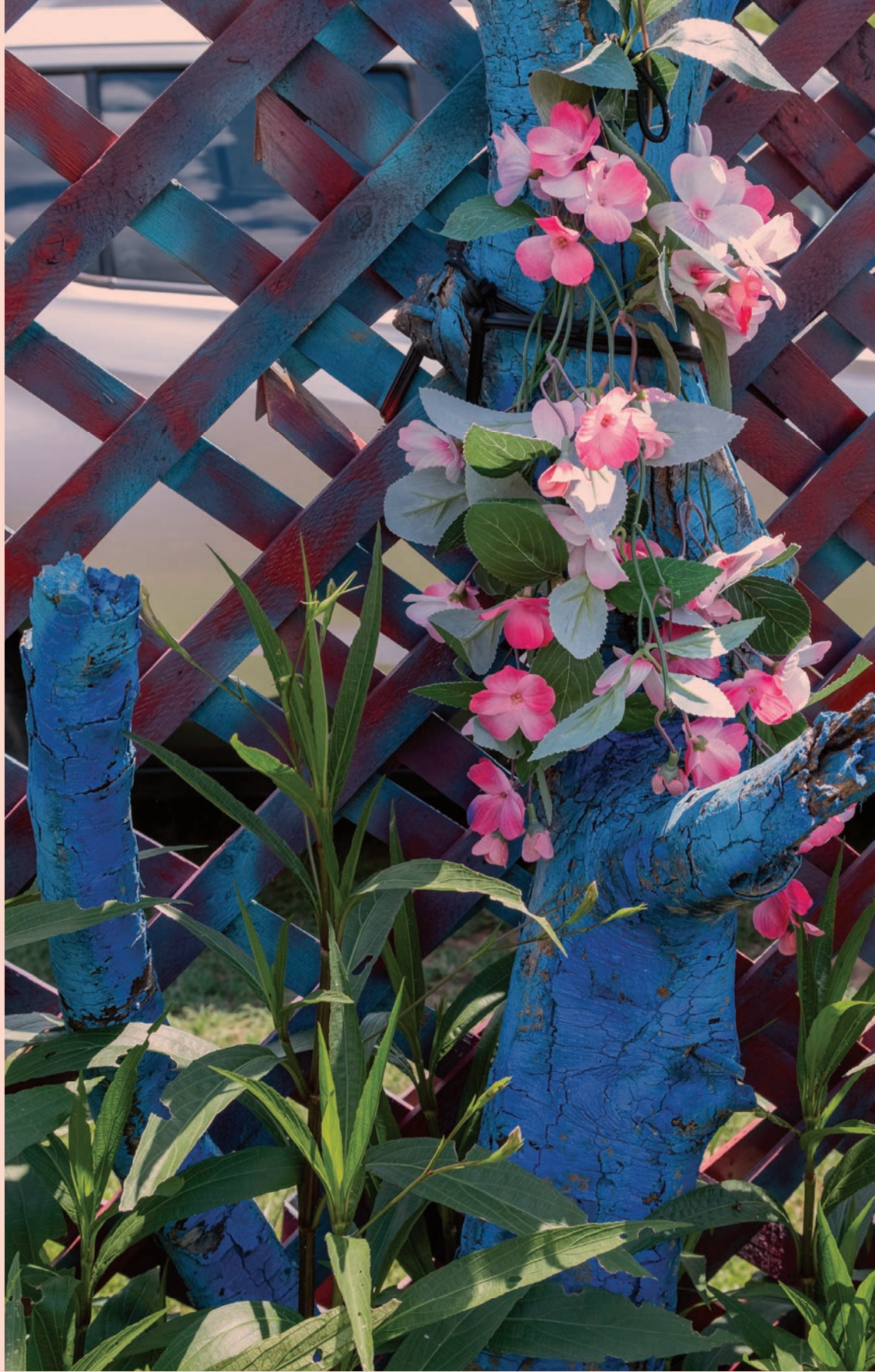
We dedicate *The place where the creek goes underground* to our families and relatives. We thank them for sharing their stories and showing us the importance of remembering together.



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RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023-PRESENT. A LOG PAINTED BLUE, DECORATED WITH SYNTHETIC FLOWERS AND FRAMED BY MEXICAN PETUNIAS, STANDS OUTSIDE SILVIA GARCIA MCKINNEY'S HOME IN SHILLEY, TEXAS. THE VEHICLES OF RELATIVES LINE THE DRIVEWAY (DETAIL).



FOREWORD

MEG ROTZEL
CURATOR OF EXHIBITIONS

CAITLIN JULIA RUBIN
INTERIM CURATOR OF EXHIBITIONS

In their exhibition at Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Deanna Ledezma, Josh Rios, and Anthony Romero—together known as the Place as Practice Collective—reflect on the complexities of kinship and belonging as related to place. The exhibition's title, *The place where the creek goes underground*, refers to a site that is both tangible and felt: often unseen, yet known by those who are deeply attuned to the land and its stories. As Roberto Bedoya, the cultural affairs manager for the City of Oakland, explained to Romero: "In every city or town . . . there is a creek. In every creek there is a place where it goes underground. That place may still be accessible, or it may be paved over. It may be a parking lot, or a hospital, or a set of condos. Somewhere in that city or town, there is someone who remembers this place, the place where the creek goes underground." Even as the built environment alters or obscures facets of the landscape, someone always holds its memory.

At Radcliffe, *The place where the creek goes underground* shapes an alternative archive that speaks to the multilayered past and present of the regions these artists and their relatives call home, in South-Central Texas and Northern Mexico. This area is deeply affected by social, economic, and ecological issues that have arisen from colonial and capitalist developments. In sculptural, photographic, and text-based works, Ledezma, Rios, and Romero offer witness to the recent degradation of these ancestral lands and to the long and layered stories cradled within this terrain. Their exhibition—and this related publication—demonstrate the role that kinship research and storytelling might play in charting new ways of engaging with the lands on which we live and with one another.

As these artists show us, we must ask questions—of the land, of our families, and of ourselves—and, critically, take time to listen in response. In the video on view in the Johnson-Kulukundis Gallery, *Returning as research: moving image and sound* (2024), we hear Ledezma's and Rios's queries for family members who guide them across grounds they have tended and where ancestors now rest. A coauthored essay in the exhibition's broadsheet explains how such dialogues inform the artists' collective practice: "We listen with patience to . . . tangents, which turn out to be not digressions but, rather,

answers to questions we did not know to ask. An occasion of listening cannot be reduced to gaining information. Instead, it yields an understanding of how our relatives came to know the things they tell us.” Like the texts that unfold within the pages you now hold, these exchanges open onto more expansive landscapes.

Conversation similarly guided the process through which this project took shape. We are grateful to have been welcomed into these generous and attentive dialogues: first by Romero (the 2019–2020 David and Roberta Logie Fellow at Harvard Radcliffe Institute), who introduced us to his longtime collaborators Ledezma and Rios, and later by this collective. It has been a privilege to work with these artists as they developed their exhibition and this publication, and to listen to and participate in exchanges that their work has inspired.

We are also grateful for the dedicated work of our Radcliffe colleagues, particularly our fellow Academic Ventures and Engagement staff. Gallery Coordinator Joe Zane, who led the installation of the exhibition on campus, deserves special appreciation. Cara Buzzell skillfully designed both this publication and the broadsheet that figures prominently in the exhibition and its artworks. *The place where the creek goes underground* was funded with support from the Johnson-Kulukundis Family Endowment Fund for the Arts, for which we are thankful.

In a program that marked the exhibition’s opening, Roberto Bedoya and Kade Twist joined Anthony Romero to discuss—among other topics—the distinction between the transactional nature of the word “relationship” and the more open-ended and situational state of being “in relation.” At Radcliffe, *The place where the creek goes underground* sits in relation to many intertwined and overlapping notions of place and of home, including the ancestral grounds of the Massachusett, the original inhabitants of what is now known as Boston and Cambridge. To consider a site, the artists explain in the broadsheet, “is to reflect on . . . land as a contested instrument of power and . . . the multigenerational temporalities that emerge from being in and of a place.” Their exhibition and this publication do this work, and as a project, *The place where the creek goes underground* invites viewers to similarly reckon with their own entanglements with the places and people to which they are linked.



ANTHONY ROMERO, PINK NOPAL, 2016.



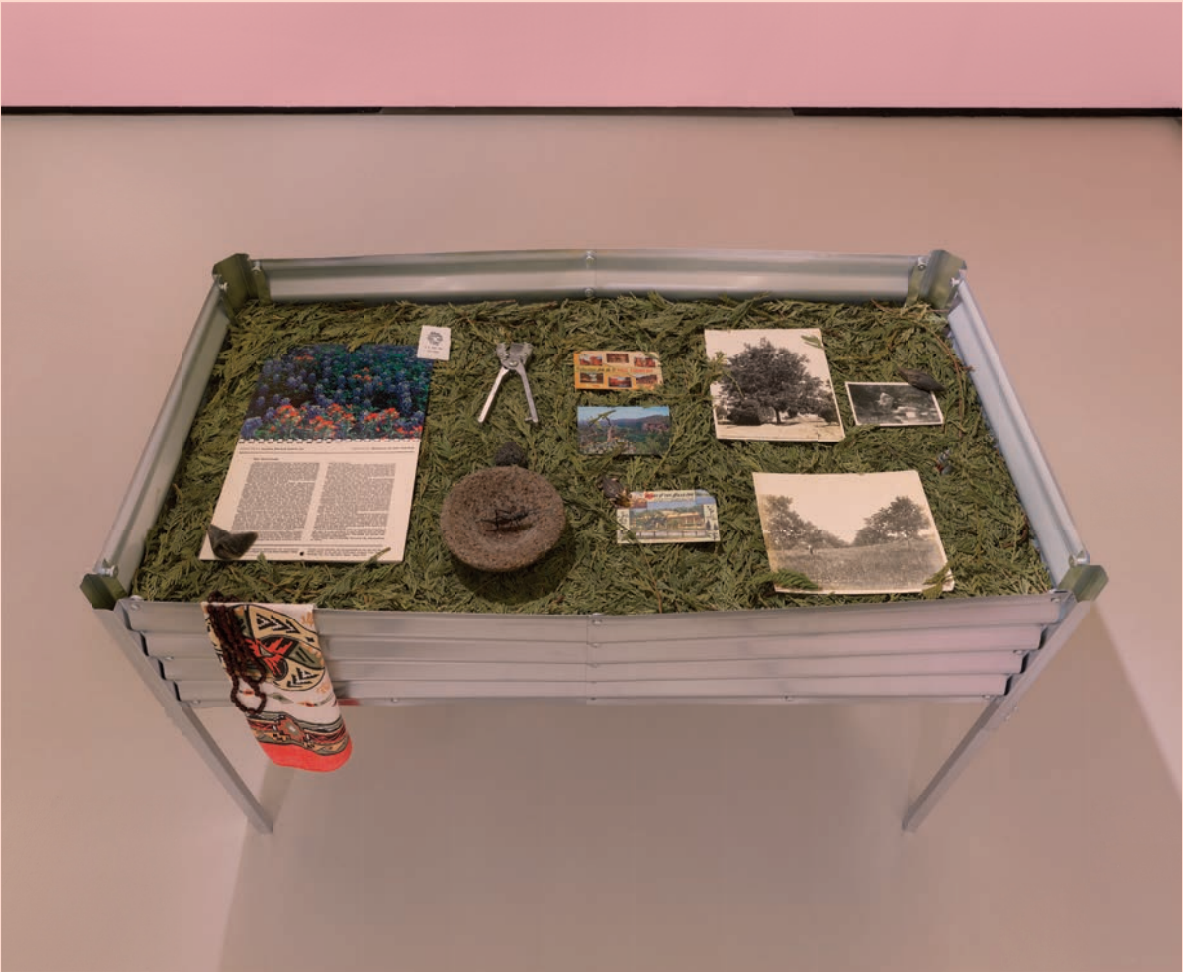


EXHIBITION VIEW, THE PLACE WHERE THE CREEK GOES UNDERGROUND, JOHNSON-KUKULUNDIS FAMILY GALLERY, HARVARD RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE.





(THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS) ARCHIVAL WALL WORK II AND III, 2024.



RAISED GARDEN BED VITRINE, 2024.



EXHIBITION VIEW, *THE PLACE WHERE THE CREEK GOES UNDERGROUND*, JOHNSON-KULUKUNDIS FAMILY GALLERY, HARVARD RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE.



INNER TUBE VITRINE II, 2024.



EXHIBITION VIEW, THE PLACE WHERE THE CREEK GOES UNDERGROUND, JOHNSON-KULUKUNDIS FAMILY GALLERY, HARVARD RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE.



RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023–PRESENT. A VISIT TO THE LEDEZMA FAMILY PROPERTY IN BANDERA, TEXAS BEGINS WITH GATHERING FALLEN TREE BRANCHES BY HAND AND TRANSPORTING THEM IN A WHEELBARROW. PILED TOGETHER, THE DEBRIS IS BURNED ONCE WEATHER CONDITIONS PERMIT.



RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023–PRESENT. DAVID GARCIA TENDS THE GROUNDS OF THE SMILEY LATIN AMERICAN CEMETERY. AFTERWARDS, HE RECOUNTS HIS ANCESTORS' EXPERIENCES LIVING UNDER ANGLO AMERICAN DOMINANCE DURING THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY. HIS GRANDFATHER TEMPORARILY FLED THIS PART OF SOUTH-CENTRAL TEXAS.





EXHIBITION VIEW, THE PLACE WHERE THE CREEK GOES UNDERGROUND, JOHNSON-KULUKUNDIS FAMILY GALLERY, HARVARD RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE.



Hope: I called Maria Espinoza.



Dice que, she found it on her phone,

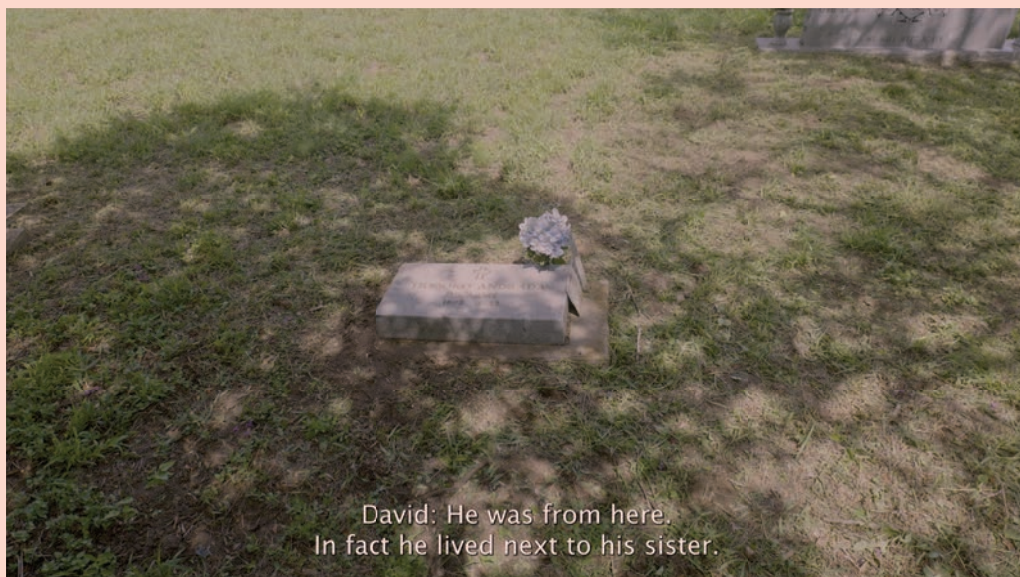


I mean I know them, but I would never remember them.





[weed eater motor starting up]



David: He was from here.
In fact he lived next to his sister.



He knew how to read in English,
which back then was extremely dangerous.



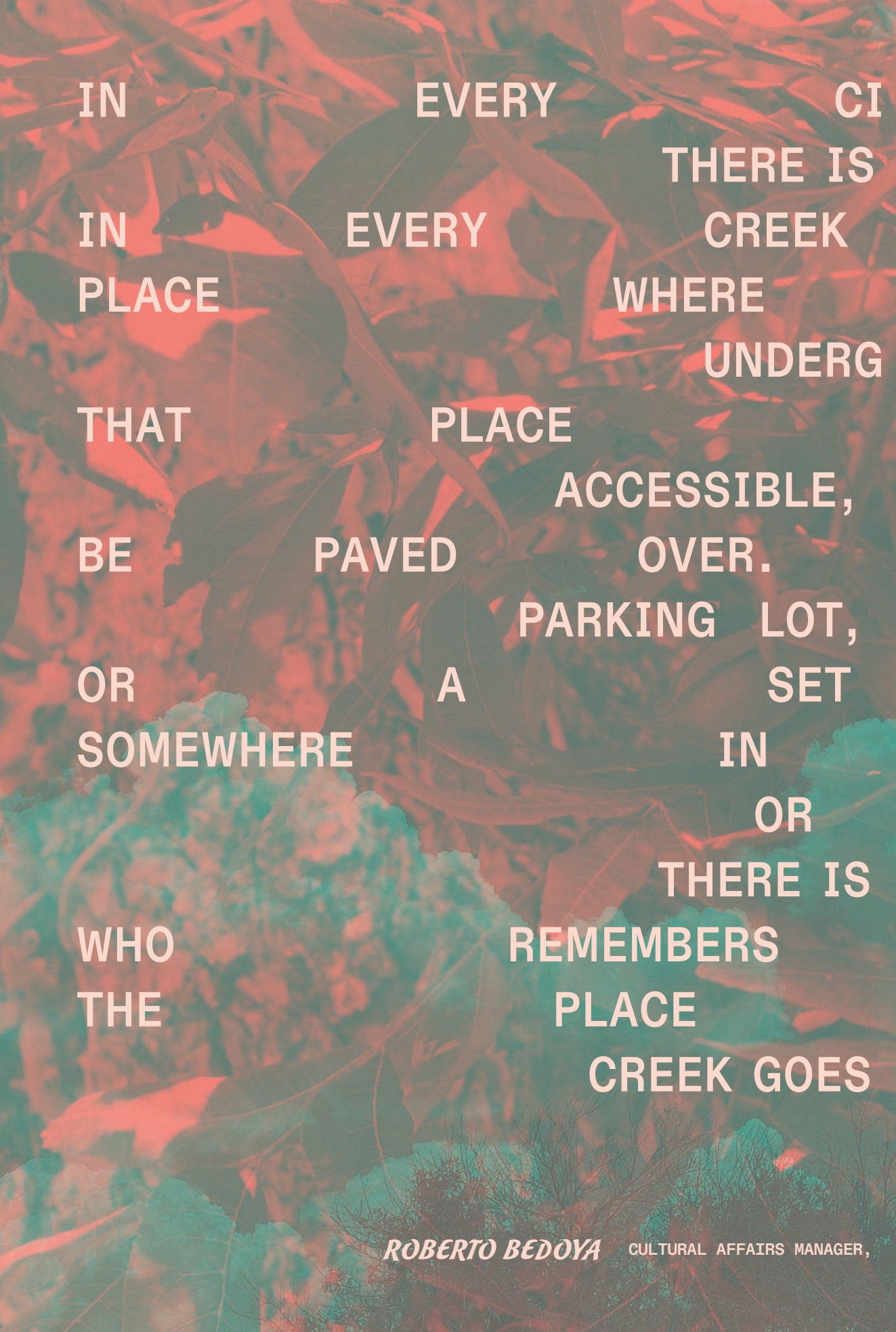
Field recording of insects and birds singing,



[field recording loops seamlessly]



Sandies Creek, Smiley, Texas



IN EVERY CITY
THERE IS
IN EVERY CREEK
PLACE WHERE
UNDERGROUND
THAT PLACE
ACCESSIBLE,
BE PAVED OVER.
PARKING LOT,
OR A SET
SOMEWHERE IN
OR
THERE IS
WHO REMEMBERS
THE PLACE
CREEK GOES

ROBERTO BEDOYA

CULTURAL AFFAIRS MANAGER,

TY OR TOWN
A CREEK.
THERE IS A
IT GOES
ROUND.
MAY STILL BE
OR IT MAY
IT MAY BE A
OR A HOSPITAL,
OF CONDOS.
THAT CITY
TOWN,
SOMEONE
THIS PLACE,
WHERE THE
UNDERGROUND.



1

My mother's closet always seemed too dark and too cavernous. As a child, I feared that my small body was in danger of being swallowed by the space. Perhaps it was also that the closet was the kind of place where things too hard to keep were hidden away. Scattered among the clothes were old tins of my grandmother's sewing supplies, gifted cowboy hats too nice to be worn, my mother's wedding dress draped in plastic, a rusted rifle, my late grandfather's suit. It was here that my mother kept the family archive. Buried beneath worn-out Christmas stockings and Mexican blankets was a large plastic bin full of old photo albums. It was topped by an unsentimental black trash bag full of fat stacks of photographs stuffed into brittle photo sleeves.

Children hardly have any use for memories. This is perhaps especially true for those of us who grow up in small rural places surrounded by generations of family and the kind of relatives that are collected along the way: aunts, uncles, and cousins who are not found on any family tree but whose roots are nevertheless intertwined with our own out of necessity, tradition, or proximity. It is in the smallest places that one acquires the largest needs, and every family needs an archivist—a keeper of the hard and the easy, the unremarkable, the intimate. The careful and the careless. What is displayed on mantels and hallways is only a small portion of what a family is. The rest is held in the care of a closet or an attic, where it waits, as all archives do, to be called.

2

There is one photograph I wish existed in the large plastic bin.

It's early spring in Texas. I am kneeling in the front yard at the northeastern corner of my childhood home, digging a hole for my mother. I have guilted her into putting a small, abandoned, nearly dead rosemary plant into the ground. I have spent the better part of a weeklong visit passing by our namesake as it stands guard outside the front door. I suppose I grew tired of hearing the tender brown leaves sigh as I walked by them. My mother is browning too. It's difficult for her to stand—a bad knee, a tired heart—a long drought has taken its toll. She's humoring me. Leaning on her cane, beneath the tree she planted when I was born, she half commits to her instructions

between heavy breaths. Dig here. Like this. Wider. Deeper. Beneath this window. At this corner—the same corner that has held a rosemary plant for as long as I can remember.

3

What is a photograph? A device for recalling events, incidents, persons, objects? What do we call such a thing? A memento? A keepsake? A time machine? A time capsule? Is this why my mother became the keeper of the family archive? To travel back and forth between the past and the present at her leisure? No. It's a burden to care for such relics, and my mother doesn't dream in reverse. She longed for a future that never came, and people who dream of such things don't want to remember what keeps them in place.

Perhaps a photograph is more akin to a seed. We should not forget that photographs are made, after all. They are constructed for a particular purpose at a particular time. They are born. They are cared for, cultivated, and propagated. Much like a seed, a photograph waits for us to be ready for what it holds. It is never only what exists in the frame: It holds the moments that came before and after as well. Standing at the temporal crossroads is hard work for seeds and for photographs, but they manage to find strength in their humble excess. Each is the overflow of something—a plant, a tree, a family, a life.

4

Seated at my parents' kitchen table, my father tells me how his grandmother would store seeds in her closet between growing seasons. Mason jars full of next year's crops of corn, squash, beans, chilis, and melons were packed between well-worn but neatly folded farm clothes. How precious it is to hold one's memories and one's future as tenderly as one is held by a favorite set of clothes.

5

I am embracing this moment, digging deeper beneath my childhood home and marveling at what the ground holds. Growing up on this plot, through too many grueling Texas summers to count, I have become accustomed to the dry, sandy topsoil. For this reason I am surprised by how much water is held below the surface. The subsoil, nearly mud, is a mixture of deep reds and browns. As I marvel at its coloring, it occurs to me that I have almost forgotten about the rosemary and my mother.

6

The black bag of photographs makes a sound like running water as I slide it from the top of the plastic bin to the floor. Inside the envelopes are plump and cool to the touch. Hidden



ANTHONY ROMERO, *LUCIA ROMERO'S HOUSE*, 2024.

away in the farthest corner of our family home, the photographs appear to have never known the Texas sun. I happily dip my hands into the well of images.

What relative was this? Whose grave? Whose house? What is it now? Where are they? Who will remember? Is this all that's left?

7

The ground welcomes the rosemary. I fill in the earth around its roots, leaving the last for my mother, who whispers a customary prayer. She straightens herself on her cane as we both begin to feel a cool summer rain. The sky is cloudless and open but it weeps nonetheless. My mother tilts her face up, welcoming the rain.

8

This photograph, despite being imagined, contains nothing exciting. It's too intimate for that. It's an image that matters only to its maker. It catches us in the act. Imagined or real, a photograph is proof that something happened. This photograph is proof of an attempt to care for this plant that bears our name. Proof of an attempt to care for my mother.

Our family has always lived on the land that stretches between South-Central Texas and Northern Mexico. Much like the land, our family has been turned and broken by the histories that have brought us to this moment—farming, ranching, colonization, migration, extraction, violence, trauma, dispossession. It is out of necessity that I have constructed and reconstructed this photograph in my mind many times to provide myself with evidence of our place here. I have shaped and reshaped its details. Moved its elements around, composed it better, composed it worse. Each time, I frame not the image but the memory just outside it.

9

I imagine the photograph this way: my hand, brown as the earth beneath our home, softly laid across the hole I diligently dug at my mother's feet. I am not swallowed by this hole in the earth. I am not drowned. My hand simply hovers there, palm up next to my mother's feet. My hand, my mother's feet, and the earth are nearly indistinguishable.

ANTHONY ROMERO, *ROADSIDE RANCH* (KYLE, TEXAS), 2023.





ANTHONY ROMERO, ROMERO (AND BABY), 2018.

DEANINA LEDEZNA, HAVING FIRST LEARNED PHOTOGRAPHY ON AND WITH THIS LAND, FROM RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023-PRESENT.



THERE'S OUR HOUSE THAT'S NO LONGER THERE

DEANNA LEDEZMA

The whirl of truck tires on pavement eases as we turn down the one-lane road. On this day, as on other weekends and holidays, my parents are taking a drive along the scenic routes of the Texas Hill Country, past panoramas of steep limestone bluffs thick with juniper and oak and the cypress-lined banks of swimming holes and creeks never before seen so low. As a child, I asked my parents to pull over at such prime spots so that I could aim my Kmart point-and-shoot camera and, later, my father's vintage 35mm Olympus. Home for winter break in early 2024, I have requested that the destinations of this outing include the pecan orchard and its house and the guest ranch where my grandparents, father, aunts, and uncles lived and worked after emigrating from Múzquiz, Coahuila, Mexico in the 1960s. We use names for places no longer in existence, for properties transported and transformed. The family's first residence stateside, the pecan orchard house, hauled into town and left vacant on cinder blocks, is no longer on an orchard, and the orchard is now an RV park. Perhaps it is the mutability of place that propels our return. With my husband and collaborator, Josh Rios, I ride in the back seat crowded with bags of equipment we use to make photographs, videos, and audio recordings.

As we near the guest ranch, recollections—some spoken, others thought—overlap with a rapidity elicited by a well-traveled path to a once familiar place. There was the long walk my father and his five siblings took from the house to the school bus stop, later remedied by the hardship driver's license he was granted in the eighth grade. My father took this same route on his first motorcycle at age fourteen. Bringing home a can of coffee for his parents, he attempted to balance the metal container between his legs but lost control. The setting of the winter sun darkened the narrow road. He skidded into a ditch. In the story, narrated in turns by my parents, the consequences of the accident are recounted in the order of coffee spilled and damage to the motorcycle, a brand-new Honda, bought with the wages my father earned at a grocery store in town. His brown leather jacket and helmet protected him, but the injury to his shoulder, where his body struck the ground, still appears on X-rays. The land left its mark.

From the back seat of the truck, I ask my father if he remembers the first time he went to the ranch. Yes, as a passenger, he accompanied my grandfather Guadalupe Martinez Ledezma, who drove my grandmother Maria Ignacia Esquivel Ledezma to the house of the ranch owners, where she cleaned and ironed. When Guadalupe's youngest brother, Nicolas, preferring Mexico, declined the proposal that he work and live with his family on the ranch, the job offer was extended to Guadalupe, with Maria's reliable labor serving as an unwritten recommendation. The ranch owners already knew and liked them, my father explains. His words placate the vigilance I keep for my relatives both living and dead, and their laboring bodies, if only briefly.

The Ledezmas' arrival and reunification on the U.S. side of the border hinged on my grandfather's securing a job and housing for his wife and young children. The pecan orchard, where my father and his siblings contributed to growing, harvesting, and shelling the nuts, offered both. To supplement their modest income, they grew fruits and vegetables—squash, tomatoes, onions, watermelons, peaches, garlic—all bought by the local grocer. The sandy soil in Múzquiz had been comparatively difficult to cultivate. After six years at the orchard, they relocated to the guest ranch. The Ledezmas measured this move in the increment of down the road: a mere four miles compared with their transnational migration from Mexico. This arrangement at the ranch entailed another intertwining of their housing and domestic lives with the white proprietors who employed them and whose proximity was a condition of the job. Family owned; family operated.

UNRECORDED PHOTOGRAPHER, SNAPSHOT OF MARIA LEDEZMA, STANDING UNDER THE CARPORT GUADALUPE BUILT, UNDATED, KEPT BY DEANNA LEDEZMA.



Guadalupe and Maria lived at the ranch for 27 years until their departure, tactfully referred to as their retirement. Guadalupe, a herder of goats and a miner in Mexico, worked as the ranch foreman and custodian of livestock. Maria was a cook and a housekeeper for the guests' cabins. I imagine that she entered this line of work by virtue of being a woman. She was one of at least 15 children born to my great-grandmother Juana



UNRECORDED PHOTOGRAPHER, SNAPSHOT OF GUADALUPE LEDEZMA, STANDING NEAR THE CARPORT HE BUILT, UNDATED, KEPT BY DEANNA LEDEZMA.

Niño Rabago between 1924 and 1948, with additional kin counted depending on who is keeping the ancestral score. The Mexican census record for Juana's father, my great-great-grandfather Victoriano Niño, lists his occupation as criado, or servant. A descendant of domestic workers, I am cognizant of the entanglements of labor and kinship among recent generations, and I recognize the tenuous—if ultimately temporary—attachments formed within families in the context of employment. I have been trained to critique these historical and social conditions, but I am also inclined to acknowledge what I cannot know, to concede what I cannot feel.

The stays of other families at the ranch were brief. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, dozens of guest ranches and summer camps operated in the Texas Hill Country, each offering outdoor recreational activities with modern amenities. My aunts worked in the visitors' office and the dining hall, while my uncles assisted with maintenance and construction and saddled horses for the guests' trail rides. The youngest of the siblings raised the flag each morning. But the ranch was more than their livelihood, my father reminds me. They enjoyed the horses they knew by name, the swimming pool, the spring-fed creek, the live bands, and the dances in the pavilion, where my parents held their wedding reception just weeks after their high school graduation. As adults, some of the siblings moved to other cities and states for business or overseas for military assignments; a couple remained close or, in my father's case, returned to the town a few miles away after more than 20 years elsewhere.

During the period when my parents, my brother, and I lived in the Mojave Desert, the road to the ranch marked the ends and beginnings of marathon drives across the Southwest in a crimson station wagon. Our arrivals and departures were made weary, first by the exhaustion of the interstate and then by bidding goodbye. Following my father's itinerary, we would leave before sunrise, hastening our leave-taking. My grandmother would already be awake; she began her workday mornings as early as 3:00 am. She would walk from her house to the ranch kitchen through a darkness dense with the chirping of





DEANNA LEDEZNA, MY FATHER STOPS TO SHOW US WHERE THE BEES WERE, BANDERA, TEXAS FROM RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023-PRESENT.

crickets, their sound interspersed with the rustling of an armadillo or the trill of an owl. Night obscured the ringtail possums perched on junipers and oaks, but their reflective eyes were visible from yards away. Is time made, given, or had for stargazing? In the ranch kitchen, my grandmother would prepare a substantial American breakfast for the hunters, whom my grandfather then led to the deer blinds, toward their bragging rights. She would send us off on our cross-country journey with an assortment of taquitos—scrambled eggs, potatoes, refried pinto beans, shredded cheese, and bacon, blanketed by charred flour tortillas—individually wrapped in tinfoil and nestled together in an insulated chest. We ate them in shifts, between naps, and at rest-stop picnic tables.

Reyes, a family friend since the days at the pecan orchard, never passed through the guest ranch entryway without a gift in hand: a turkey or a hindquarter of venison he had hunted, glass bottles of Coca-Cola, a six-pack of beer to split with Guadalupe, a box of pastries for the children. A fellow Mexican immigrant and my grandfather's contemporary, Reyes took care of the horses, fences, and whatever else was needed for 40 years at an exclusive all-girls summer camp nearby. Reyes and Guadalupe built fences together. For my father and his relatives, fences were started with holes dug by hand, constructed on evenings and weekends, remade after flash floods took them out, repaired after vehicles veered and then fled, maintained with and for others, and, in youth, jumped over. Reyes would bury the crooked ends of cedar posts in the ground with their straight ends upward so that even if the posts were imperfect, the fence wouldn't appear so. Nothing wasted. Once a passerby, observing Reyes's exertion, gave him a roll of quarters because the man felt sorry for him. On our family's land, remnants of wire from old fences strung by my father and grandfather lay coiled on the stumps of trees lamentably cut. Like wreaths at altars, those loops of weathered steel and rusted metal were placed on trunks left waist-high out of respect for the years the trees had spent growing.

Prone to cautiousness, I have learned to interpret strangers' gates as warning signs. Whether rugged or opulent, they serve to keep out. A gate announces a threshold that cannot be traversed without fear of bodily harm. If a Private Property sign is posted on land once close to home, who are you to cross it? In the summer of 2023, word of an estate sale brought my parents back to the ranch and the edges of its 735 acres. In a succession of landholders whose asking prices multiplied with each transaction, the latest owner had hired someone to

manage the bargaining. Preview photographs of the estate sale, advertised online, showed a jumble of washing machines, fans and lighting fixtures pulled from ceilings, lawn furniture, air-conditioning units, a barbecue grill, a lookout tower, and playground equipment that included a merry-go-round, in case anyone thought towing it was worth the trouble or the price of scrap metal. Because of that estate sale, my parents regained access to the ranch, only to find it in unrecognizable ruins. Many of its buildings, not long ago filmed by a drone for the multimillion-dollar real estate listing, had been reduced to rubble.

Now, as we approach the ranch gates, our speculation turns to what else is gone. We have heard that the entrance sign, displaying the initials of the ranch styled as branding-iron medallions, has been removed. Perhaps it was auctioned off to an antiques collector, bought at a steal, salvaged by descendants of the original proprietors, or unceremoniously crumpled by a bulldozer. Together, we reach the margins of the ranch to see what remains, and the answer is even less. With the debris left in heaps of unidentifiable earth-toned fragments and other structures half-torn, the man-made wreckage looks catastrophic. Follow the hand-carved signs that once directed guests to various facilities, and you will be led to a place turned to a pile.

UNRECORDED PHOTOGRAPHER, SNAPSHOT OF JOE LEDEZMA AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE RANCH, SEPTEMBER 1972, KEPT BY DEANNA LEDEZMA.



As the truck comes to a stop, I ask my parents if it would be okay for Josh and me to get out—a question meant to ascertain how my father feels now that we are here. I wonder aloud whether anyone else might be at the site amid its stilled machinery. “Say we are here for family memories,” my mother suggests, anticipating a need to justify our uninvited presence. Josh and I unclick our seat belts and descend from the truck with our cameras. We peer through the grid of the steel wire fence, each metal square framing an image in an aspect ratio comparable yet wholly incompatible with some of my family’s snapshots. My father tells me, “There’s our house that’s no longer there.”





DEANNA LEDEZMA, GUADALUPE'S COILED WIRE, KEPT BY HIS SON JOE, BANDERA, TEXAS FROM RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023-PRESENT.

DEANNA LEDEZNA, FLOWER ARRANGEMENT AT THE LATIN AMERICAN CEMETERY FROM RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023-PRESENT.



At dawn we packed my mother's car and headed to the family cemetery, located in the rural Texas town where she and her nine siblings were born and raised. The cemetery is not far by driving standards from her current residence, a tightly packed subdivision in the fastest-growing city in the United States, according to the *New York Times*. Idealized street names like Lonesome Quail, Woodpecker Run, and Hummingbird Drive are replaced by the practicality of numbered farm-to-market roads that wind endlessly through the countryside. A short hour later we arrived in my mother's hometown, the kind of place that might have been called a village in another time. For the past five decades its population has hovered around 500, with just as many chickens and cows. On the way to the cemetery we pulled over and parked on the side of the road in front of the house where her grandparents Jesus and Florencia used to live—its disrepair visible through a mass of winter-bare trees and dead weeds. Collapsed sheds, broken windows, rusted roofs, trash piled inside and out, paint dried and flaked off ages ago. It used to be beautiful, my mother recalled, with a big garden and a gazebo covered in vines. We thought it was a mansion. My mind turned too easily to saccharine images of her and her siblings as children playing in a half-remembered yard, chasing horned toads in the afternoon and fireflies at night, eating wild grapes and camping at the nearby creek that joins the Guadalupe River on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. It is the same creek I snuck off to with my cousins and brother. Maybe we all made our way through the same grassy stands and foraged the same sour-dock stalks, engulfed by the same wall of cicada sounds. Maybe not. It is hard not to romanticize my family's experiences of the countryside, especially from an apartment in Chicago, far from one home but at peace with another.

This deeply familiar region of Texas, where abundant central plateaus give way to coastal prairies and brackish marshland, is also an alienating social territory shaped and reshaped by Anglo and Spanish colonialism, Indigenous dispossession, the rise of the missions, the dynamics of slavery and cotton agribusiness, German immigration, and a history of lynching that includes untold Black and Brown victims. Sitting in

the passenger seat, I tried to imagine the garden my mother recalled. The plants and trees that tether home to land. But I could only picture the red crepe myrtle, rows of Mexican petunia, and boxwood trees at the houses of various relatives. Everyone lived, and some still live, down the road from one another, where all the same plants grow, binding us together across time and place. I tried to imagine the hands that rolled the masa, tended the gardens, ground the garlic, and picked the crops—fingertips calloused against the sting of weeds, insects, and the comal. And when I did, I saw my mother's hands and, to a lesser degree, my own.

What felt like a mansion back then is just another derelict small-town structure where bored teenagers might go to fill empty time, where squatters take refuge and snakes build dens. "I wonder who owns the house now," my mother mused. It is a seemingly simple question that will set the tone for many complex conversations to come, about land and how it is passed on through the state's definition of family; about what it means to divide and transform stolen terrain into a private commodity. Later that same afternoon, reflecting on her grandparents and the visit home, my mother wrote out the names of her father's siblings, of their children, and of their children's children. She did it to remember, but also because this is the type of information that tax offices and title companies use to look up property records. Within the framework of men, who begets whom determines who gets what. The next day, when I copied her genealogical memo into my notebook, I did so hoping that a different story might be told—one

about belonging to rather than owning a place.

We left Jesus and Florencia's old house and turned up the short dirt road that leads to the arched entrance of Smiley Latin American Cemetery. Its name is spelled out in dark metal letters above a chain-link gate decorated with two small U.S. flags. They are as sparse and tattered as the surrounding area. What started off as a burial ground segregated by race has over the years become a place of preference and belonging, as lifespan and landscape collapse and the tree of genealogy is smoothed into the layers of

UNRECORDED PHOTOGRAPHER, *ALCARIO*
AND *JUANITA GARCIA*, UNDATED, KEPT
BY CORINA GARCIA DAWSON.





UNRECORDED PHOTOGRAPHER,
GARDEN, UNDATED, KEPT BY
CORINA GARCIA DAWSON.

geology. We have come to visit significant places and people, living and dead, including my mother's father, Alcario, who is buried alongside my mother's mother, Juanita. Alcario is remembered deeply by his children and grandchildren, myself included, for his unvarying uniform of Wrangler rancher slacks; light-colored, short-sleeved button down; and straw cowboy hat covering a thicket of white hair. He is especially remembered for his impromptu musical performances, which were unbound by the mundanity of being in tune. During our frequent gatherings of extended family, he would sit in the front yard and strum a worn acoustic guitar, singing and giving testimony to his religious conversion.

We have audio of Alcario performing, because my aunt Silvia showed him at some point how to use a portable cassette recorder. The timeline and location of the recordings is family lore. Where was he when he turned on the tape player to archive his confessional story, set to a handful of repeated chords and musical patterns? Possibly in the solitude of the church he helped found, after everyone else had left for the day. It took many fragmented conversations over years before I learned of the tapes' existence. Information rarely travels in a straight line within a group of people who have known one another their whole lives.

I remember my pleasant surprise, and mild alarm, when my aunt Silvia brought the tapes from her camper trailer, which is within walking distance of the cemetery, to her parents' house, to her grandparents' house, to the family church, to other family members still in the area. She had been storing

them in an empty Christmas cookie tin filled with other loose cassettes. As we sat on spray-painted wicker patio furniture eating carryout pizza on paper plates, we dug through the metal box for the ones labeled in her hand. The humble materials and unassuming poetics of the family archive feel both enriched and precarious in such moments. My mother had not heard the recordings, which is why we came to the family plot—to listen together surrounded by ancestors, including my great-grandparents Florencia and Jesus; Florencia's parents, my great-great grandparents, Remijio and Josefa; my mother's mother, Juanita; my mother's father, Alcario; my great-aunts and -uncles, Christina, Crisoforo, and George (my great-aunts Josefa, Maria, and Siria are buried elsewhere); my uncle Estevan; my uncle David's twin, Daniel, who died as a child. There are others, whose connections and names I do not recognize but somehow feel.

The cemetery is a cleared field, and like all the other fields in the area, it is bound by barbed wire fencing. Growing up, I watched and helped relatives build similar enclosures. It was a rite and a ritual to stand around bored while grown-ups performed undefinable tasks. They moved the earth with a manual posthole digger: a strange object thrown with force into the ground and then pulled apart by two handles. The pincers of the hinged shovels held the dirt like clasped hands

DEANNA LEDEZMA, *SMILEY LATIN
AMERICAN CEMETERY GATES*,
FROM *RETURNING AS RESEARCH:
PHOTOGRAPHS*, 2023–PRESENT.





DEANNA LEDEZMA, GARCIA SISTERS
FROM *RETURNING AS RESEARCH:*
PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023–PRESENT.

before it was lifted out and tossed to the side. I watched them place each post, one person steadying it while another packed in red dirt and cement. I watched them pull the metal wire into horizontal rows and hammer U-shaped fasteners to hold it in place. I passed them the screwdriver they used to tighten the lines by twisting the wire like a garrote while the tool's yellow handle glowed in the sun. All this to keep a few cows from wandering through town. I also did my share of loosening fences by stepping on the bottom row and pulling up on the top one so that a crouching cousin or brother could pass through un snagged, like a boxer entering a ring.

As roosters announced the morning sun, still low behind the trees, a group of guinea fowl hopped out of the brush. They mingled with the sandy chickens pecking near the car while a row of common ducks followed close behind.

Their calls carried over the fields

and into the cloudless sky, across the lingering moon. We made our way toward the graves, my mother leading while my wife and collaborator, Deanna, steadied her camera and started taking photographs. Our creative work incorporates witnessing and documenting for each other as we facilitate family events that draw on our creative practices and scholarly interests, including setting out for a rural cemetery at dawn, stopping on the way to observe the condition of an untended house, and listening graveside to hiss-filled cassette tapes of an old man's Spanish testimonio. The theorists Eve Tuck and C. Ree write about the importance of preparing to become a ghost, which speaks to the agency of the one that does the haunting—the one that returns from the lockbox of history to unsettle the present. But what about those of us who prepare ourselves to be haunted, who make a place for the past to return to, who prepare for our perpetual melancholy and toil within our collective phenomenologies of desire?





DEANNA LEDEZNA, WHITE HORSE FROM RETURNING AS RESEARCH: PHOTOGRAPHS, 2023-PRESENT.

CHECKLIST

Latin American Cemetery, Smiley, Texas
from *Returning as research: photographs*,
2023–present
Photographic mural
Photograph by Deanna Ledezma

Returning as research: photographs,
2023–present
Five digital prints mounted on aluminum
Photographs by Deanna Ledezma

Archival Wall Work I–IV, 2024
Inkjet prints, plywood, wheat paste, artists’
archival materials (publications, family
photographs, and ephemera)
Crafted and arranged by Anthony Romero
with objects from the collections of Deanna
Ledezma, Josh Rios, and Anthony Romero

Inner Tube Vitrine I and II, 2024
Truck tire inner tube, Plexiglas, artists’
archival materials (publications, family
photographs, and ephemera) set in gravel
Crafted and arranged by Anthony Romero
with objects from the collections of Deanna
Ledezma, Josh Rios, and Anthony Romero

Raised Garden Bed Vitrine, 2024
Raised garden bed, Plexiglas, artists’ archival
materials (publications, family photographs,
and ephemera), set in cedar leaves
Crafted and arranged by Anthony Romero
with objects from the collections of Deanna
Ledezma, Josh Rios, and Anthony Romero

*Returning as research: moving image
and sound*, 2024
Six sequences of video and sound
Videography and sound by Josh Rios

BIOGRAPHIES

Anthony Romero is an artist, a writer, and an organizer committed to documenting and supporting Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

Deanna Ledezma, Ph.D. is a Tejanx scholar, writer, and educator specializing in Latinx Studies, the history and theory of photography, contemporary art, and visual culture.

Josh Rios is an educator, media artist, and writer whose projects deal with the histories, archives, and futurities of Latinx subjectivity and U.S./Mexico relations as understood through the intersections of modernity, post-modernity, and neocolonialism.

www.placeaspractice.com



The place where the creek goes underground
Anthony Romero with Deanna Ledezma
and Josh Rios

September 16 – December 14, 2024

Johnson-Kulukundis Family Gallery
Harvard Radcliffe Institute
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COVER IMAGE **Deanna Ledezma**, *The fence that Reyes built, Hunt, Texas* from *Returning as research: photographs*, 2023–present

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