

Gravestones Tell Stories: Photos from San Isidro Cemetery in Sugar Land, Texas

By Marie-Theresa Hernández

“Photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them.”

–John Berger

Long before Sugar Land was an affluent suburb of Houston, it was known as the home of Imperial Sugar. The company produced and imported sugar cane and processed it in a red brick, six-story building that still stands alongside U.S. Highway 90. Imperial Sugar initially used convict labor to work the fields and refine the sugar, but when this practice finally came to an end in 1914, the company began recruiting Latinx workers from Central Texas and Northern Mexico. The company allotted a cemetery near Oyster Creek for Latinx workers.

The cemetery was first called Gran Centro. Later, workers changed the name to Cementerio San Isidro, the patron saint of farm laborers. It has withstood economic and demographic changes over an entire century; and, through these changes, Cementerio San Isidro found itself locked inside a prosperous subdivision, where, initially, the striking differences between the old and new created significant tension.

The land was sold to developers in the 1960s, and the communities bordering the sugar cane fields were obliterated, but the cemetery remained. The fields became neighborhoods with brick homes. Tension between the old and the new was palpable. In the 1990s, litigation sought to block access, yet the cemetery survived and has evolved into a cultural and psychological home for Imperial Sugar’s Latinx workers, their families, and their descendants.

The story of Felix Tijerina, a prominent leader of Houston’s Mexican American community, is entangled with San Isidro. In 1915, Tijerina took a train with his family from Nuevo León to Sugar Land, and though the family’s stay was short-lived, it is reported that one of the children passed away and was buried in San Isidro.

In 2019 Cementerio San Isidro is a serene space, bordered on one side by Oyster Creek. Family members of the deceased farm workers visit often. As the descendants would say, “San Isidro contains the story of the old Mexican community.” It holds the memories of the past, made tangible by the innumerable objects placed on each grave.

The Center for Public History worked with University of Houston students from the History Department and the World Cultures and Literatures Program to produce a series of photographs of San Isidro for the Visual Stories: Local and the Global class taught by Marie-Theresa Hernández. Carmen Flores Perez, who grew up in Sugar Land reminds us there are many stories to tell.

Marie-Theresa Hernández is Professor and Undergraduate Director of the World Cultures and Literatures Program at the University of Houston. She is the author of *Cemeteries of Ambivalent Desire: Deep South Narratives from a Texas Graveyard*.



Leslie Gonzalez "Angel Wings"

I saw the angel wings as soon as I walked into the cemetery. They immediately caught my attention. The marker in the middle displays the name of Adrian Rodriguez, who was thirty-one years old when he passed away. My sense is that he left this world too early, and his family placed the wings on his grave like that so that he will forever be remembered as an angel flying high with his angel wings. LG

Carolina Aguado "Cherub Beneath a Tree"

Many small objects are hidden within the cemetery residences. As I walk through the cemetery, I am filled with a thought of wonder and an odd sort of thrill in finding something new among the graves and greenery. There is so much visual stimulation. I am trying to catch every little detail and am often surprised by the figures and gifts placed at tombstones. This cherub, in particular, took some time to find. He is hidden in plain sight. CA



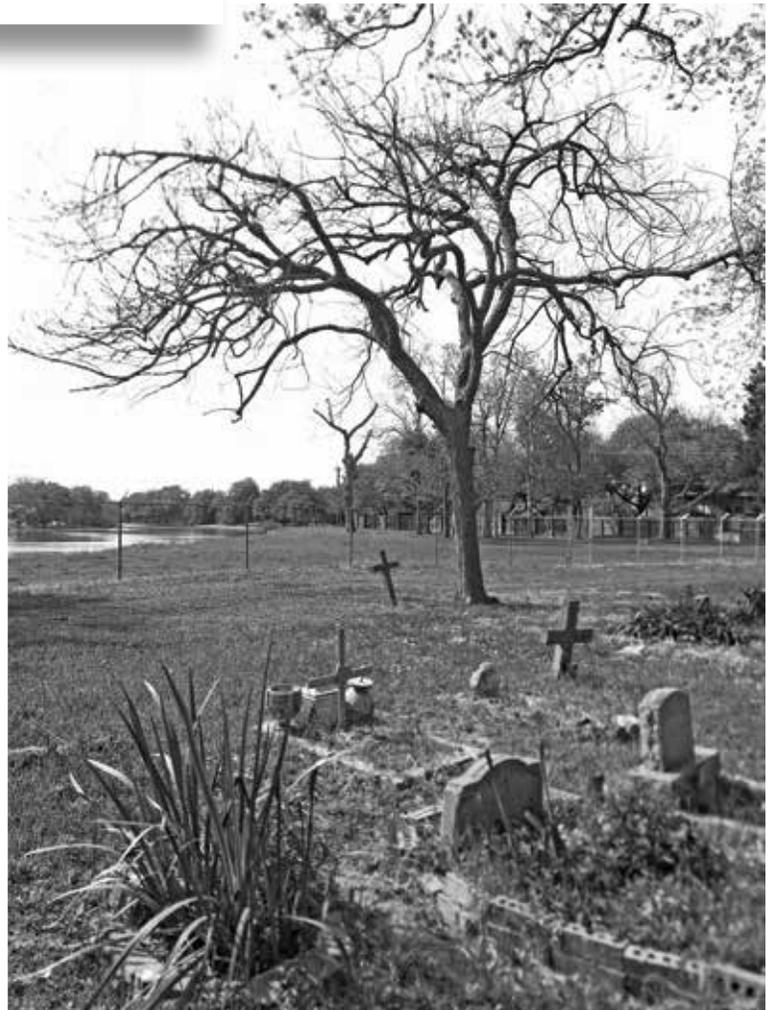


Cristian Torres "Jimenez"

If I am correct, this tombstone honors a couple buried together. The dates signify when they were born and when they passed away. This gravesite tells us about their relationship. Through the good and bad, they were always by each other's side, even after they passed away. I hope that in the future, the woman I marry spends the rest of her life with me, just like Mr. and Mrs. Jimenez. CT

**Mayra de la Garza
"Tree as Protector"**

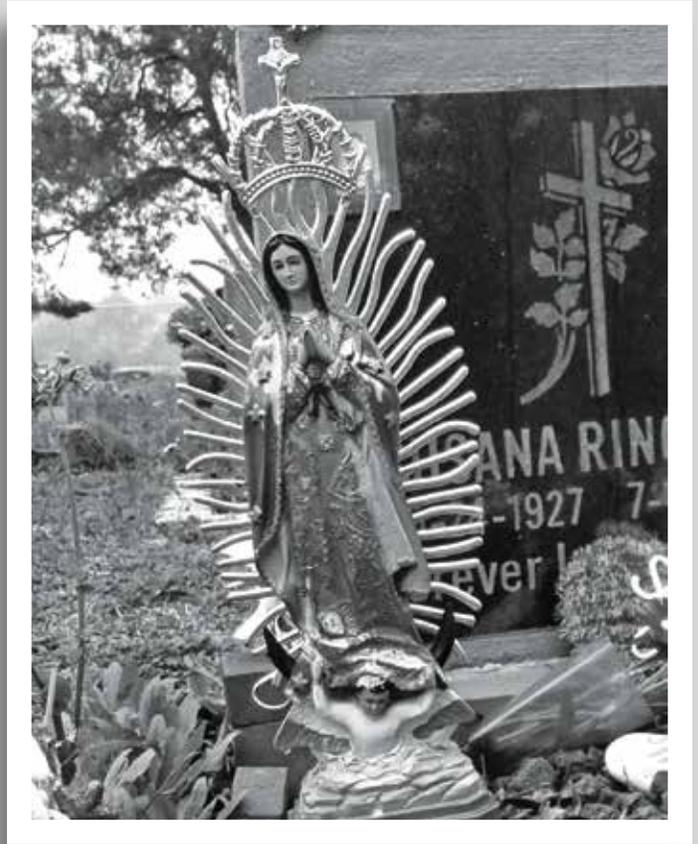
Even though I took this photograph on a beautiful spring day, the resulting image reflects a gothic, eerie and magical vibe in the cemetery. The tree branches reach outward towards the graves in all directions. In my mind, the tree symbolizes a deep-rooted connection between those buried there and the history of the cemetery. The tree acts like a protector for the graves and watches over them. MDG





Josefina Arguello "Crystal Virgins"

The ornaments our loved ones place on our graves say much more about who we were as people than our physical appearance does when we were alive. Our death is not the end because we will live on in the people who remember us. The ornaments reinforce our presence to our loved ones who will not forget us but will pass on our stories until they, too, cease to exist. JA



Cristian Torres "Virgin Mary of Guadalupe"

As an Hispanic, I believe the Virgin Mary delivers miracles when we pray for them. In return we light a candle in her favor signifying that we thank her for the miracle she has delivered and for answering our prayers. This image means a great deal to me because the image of the Virgin reminds me of my mother. My mother has supported me through all my bad and good times, and the moments when I need the most support, she is always by my side. Whether it is a financial, health, or school related situation, she is always answering my prayer and helping me get through everything in a positive manner. CT



Leslie Gonzalez "Untitled"

The angels appear as if they are placed with purpose, the larger one watching the smaller ones. There is a small pecan tree coming up between them, something living and growing among the dead. Marie-Theresa Hernández, caption



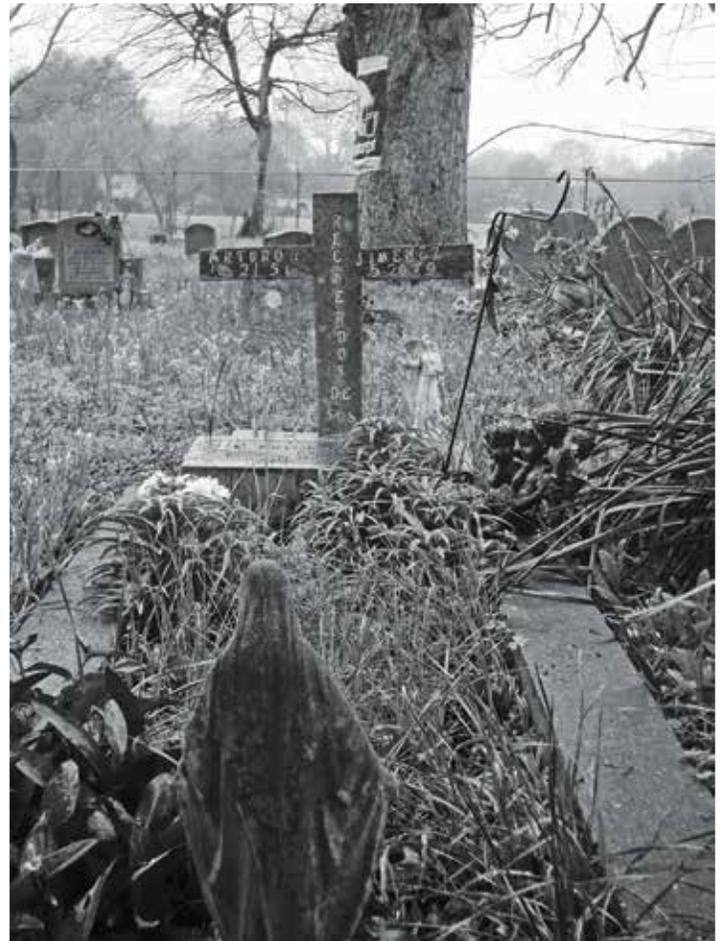
Carolina Aguado
 "Of Lone Headstone with Daisies"

Headstones are like sturdy and visible time capsules remembered by those who witness their installation. Over time, they could be forgotten until they are found once more by new visitors. The style and writing will forever hold a special place to those who know the history of those at rest there. Even though wildflowers may grow around the grave and the world around it may change, the tombstone stays to witness those changes, standing tall even though seemingly broken from its original perch. CA



Kayla Ausman "Shadow Tree"

The tree and the lone grave. In life and death, the man buried here brought the town together. His spirit lives on after death, and through the shadows of the tree branches, he connects the community. He seems to stand alone, with no graves around him, but the tree's shadow connects him to the others buried there. The shadows represent how the people are only shadows now, but they are always there because of the memories they hold. The man buried here sees the cemetery as his old neighborhood. He can go grave to grave and see his neighbors and friends and family. His memory lives on in his love for his community. KA



Carolina Aguado "Recuerdos"

Someone in Arturo Jimenez's family used their own hands to make the cross over his grave. The memory of creating the marker is deeply embedded. It has been forty years, the moment the cross was placed in the ground must have been so important. Marie-Theresa Hernández, caption



Kayla Ausman "Sleeping Angel"

The angel's eyelids close as the sun rises on the cemetery. As the world wakes, the young angel sleeps. He rests his head on his arm and pulls his legs towards his stomach in the perfect, comfortable position to fall asleep quickly. He eagerly awaits his dreams in the peaceful cemetery where he relaxes into a deep slumber and dreams of the people buried here. He knows them only in his dreams. He sees their lives, and their happiest moments bring a smile to his face. He also sees tragedies, which brings tears to his eyes. He sees their memories through their emotions and feels what they do. He tries to forget the night when he can no longer see the good spirits and only the evil ones. KA

Dylan Ramirez "Jesus Villarreal's War Memories"

He wears Mardi Gras beads and sits over the grave of Jesus Villarreal who was an infantryman in World War II. The angel is on a bench that covers the gravestone noting Mr. Villarreal's service. We can barely see the letters in the image, but it is not completely out of sight. Jesus Villarreal's war memory was probably like that during his lifetime. A soldier never forgets his combat experience. It was not at the forefront but always present in everything he did.

Marie-Theresa Hernández, caption

