ROOTS OF AMNESIA

by

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ROOTS OF AMNESIA

by

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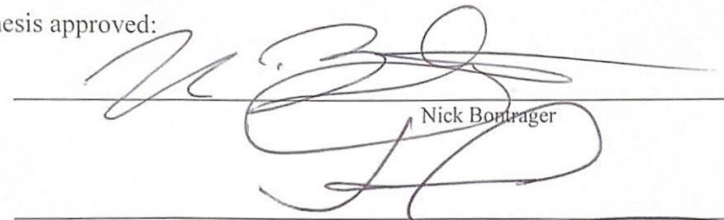

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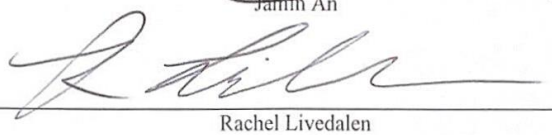

Rachel Livedalen

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This work is dedicated to my parents, whose migration, sacrifices, and quiet endurance have shaped every image and every word of this project. Their presence is the ground I stand on. To my graduate cohort, Eli Ruhala, Mckee Frazior, and Austin Lewis, thank you for your camaraderie and the many conversations that sharpened my thinking and kept me moving forward. To my professors Kalee Appleton, Jamin An, Rachel Livedalen, and Nick Bontrager, your guidance, critique, and feedback have left a lasting impact on my work and process.

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Introduction

In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Roots of Amnesia*, I explore the fleeting sense of memory that I try to make graspable through image-making and reflection. The memory I refer to is not my own. My work is concerned with a broader understanding of racial history that I have engaged through the Texas landscape and community. The works in *Roots of Amnesia* explore how a collection of photographs can recount stories from this past. The visual language of the photographs draws on a nonlinear understanding of time, the presence of symbols embedded in the landscape, and the endurance of memory through acts of daily practice. These elements come together to consider how survival is often marked not just by what is remembered, but also by what is intentionally set aside. If the telling of history prioritizes the viewpoint of the powerful, it is acts of survivance that ensure the roots of the silenced ones are not eradicated. Through my work, I consider memory not as a static archive, but as a living process shaped by stories, symbols, and survival.

My interest in "roots" encompasses both a physical connection to the land and one's cultural heritage. As a plant withers, its roots remain embedded in the soil, and carry through the remainder of its time, the remnants of its existence. The roots in my work imagine how physical space holds layers of memory. These roots serve as a conduit through which history emerges, ensuring that its memory finds its way into new growth of what comes next. Twofold, the roots also suggest a collective foundation that connects individuals to a broader framework. The memory that is delivered historically often arrives through generational transmission, carried in both written records and oral accounts that serve as tools for continuity and cultural preservation. These methods of passing down knowledge offer ways to sustain identity and connect with the past, yet they are also shaped by the frameworks of official history. As a result, the memory that

reaches us is often filtered, leaving behind fragments that must be reassembled to uncover fuller, more complex truths.

The other keyword in my title, "amnesia," refers to the intentional and unintentional forgetting of historic events. This forgetting can occur collectively or individually, often as a coping mechanism, but also because of systemic erasure that prioritizes certain histories while silencing others. Sometimes amnesia has ameliorating effects, allowing us to navigate the present by distancing ourselves from the weight of the past. Put another way, this kind of forgetting is a means of survival, prompting cultural adaptation and resilience in the face of historical trauma and systemic erasure. What are the costs of such amnesia? Can compensatory forgetting ever fully account for both past and present? My photographs consider memory as an act of resistance. I seek to recognize what has been forgotten and aim to reclaim these histories to establish a connection between remembrance and the ongoing transformation of their memory. In doing so, my work positions itself as a tool for confronting absence, offering a way to engage with what lingers beyond the margins of official record.

The Porvenir Massacre

My exhibition begins at the metaphorical inception of memory. A memory starts with fragments; partial recognitions, blurred details, and the gradual process of piecing together information. An attempt to bring form to the fleeting. The first photograph the audience encounters enacts this process. The image is of the historic marker commemorating the Porvenir Massacre of 1918, where in the remote border community of Porvenir, Texas, U.S. Army soldiers, Texas Rangers, and local ranchers forcibly removed 15 Mexican men and boys from their homes and executed them without trial. Though initially denied, the killings were later

confirmed through testimony as the victims' families were forced to recover their bodies and cross into Mexico to bury them.[1]

Fig. 1 *Porvenir Marker,* Archival Inkjet Print

The marker, occupying most of the image, stands as an official document of history yet resists clarity and readability as the foreground is left intentionally out of focus. This maneuver reflects the broader challenges of accessing and confronting the document, recognizing that its knowledge has long been obscured or overlooked. In contrast, the background landscape emerges with sharpness and offers a persistent reminder of the terrain that witnessed the event. This visual approach underscores my central investigation: how are historical narratives remembered, forgotten, and reconstructed over time to form different meanings? As the first

[1] "Remembering the Porvenir Massacre," Texas Historical Commission, accessed April 22, 2025, https://thc.texas.gov/blog/remembering-porvenir-massacre.

work of the exhibition, this image stages an initial confrontation that sets a tone for the larger show that follows, prompting viewers to consider the tension between visibility and soft obscurity within collective memory.

In *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, Dr. Monica Muñoz Martinez examines the period between 1910 and 1920 where hundreds of ethnic Mexicans in Texas were killed by vigilantes, law enforcement, and by members of the Texas Rangers. Her study includes the Porvenir Massacre. Muñoz reconstructs the atrocity this way:

> In the early morning of January 28, 1918, Com-pany B of the Texas Rangers and four local ranchmen—- Buck Poole, John Poole, Tom Snyder, and Raymond Fitzgerald—-surrounded the residents of Porvenir, a rural ranching community situated in the northeastern quadrant of the Big Bend region. With the help of the Eighth U.S. Cavalry Regiment, the Rangers and cattlemen woke up the residents and separated the fifteen able--bodied men and boys from the -women, -children, and el-derly men. Without conducting interviews, the Rangers proceeded to execute their fifteen prisoners, who ranged in age from sixteen to sixty-four years old.[2]

Martinez' larger analysis makes clear how the impact of racial violence in the Texas-Mexico borderlands endures for the affected communities. For me, learning about Porvenir stoked a sense of disbelief and unease. The weight of its history felt distant yet unsettlingly current. Confronting the details of a massacre like Porvenir and so many others revealed to me the deep layers of violence and erasure that remain submerged in the collective memory beneath Texas' "official" history.

[2] Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 121.

Fig. 2 Installation view of entry corridor

The exhibition continues with a narrow corridor into the gallery. Beside *Porvenir Marker* is a large landscape photograph, *El Cementerio de la Merced,* taken in Marfa, Texas. The image derives its composition from the historic burial ground's prominent division of space—a fence separating two sides of the cemetery. On the left, disheveled burials mark the Mexican section of the cemetery, while the right side is defined by orderly rows of headstones, uniform, structured, and visibly separated by a fence as the Anglo side. This division bears the mark of historic segregation and leaves in its presence the lingering aftermath of imposed borders separating racial and social classes. This division serves as a visual reminder of both physical and symbolic boundaries, suggesting that even in death, separation is maintained.

The photograph invites viewers to consider how the ideas of boundaries shape the environment, while memory itself remains fluid and uncontained. In a 2014 article for Marfa Public Radio, Mia Warren reflected on the inextricable presence of La Merced Cemetery, "In

this part of Texas, Hispanics hold many key political offices. Yet a visible reminder of historic inequality are the cemeteries, where in death, people remain divided."[3] The persistence of this divide becomes part of lived experience, reinforcing how memory is formed even through exclusionary practice.

Fig. 3 *El Cementerio de la Merced,* Inkjet Print on Vinyl

While the two initial photographs of the exhibition orient the viewer to the sites and times of my concern, the next two images narrow this focus onto objects in the landscape. A shovel leaning against the sunlit side of a home evokes labor, where the act of digging becomes a physical task and a symbolic gesture of remembering. Next to it, a broken gravestone from La Merced cemetery held together by rusted wire. The damage to the cross speaks to the vulnerability of memory and the fragility of historical accuracy. Together, these images highlight

[3] "A Legacy of Division in Marfa's Cemeteries." Marfa Public Radio, accessed April 4, 2025. https://www.marfapublicradio.org/2014-10-17/a-legacy-of-division-in-marfas-cemeteries.

how memory is both arduously constructed to form ideas but eroded over time when lacking maintenance. The conversation between these images is shaped by the physical work of preservation and the inevitability of loss, where absence and decay contribute to the gradual fading history.

Fig. 4 *Broken Cross at La Merced,* Archival Inkjet Print (left)
Fig. 5 *Lionel Salgado's home*, Archival Inkjet Print (right)

Fig. 6 Installation view of central exhibition space

An Asynchronous History

Further into the exhibition space, the display is noticeably out of sync. The spatial arrangement of objects creates a deliberate tension where stories and symbols exist in disjointed layers rather than a cohesive timeline. This layout reflects what I consider to be an asynchronous history; a history that does not unfold in a straight line but instead surfaces in flashes, ruptures, and instances. In this installation, the relationships and proximity between images become a significant operation, pointing to the ways in which memory can be constructed through formed connections between unchronological and non-linear moments. Avishek Parui, a postcolonial scholar of memory studies, posits a similar way of conceiving memory:

> Memories, through their multidirectionality (Rothberg 2009) and postcolonial writings through their multiterritorialities (Wilson, Sandru, and Lawson Welsh 2010) are oriented

> towards polyphony, liminality, and thresholds (Wilson and Tunca 2014). Consequently, both disciplines highlight how acts of representation and identity iteration are also often mediated through absences and ambivalent frames.[4]

Parui's emphasis on polyphony and liminality of memory underscores my own experience producing the works in this exhibition. I traveled through Texas guided by a search for personal memories, reflections, and places shaped by histories like Porvenir. I pieced together fragments of stories that exist in the periphery of written document, in oral histories, and along the roadside. The photographs that I created reflect deeper, more complex narratives that rest beneath the surface of Texas's familiar image. In the context of the exhibition, the way space and images work construct an experience of the layered thresholds and the "ambivalent frames" that define memory and postcoloniality.

Negotiating Symbols

To understand how postcoloniality operates within the Texas imagination, we must first examine the symbols that continue to shape its physical and cultural landscape. This dialogue begins with the photograph *T,* a large road sign in the shape of the letter "T." The image appears in black and white, to establish a visual starting point. This image mirrors the familiar style and typography of the Texas Rangers baseball team. Even outside of formal historical contexts, the form is recognizable due to its strong presence in everyday popular American culture.

[4] Avishek Parui, "Memory Studies and Postcolonial Writing: Interstitial Intersections and Entanglements," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 60, no. 6 (2024): 725–733, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449855.2024.2438722.

Fig. 7 *T,* Archival Inkjet Print

As a separate entity, the baseball team is celebrated and revered. Yet the darker history of the law enforcement agency and their role in racial violence remains largely overshadowed by their cultural romanticization.[5] Martinez elaborates on how the Rangers were perceived in the early 19th century,

> The Texas Rangers were described as a "fighting force" created by Anglo settlers to fight in the ongoing war for racial supremacy, battling Mexican landowners and indigenous nations, including the Tonkawas, Lipan Apache, Waco, Karankawa, Kiowa, and Comanche. The Texas Rangers targeted both the "Indian warrior" and the Mexican *vaquero* as enemies of white supremacy.[6]

[5] "Campfire Stories: Texas Rangers," Bullock Museum, accessed March 30, 2025. https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/campfire-stories/texas-ranger.
[6] Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You,* 10.

This mythos holds a powerful grip on the dominance surrounding the Rangers, reinforced by cultural portrayals that have transformed their image from a historically violent force into a celebrated organization. In the exhibition, *T* begins the rhythm of the central part of the exhibition. The work transitions into color and signals a shift in the visual relationship of symbols as it continues.

Fig. 8 Installation view of central exhibition space towards right

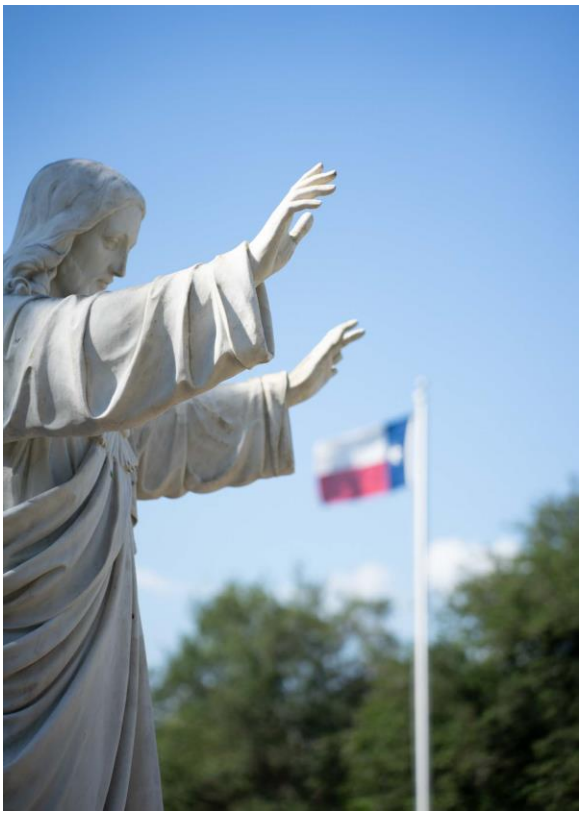


Fig. 9 *Monument III,* Archival Inkjet Print

The images that follow evoke the significance of religion to the colonization of Indigenous lands that sought to erase Native and Mexican cultures and traditions alike. In *Monument III*, the placement of the Christ figure blessing the Texas state flag interrogates the strategic alignment of religious belief and political grasp. The figure, appearing in the foreground in sharp focus as the flag recedes, distant with shallow focus, speaks to a tradeoff of powers, and suggests the masking of authority beneath the guise of divinity. Together, the sculpture of Christ and the Texas flag function as extensions of colonial ideology embedded within the physical and symbolic landscape. This draws attention to how belief, power, and historical memory are intertwined.

Fig. 10 *Monument II*, Archival Inkjet Print (left)
Fig. 11 *Monument I*, Archival Inkjet Print (right)

In *Monument II* and *Monument I*, the images of a Mexican figure and a weathered wooden statue of a Native man are meant to depict generic caricatures. Representations of Indigenous and Mexican presence in public spaces are often filtered through a colonial perspective, reducing their true experiences to stereotyped symbols rather than lived realities in service to the pursuit of conquering lands.[7] Instead of functioning as an assertion of Native and Mexican presence, such imagery reflects how colonial narratives reframe and commodify history. In an entry from *The Handbook of Texas*, Robert E. Wright expands on the role religious institutions played in advancing colonial control by integrating Indigenous communities into the structures of the Spanish church and state. Wright explains:

[7] "The Alamo is a Rupture," *Guernica*, accessed March 20, 2025. https://www.guernicamag.com/the-alamo-is-a-rupture-texas-mexico-imperialism-history.

> The Spanish mission was a frontier institution that sought to incorporate indigenous people into the Spanish colonial empire, its Catholic religion, and certain aspects of its Hispanic culture through the formal establishment or recognition of sedentary Indian communities entrusted to the tutelage of missionaries under the protection and control of the Spanish state. Although most of these missions fell short of their goal, several had relative success, and all played a key role in establishing the European and mixed-race foundations of Texas. In general, the missionaries sought to eradicate among missionized natives all appearances of indigenous religion and culture judged to be incompatible with or inferior to Christian beliefs and practices.[8]

The three *Monument* photographs embody the tension against colonial signs, allowing the images to exist in dialogue with each other rather than in service of a singular, dominant narrative. In this context, the placement of images transforms the space into a site of negotiation, where symbols are reoriented and their meanings reconsidered through the quiet force of new association.

Survivance

"Survivance," a concept articulated by Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) writer and literary critic Gerald Vizenor, proposes a way of thinking about survival not as passive endurance, but as an ongoing act of preservation that resists erasure through the persistence of memory, storytelling, and the quiet assertion of cultural identity. The process of memory anchors itself to what is remembered, creating a connection between past events and the present moment. Even when details fade or become distorted, the act of holding onto fragments resists the complete erasure of that history. For Vizenor, survivance functions not only as recall, but as an active refusal to disappear entirely, preserving traces of what might otherwise be forgotten. Vizenor explains:

[8] "Spanish Missions," Texas Historical Association, accessed April 5, 2025 https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/spanish-missions.

> Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory. The theory is earned by interpretations… The incongruity of survivance as a practice of natural reason and as a discourse on literary studies anticipates a rhetorical or wry contrast of meaning. As practice, then, survivance especially emphasizes lived experience and everyday acts.[9]

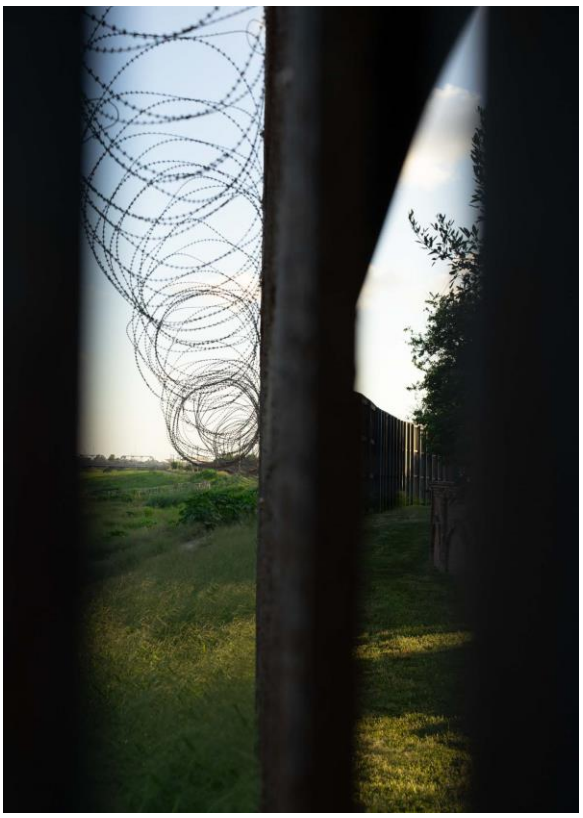
Fig. 12 *Juliana with acordeón*, Archival Inkjet Print (left)
Fig. 13 *Flags*, Archival Inkjet Print (right)

Vizenor's turn to lived experience and everyday acts becomes apparent in the photographs of *Juliana with accordion* and *Flags*. In both works, objects and traditions serve as vessels for the transfer of memory. The coexistence of a Mexican and Texan flag side by side on a truck window, and the act of playing the accordion along a South Texas riverbank become carriers of cultural continuity. The truck becomes a vehicle for shaping a sense of self grounded in work, routine, and the relationship to land, where identity is formed not solely through

[9] Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 89.

movement across borders, but through the everyday acts of making, carrying, and sustaining. The accordion player, often associated with corrido songs and Tejano music, functions as an auditory form of memory passed down through cultural inheritance, not written but heard. These images create an opportunity where memory expresses itself through various channels, revealing the ways it acts beyond linear history and fixed narratives.

In my own formative life, I navigated between Matamoros, Mexico and Fort Worth, TX: moving between two nations constantly. The photograph titled *Matamoros/Brownsville wall* engages this perspective.



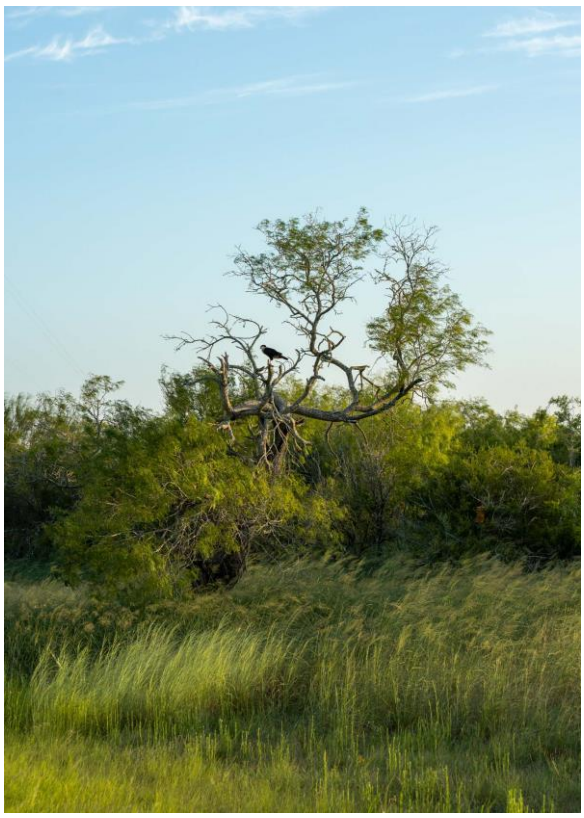


Fig. 14 *Matamoros/Brownsville wall*, Archival Inkjet Print (left)
Fig. 15 *Untitled*, Archival Inkjet Print (right)

Taken through the narrow opening between the border wall beams, the image presents a visually symbolic threshold where geography converges and the ability to view into both Mexico and Texas reinforces the complexities of a transnational identity. Conversely, the photograph,

Untitled depicts a vulture resting on the upper limbs of a mesquite tree. The bird, solitary and watchful, is rooted in land rather than nation. Together, the images converse on what it means to belong to a place shaped by impeded and unimpeded boundaries.

As the wider exhibition space narrows to a final corridor, two black and white photographs serve as an endpoint to the central dialogue, creating a separation before entering a final corridor to a more intimate closing passage. *Mia*, a direct portrait of a young girl seated outdoors, makes a quiet confrontation. The moment holds space for a reflective presence where memory can take shape with sharp clarity. In *Disappearing Flag*, a fading American flag imprinted on the side of a crumbling wall, suggests the erosion of a national memory, and allows for the two images to explore the space between what is remembered and forgotten under their imposed boundaries. Rendered in black and white, the images remove the familiarity and immediacy of color, encouraging a slower investigation. This choice distills the scenes down to their essential elements, allowing form, texture, and contrast to play a key visual role. The photographs create a sense of distance that mirrors the uncertainty and fragmentation of memory within the viewer. What do we inherit across generations, and what do we come to understand as part of a shared national history?

Fig. 16 *Mia*, Archival Inkjet Print (left)

Fig. 17 *Disappearing Flag* Archival Inkjet Print (right)

Fig. 18 Installation view of central exhibition space towards final corridor

Fig. 19 Installation view of final corridor

A Mark for Memory

In the final corridor two facing walls are lined with fifteen 5 inch by 3 ½ inch, evenly spaced photographs that invite viewers to move slowly and closely through the space, engaging with each image in an intimate and deliberate manner. The images depict various forms of the smallpox vaccine scar and the BCG vaccine scar. These vaccines are often administered shortly after birth or at youth at time when personal memory has yet to form. The scar's mark, itself, is often faintly raised but sometimes extremely visible with a recognizable shape. Their presence on the body gestures toward a longer history in which individuals have been marked not only by health initiatives but also by colonial strategies.

In the 19th century, vaccination efforts in Mexico were introduced under the influence of English physician Edward Jenner's smallpox research. These efforts were recorded in a

document titled *Origin of the vaccine and means of finding it in the kingdom of New Spain*, which outlined a mass vaccination strategy to be implemented across the colonies of Spain in Mexico.[10] Framed as a public health initiative, this campaign also operated within a broader colonial framework, where Indigenous bodies were treated as instruments of disease control, underscored by the fact that it was introduced to the Americas through Spanish conquest.

Fig. 20 *A Mark for Memory*, print series detail

These photographs allow viewers to return to memory as both an embodied and withheld experience, shaped by forces that dictate how it is remembered and what is silently masked as colonial enterprise. Smallpox vaccine ended in most countries, including the United States, in the

[10] "Vaccination in Mexico's History," Google Arts & Culture, accessed April 20, 2025, https://artsandculture.google.com/story/HgVBjgkdsh9cTw.

early 1970s following the successful global eradication. The BCG vaccine remained common in Mexico until 1998.[11]

The BCG vaccine and the smallpox vaccine are similar in that they both induce a reaction at the injection site, often resulting in the recognizable scar. This distinction, while medical in origin, often signals an experience rooted outside the United States, quietly alluding to an immigrant past shaped by different public health systems, national policies, and cultural markers of care. When I captured this series, I had the opportunity to ask if the subjects remembered this moment. Many said no while others recalled small, fragmented details. The scars become a quiet punchline and ironic trace of so-called progress etched into the skin, where the absurdity of colonial logic reveals itself not through grand monuments, but through a faint mark that lingers without explanation. In contemporary contexts, the presence or absence of the scar often serves as a lighthearted indicator of one's country of origin. Having been born in the United States, I do not carry the scar, while my sister, born in Mexico just two years earlier, bears the fading imprint of the vaccine. The contrast between us, bound by blood yet marked differently, brings my work to a final perspective, one where even kinship is not immune to the distinctions imposed by geography. In that small circle of skin, what began as a medical mark became a collective symbol, revealing how bodies hold history, how borders leave impressions, and how even shared blood can bear the weight of divided origins.

[11] "The BCG World Atlas: A Database of Global BCG Vaccination Policies and Practices," PLoS Medicine, accessed April 28, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001012.t001.

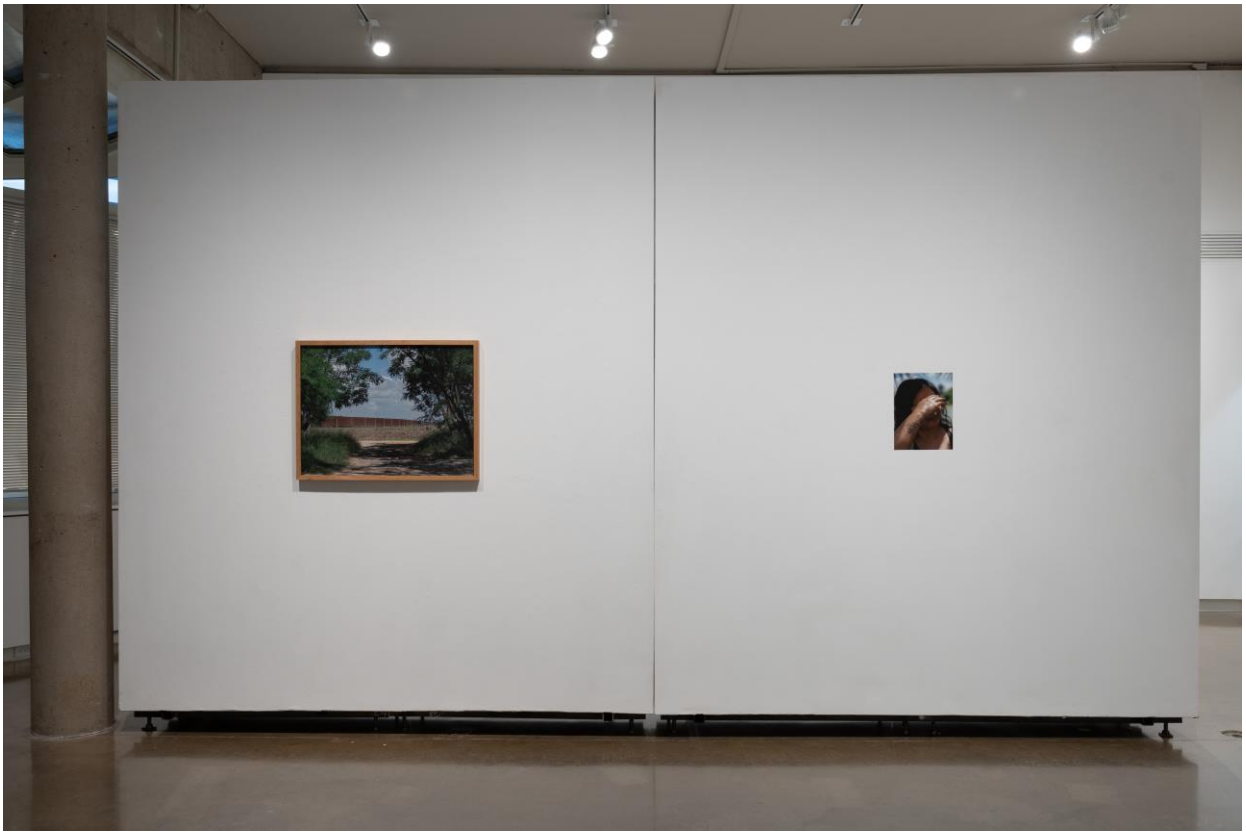


Fig. 21 Installation view of final corridor

The final corridor returns viewers to the central exhibition space of the gallery and two images conclude the exhibition. On one side, a photograph of the border reappears. Titled *Matamoros/Brownsville wall*, the photograph captures the main boundary and a recurring entry point into history shaped by physical separation. Next to it, *Roots of Amnesia*, an image of a face partially hidden by the subject's hand, reflects the title of the exhibition. The photograph positions itself between concealment and detachment and returning viewers to the question, "What is it that we choose to forget?" This return considers not only the process of memory, but the conditions under which forgetting becomes necessary. A final gesture toward the nature of memory itself, always lingering just beneath the surface.

Fig. 22 *Roots of Amnesia*, Inkjet Print on Vinyl

Conclusion

My exhibition ultimately offers a space to reflect on how memory is constructed, contested, and carried forward. My work does not aim to provide resolution but instead encourages viewers to engage with histories that remain out of focus, recognize the survival of memory over time, and interrogate the ongoing process of remembering that often leaves it unresolved. Throughout the exhibition, symbols play a central role, revealing how they continue to shape and guide our understanding of history in both subtle and overt ways. These visual markers, whether inherited, adapted, or recontextualized, carry the weight of cultural memory and question the systems that have long defined whose histories are remembered and whose are forgotten.

My work grapples with histories that do not unfold in sequence but surface unevenly, in fragments and returns. The photographs embrace this disjointed rhythm, where meaning emerges not through chronology, but through proximity. At their core, my photographs consider memory itself, not as a fixed archive, but as something that survives through acts of practice. The work acknowledges the difficulty of holding onto memory as it shifts under the pressures of contemporary life, where nationalism, displacement, and historical amnesia complicate the act of remembering. By drawing attention to this struggle, I hope to affirm that remembering is not passive. It is active, intentional, and at times, resistant. It is through this practice of sustained attention that memory survives, even in its most fragmented forms.

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VITA

Raul Rodriguez was born in Fort Worth Texas in 1988 to parents from Matamoros, Tamaulipas. He graduated from the University of North Texas in 2014 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art with a concentration in Photography. In 2025, Rodriguez earned a Master of Fine Arts from Texas Christian University. During his time at TCU Raul received a graduate fellowship, a STARS Award and The Carol Tompkins Benson ‘02 MFA Fellowship. He served as a gallery technician for TCU Art Galleries, a Teaching Assistant and Instructor of Record for Beginning Photography under Professor Kalee Appleton.

ABSTRACT

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In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Roots of Amnesia*, I explore the fleeting sense of memory that, through my work, I try to make graspable through image-making and reflection. The visual language of my photographs draws on a nonlinear understanding of time, the presence of symbols embedded in the landscape, and the endurance of memory through acts of daily practice. Using this framework, I consider memory not as a static archive, but as a living process shaped by symbols, histories, and survival.