



**Cemeteries of Ambivalent Desire: Unearthing  
Deep South Narratives from a Texas Graveyard  
(University of Houston Series in Mexican  
American Studies, Sponsored by the Cente)**

*Marie Theresa Hernandez*

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Growing up as the daughter of a funeral director in Fort Bend County, Texas, Marie Theresa Hernández was a frequent visitor to the San Isidro Cemetery, a burial place for Latino workers at the Imperial Sugar Company, based in nearby Sugar Land. During these years she acquired from her father and mother a sense of what it was like to live as an ethnic minority in Jim Crow Texas. Therefore, returning to the cemetery as an ethnographer offered Hernández a welcome opportunity to begin piecing together a narrative of the lives and struggles of the Mexican American community that formed her heritage.

However, Hernández soon realized that San Isidro contained hidden depths. The cemetery was built on the former grounds of an old slave-owning plantation. Her story quickly burgeoned from one of immigrant laborers working the land of the giant sugar company to one of the slave laborers who had worked the sugar plantations decades before, but whose history had been largely wiped out of the narrative of the affluent, white-majority county. Much like an archeologist, Hernández began carefully brushing away layers of time to reveal the fragile, entombed remnants of a complex, unknown past.

A professional photographer as well as a scholar, Hernández provides visual images to spur the reader's imagination and anchor the narrative in historical reality. She mines interviews, newspaper accounts, and other primary sources—interpreted through her own rich sense of place and time—to reconstruct the identity of a community where the Old South, the wealthy New South, and the culture from south of the border all come together to form an almost iconic symbol for today's America.

In this complex and nuanced, self-reflexive ethnography, Hernández interweaves personal memory and group history, ethnic experience and class . . . even death and life.

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