

Reimagining the Family Archive as a Multidimensional Space

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Dear Reader,

Without giving it too much thought, can you answer the following question: how do you organize memories when you recall the past?

I organize my memories by different categories of spaces. When moving house, relocating to another city, or just going on vacation; each space represents a period of time and vice versa. This block of time is a type of landmark that's bookended with a beginning and an end (the latter signaled when the movers have packed up the last remaining boxes in the entrance hall or the moment I've stepped foot in the airport to catch my return flight). It's not measured by calendrical units.

Instead each "memory space" marks a unit of time and the landscape functions as the timekeeper. Whether I've just come back from vacation or I'm decorating a new bedroom—something has shifted and I feel like I'm embarking on something new or rediscovering something lost. (How many times have I promised to change, improve, or work on myself after coming back from vacation?) Refreshed by a new landscape—or returning to a familiar one after time spent away—I feel inspired and rejuvenated. The momentum generates from a meaningful span of time that occurs against the backdrop of a singular environment.

This letter you hold in your hands is the culmination of my thesis work. It's partially based on oral histories that I conducted with my Uncle Alcides (Al) Gutierrez—my mother's brother—for the purpose of this project, as well as stories from my own life. While this is a story about family, it's also a story about place and discovery. My uncle decided to leave Peru for the United States in 1972 and a new time-landmark for our family was erected. His story will come later.

I draw from my life history to add context and provide examples when relevant, but my uncle's stories are the central focus here—what I pepper in is to help the reader (you!) experience the dimensionality of this written text as proof of concept of what I propose as a long-term archiving project: a family archive reimagined as a multidimensional space. The epistolary form will package and guide your experience. What that means will become clear soon.

As I mentioned, this is representative of a larger oral history collection that I plan to expand and contribute to over the course of, well, a lifetime—but it's also one I hope goes on to live many lives. In an attempt to plant those seeds, I must consider ways to foster personal connections with the archive through meaningful interactions. I plan to achieve this through a combination of tangible and metaphorical methods, which I call a multidimensional approach to the archive.

My archive is and will be composed of letters produced from oral histories conducted with narrators in my family. These communications will contain excerpts from their transcripts. While

mail is used as a metaphor for circulation, it's also the physical component of my archive that can literally circulate if mailed. It's cyclical: a departure point means there is a destination—and those roles can reverse. To that end, the letter you hold in your hands is what I've created in response to some of these ideas.

This letter is singular. The only copy that exists is currently in your hands. Take a moment to note the quality of the paper between your fingers. It's handmade, thick, and durable. It's also kept in an archival storage box. I've taken proper steps to ensure that this written text will endure. My family archive is an extension and more expansive version of this letter. While this example stands alone and can be accessed by any reader curious about alternative forms of archiving, the eventual model I will create will circulate solely within the realm of family.

Additionally, instead of receiving one copy, my narrators will receive several copies of their letters. The narrator plays an active role in the distribution process by catalyzing movement and kicking off circulation. Narrators can choose from a variety of means to share their correspondence, that is only if they wish to. The decision is ultimately theirs. For instance, each letter can be transported via postal service or by hand-delivery or may be left in storage to be rediscovered by chance later on down the road.

The meta-structure of this archive is influenced by artists' books. If you haven't experienced the medium for yourself, I encourage you to visit the Artists' Books in the Smithsonian Collections'

virtual catalog. You will see—as it says on their website—the artists’ book is “a medium of artistic expression that uses the structure or function of a ‘book’.”¹ In other words, it’s a piece of art in book form. Similarly, I am creating a written text where the aesthetics are not only an extension of the letter’s contents but a product of their ideas.

The physical repository is a part of a framework that can offer a holistic-dimensional experience for a family member that may in turn want to adapt and attempt their own version of this experiment. What will they think of the ranch—will they long for it? Will they already be familiar with the place? Or will it lead to a new path of self-discovery? While I hope I’m successful, the outcome, whatever it might be, is not the only reason I chose to undertake this project, the gesture itself holds meaning too.

As I write this, we find ourselves in the throes of an ongoing global pandemic, economic instability, and extreme political polarization—it almost feels radical to perform acts of hope these days. The Greek proverb, “old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit”—has lost all meaning. While I might not be able to grow vegetation from my Brooklyn apartment for my future offspring to enjoy, I can create links to the past that will endure.

Thinking back to the “irregular” metric of time I introduced at the start of this letter, this project marks time with an introduction of a new physical environment, and the conclusion of a previous one—time is split into two. If we think of these irregular units of time as a play, the story resets

when the scenery changes. To build my family archive, I wanted to start first with the construction of the setting.

If I can bring to bear a multidimensional aspect to this archive, I can enrich the memories that unfolded in that space. Inspired by a theater stage, I see in my mind's eye a set designed and informed by past memories. I see the process of reminiscence. Moments happen in a flash, but what if there were a way to slow down and freeze those moments? This archive operates on the idea that if I isolate a setting that serves as the constant backdrop for life's activities, our recall might become better—the moments longer, deeper, and dimensional.²

For example, when I conjure the image of the house I grew up in: I see the slanted hallway, my door on the right as I emerge from the dining room, peeling powder-blue paint chips that flaked unevenly off my bedroom walls. A pull-cord hangs from a bare lightbulb in the middle of the room.

Do you see? My thoughts have already begun to take on a life of their own. The room starts to populate with objects and memories. If I shut my eyes and imagine my bedroom, the dark space behind my eyelids begins to glow an orangey-yellow. Ah! I remember how the sunlight intensified around 4 pm and filled the room with light. My mom eventually hung a sheet over the window to dull its bright impact.

Location plays an outsized role in achieving a dimensional effect by serving as an anchoring point to enrich the stories recalled from (and of) that particular space. While conceptualizing this thesis, I had to consider what physical location could serve as this anchor. It couldn't be just any place, it had to be a place of significance related to our family's origins. Erecting a landscape from the past and outfitting it to be accessible for future generations is meant to serve as a bridge across time and space. By creating this space, a future relative might come away with a new understanding and appreciation for those that came before them.

During the interview process with my uncle, we spent a lot of time discussing the visual and sensory landscape of his environments. We talked about his first impressions and uniquely American experiences. I asked questions like when did he arrive; what was the first day like; how did he pass the time alone; could he describe the aromas that filled the air during breakfast time?

I originally set out to create an archive that could evoke togetherness and connection as a way to connect family past, present, and future. As a tangible object—i.e. the archival box— it can physically embody movement on multiple levels. This is the outcome I'm working towards. Inspired by the form itself, oral histories are by nature dynamic and multifaceted. Why can't their archiving plans be too?

Originally, I envisioned this archive to tell the story of the ranch we lived on in California. I spent my childhood there. It was the height of social, familial, and cultural connection in our family's new chapter in the U.S. It would eventually disintegrate as job opportunities in other parts of the country presented themselves. Eventually, it became impossible to ignore that a better future might lie outside of the ranch.

However, I realized during the course of this project that our story went even deeper than I could have ever imagined, like the roots of a very old tree—as it turned out, there were many ranches that came before “the ranch” we made our home. In reality, “our ranch” was determined by sheer luck and family connections.

Ultimately, these letters will be deposited in a physical repository—an archival box for proper preservation, starting with my Uncle Al's interviews. You might be wondering where this box will live? The narrators—like my Uncle Al—are the only ones that can make that decision. They are the shepherds of their own collections and it's up to them to decide. The epistolary form is a recurring theme of this thesis. It's intended to spotlight the relationship between movement and oral history. Instead of paying a visit to an archive, what if the archive's source material could travel to you via the postal service or other means?

*During the course of researching this project, I was deeply inspired by the book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* by Christina Sharpe—an orthographic examination of contemporary Black*

life in the diaspora. Sharpe erects a slave ship in the minds of her readers; its architecture is used as a metaphor to illustrate how “Black lives are swept up and animated by the afterlives of slavery.” Sharpe invents and describes a methodology that is infused with activity. She activates multiple registers of the same word as well as evokes their relationships with the environment. If there’s a ship, then there must be a sea, and if there’s a sea, then the ship must sail—there is a destination implied, and “the wake” is what the ship leaves behind.

The slave ship in the mind’s eye continues to expand and interact with its surroundings. The laws of physics dictate that the wake is a reaction from the moving ship meeting the sea—now forced to contend with the other’s presence. Located in that turbulence are the Black bodies swept up in the wake. Movement and dimension feature heavily in Sharpe’s methodology—and their usage and function deeply resonated with me. She reclaims words and maximizes their use. By doing so she breaks the past wide open, in this case, by activating the linguistic components of “the wake” and other terms:

“...The path behind [the] ship, keeping watch with the dead, [and] coming to consciousness.”

It’s not one definition at work here, but a holistic application of the word, and it feels natural that the antidote prescribed to cope with the violence produced by the wake is located in the word too. To perform “wake work” is to explore the wake as collected sites of “artistic production,

resistance, consciousness, and possibility for living in diaspora.”³

When my mother’s family arrived in the U.S. from Peru they maintained connections with family members back home through letter writing and the occasional long-distance phone calls, like other immigrants away from their homeland. (I can still see the yellow rotary phone perched on my mother’s nightstand and hear the cluck-cluck-cluck the dial made when it returned back to “0”.)

Before the Internet and the invention of social media sites like Facebook, my mother received airmail letters from Peru to keep in touch with family.

I could always recognize letters that arrived from Peru due to their red-and-blue-checkered border. I learned during the course of researching this project, airmail was historically designed to bear the colored border of the country they were mailed from.⁴ Apparently, this made sorting the mail a more efficient process. While blue doesn’t fit with the rest of the color scheme of the Peruvian flag, the red-and-blue checkered envelopes are the only version that turned up during the course of my research—identical to the ones I saw at home.⁵

I can’t overstate the influence of Sharpe’s work and how it factored into the conception and creation of this thesis. Acts of reciprocity are a major part of this project. It’s a gift to the future while honoring the past, but I can’t forget myself in this story either. I am performing “wake

work” within these pages. Here I am in the wake: making art from history, supplying knowledge to future generations, and finding my own way forward by standing on the shoulders of the past.

My Uncle Al's Story

My uncle was the first member of the family to start a new life chapter in the United States. In 1972, he decided to leave Peru. He was a young man in his early twenties and was hearing about job opportunities in the U.S.

He confided in his Uncle Gregory about his plans to relocate to the U.S. Together they traveled from their hometown of San Mateo de Huánchor to Lima, the capital of Peru. They arrived at a work-placement office that specialized in sending laborers from all over the world to work in the agricultural sector of the United States.

The man who ran the office was named Rigoberto and at first, he enthusiastically greeted my uncles. He had the air of someone who had been doing this for a while because upon learning where they were from, his attitude quickly shifted. He said, "You're from San Mateo? No way. I don't mess with guys from San Mateo!" He explained that the last few men he tried to send to the U.S. that were from San Mateo had backed out at the last minute and left him high and dry: either the culture shock was too much for them and they returned to Peru or they had cold feet and skipped their flights, leaving the company to pay for travel.

My uncle explained, "But we are not all the same," and took the steps to prove it. He spent months working on other ranches in Peru to demonstrate he possessed the experience they were

looking for, and that he was dependable. Eventually, Rigoberto decided to take another chance on a Peruvian from San Mateo and so began my uncle's journey to the U.S. He worked short stints on various ranches in California before settling on the ranch we eventually called home.

It's hard to imagine, what would have happened if Rigoberto had denied my uncle the opportunity based on where he was from. By the time I was growing up—I'm the daughter of his only sister who relocated to the United States—the ranch I knew was solely populated by my mother's relatives, or so it seemed. I don't know how many have lived there over the years or still do. I don't think I've ever known. Some of my older cousins started families on the ranch. Occasionally, I'd hear the news that a distant relative was visiting. I wasn't always sure how I was related to visitors. My mother is from a family of 11 children. While the firstborn was a girl, there was nothing but boys until my mother arrived—and not long after her, another girl, the last of the brood. In time, six of my uncles and my mother would immigrate to the United States and live for over a decade on The Ranch.

Like my Uncle Al, they spent time as agricultural laborers in the northwest where they received temporary gigs on various ranches before being transferred somewhere else by the work-placement office in Lima (Rigoberto must've changed his tune about people from San Mateo). When my mother arrived in the U.S., she fell in love and married another ranch hand. By that time, my uncles had found permanent employment on several family-run farms located within miles of each other outside of a small town called Rio Vista—acting as references for each

other. My mother and her siblings raised their families on this stretch of land for over a decade.

We lived on a cluster of ranches in the Montezuma Hills area of California. Sometimes the territories intersected, but we simply called it “the ranch” as if it was one entity. There was the White House (sometimes known as the Big House, and the one closest to town), the Green House, the Trailer, the House by the River, and others. (I lived in the Green House, and for a time, the House by the River.) For the first few years of my life, I felt surrounded by family everywhere I went and this imparted to my world a sense of wholeness. My surroundings felt eternally familiar and familial. If we passed a truck on a dusty road going the opposite direction: it was my uncle or my cousin (many of my older cousins—typically the ones who weren’t born in the U.S.—worked on the ranch too), or sometimes it would be the ranch owners themselves. The ranches were mostly family-owned and run for generations, and the owners had last names like McCormick, Hamilton, or Anderson.

We were bonded by blood and also by lifestyle. The nearest town of fewer than 5,000 people, could be up to a 45-minute car ride away depending on where we lived. We were used to varying levels of isolation. Our lives were defined by the inherent risks and inevitable heartache of owning pets next door to the wild. The natural playgrounds offered endless entertainment for us children: we climbed stacks of hay that dangerously reached for the barn ceiling; we went swimming in a nearby river and picked the wild blackberries that grew close by. The men—the dads—worked as shepherds and sheared the wool. They didn’t have pets, they instead had

coworkers; muscular border collies that were wise beyond their years, with names like Lady, Willie, and Blue.

When I was growing up, the moms—the wives—were the caretakers and babysitters of the children (although they often had jobs working in town; babysitting, housekeeping, or caretaking for elderly clients). My cousins were my primary playmates and often the closest neighbors around by miles.

We also happened to be one of the very few Peruvian families in the area. While the other ranch hands were mainly from Central and South America, the majority were from Mexico and Mexican culture was represented everywhere from the taquerias and taco trucks to the music that would play in the background.

One of my Uncle Al's first experiences with Mexican culture took place in a restaurant. "I thought tortillas were used as napkins." We laugh about it now, but he had never seen a tortilla before—it's not a common food item in Peru—and he didn't know what to do with it except dab at his face.

He also described the strangeness of eating at a buffet—a uniquely American pastime—on his first day of arriving in the U.S. The excess and the indulgent nature of grabbing unlimited plates of food struck him as odd and he couldn't believe there was no cap on how many times you could

return to the buffet line. He was used to letting a waiter take his order and bringing out a normal-sized plate of food.

During one of our interviews, my uncle spoke of his early morning routine, “El Gordo made breakfast in the mornings.” Every morning, one person brewed coffee, another cooked breakfast, and my uncle baked bread. Groceries were delivered to them once a week. They lived on the worksite, miles away from the nearest town.

For me, being the child of an immigrant parent, the notion of “home” is a complicated and fraught answer. If I were to draw a Venn diagram that listed the different countries, cities, and states we have since called home over the years, what is the sliver of overlap in the middle? In truth, there’s no common ground, but the ranch feels like the closest connection to home that we have in this country.

In constructing this archive, I am looking to take us all home in a way, as I resurrect the past through interviews with family members starting with my Uncle Al. In the last few years, two of my uncles and two of my aunts have died. I long for the time on the ranch when we were all together—the longest period of any other time in our shared history. I had big plans of interviewing all my uncles still living in the United States, but I have only been able to interview one so far.

It felt especially important as we grappled with the Covid-19 pandemic and continued to deal with the uncertainty of what the future will bring next. It has left me with a feeling of urgency to learn and record their memories about their early years living in the U.S. to fully understand and appreciate the path they laid down for me and my cousins to follow in “their wake” as Sharpe would say, in hopes we might find fulfillment and purpose on this strange land.

While writing this thesis, it dawned on me that I was avoiding the topic of racism and xenophobia (not to mention, classism) that was folded into their experience, especially in the early years of settling in America in the 1970s & 1980s.⁶

I avoid it because it’s already there in the margins of my thoughts (I have no control over it). The reality is, I can’t escape it, but I do need to reckon with how it has affected me. It’s not a vulnerable space I enter often because I personally feel absurdly whitewashed having grown up in the United States (partly in the suburbs) and speaking English fluently—who am I to complain when I’ve had less overt encounters with racism (I’m half-white and ambiguously ethnic-looking). While I have had my own encounters with prejudiced behavior, no one has ever told me to go back to Mexico or “your” country; no one has followed me around a Bed, Bath, & Beyond concerned I might shoplift. That’s what other family members have had to contend with.

When I was around 11 years old, an ex-friend hurled the word “beaner” at me. She wanted it to sting—I remember because she had this smug look on her face. I was stunned she even had that

in her arsenal as an option to hurt me. Another time, a friend's parent was helping me write my first resume. They commented offhandedly that a white-sounding surname would work to my advantage while applying for jobs. The implication was that it's a good thing that I didn't have my matrilineal family name or even a Spanish first name for that matter. My mom and I go by my deceased father's Anglo-Saxon surname, but while I was in high school, we lived with my Peruvian aunt, uncle, and cousins—as long as this person had known me, I was surrounded by Peruvian culture and family. I wish I remembered how I responded at the time, but I can still recall the remark. It is etched in my memory. I received the message that I was different—but just enough like them to say things only said around other White people. It was a duality I rejected but was constantly imposed on me.

I realized over the course of the several interviews I conducted with my uncle that I hardly knew his life story. I fell into the trappings of being a niece before being an interviewer. I knew him in the context of my memories and now I was getting to know him through the context of his.

For instance, he was more vulnerable than I could've imagined when he first arrived in the U.S without the community he eventually cultivated. (By the time I was growing up, there was a whole network in place of uncles, aunts, and cousins—not to mention, the ranch employed many of the newcomers.) One time, he was running late to work and considered changing his clothes, but decided against it in the end. While at work, someone frantically alerted him that his house was on fire. By the time he arrived, everything was burnt—and the only change of clothes he had

were the ones he was wearing. However, one item remained unburnt, the bible his mother gifted him before leaving Peru.

I'm chasing a sense of hope that I can create an archive that can make the concept of "home" mobile. I want to convey to you that, if this letter is in your hands, consider it an invitation to an important destination. An ideal outcome would be to see this archive evolve into a family affair for present and future generations to add and respond to (and work into conversations and spirited discussions at the dinner table).

Eventually, I'd like to interview my mom and the rest of my uncles in the U.S., but it was perfect to start with my Uncle Al—he really was the pioneer in this whole American experiment. He took the risk to start anew in a strange land. Without his persistence and determination, as a family, where would we be?

My uncle will receive a set of his texts in an archival box like the one you retrieved this letter from. The stationary and envelopes will bear the same blue-and red-checkered borders like the airmail that used to arrive from Peru. Currently, my plan is to include full excerpts from our interviews—a verbatim account with little interference from me (the editor) —but with over five hours of tape, how can I decide what to include? How will I know what might resonate with family members in the future?

I decided that this letter will also contain an experiment. For this text, I decided against including transcripts from our interviews because it doesn't mirror or channel the epistolary form that the rest of the project embodies. The transcripts read like conversations between two people. They don't "read" like letters—at times they're interrupted by moments of catching up in real-time; like chatting about whose birthday is coming up or trying to get in touch with so-and-so.

I'm reimagining the transcript from my final interview with my uncle into letter form. Instead of addressing me, he is speaking into the future. By crafting a summary of our conversation and rewriting it like a text, it reads like a letter while capturing the full range of our conversation. I lightly edited and condensed his words for clarity and chronology. This text is also translated into English from the original, spoken in Spanish (and Spanglish).

I invite you to experience a piece of the family archive reimagined for this thesis. Yes, that's right—this is a letter within a letter. I hope the following pages transport you to the ranch.

And so begins your journey.

- Margie Cook, May 2022

To a future reader—

When I first came to the U.S., I arrived with three other Peruvians and we worked on the same ranch. I think we were the first Peruvians to work there and we lived together for almost a month. I was the first to leave because the rancher sent me to another location. A little island between Stockton and Lodi, only accessible by ferry.

I started working for the Hamiltons in 1979. They were different, more considerate. I had a set schedule. I could take Sundays off—but there was one big problem. They spoke no Spanish and I spoke no English. I took classes in Fairfield about a 45-minute drive away and that's how I began to learn English. In the summertime, after I was done with work for the day, I came home to shower and eat dinner before driving to Fairfield. Class ended around 8 pm and I'd do it all over again the next day. I did that for years. My classmates were from the Philippines, India, Brazil, and Mexico, and a few were from Peru too.

I was the first of my brothers to start working for the Hamiltons. Next, my twin brother Isaac came. He left Peru to come work for them. I left the ranch in 1986 and Isaac went to Lancaster. I had just started a family. Lesly was born the year before and Peregrina and I were now parents. She wanted to find more stable work and the only option at the time was Hayward, so I had to leave the ranch.

In Hayward, I took a job in construction and worked for a Mexican guy—the whole crew was Mexican actually. He lent me a work truck, which was nice to have. I transported the construction materials and it was hard work. I lifted and carried bags of cement all day. Sometimes a house was set far from the road, and we'd walk a long way with those heavy bags.

I remember when I was in Hayward my sister Zulema came to look after the baby, and she ended up getting sick. I don't know what she came down with, but she had to go to the hospital in Oakland and she was there for a few weeks. I don't remember why Zulema was in the hospital, I think it was an issue with her heart or lungs. After work, I would visit her there. It wasn't an easy drive to make and sometimes there was no parking. I was still working in construction at the time (before briefly working at a poultry plant). Work hours were from 6 am to 3 pm. I woke up at 5 am and it took me 20 minutes to get there in the mornings, but traffic was very bad in the evenings. It took me an hour to get home. Even on the freeway and with alternate routes available, I couldn't believe how bad the traffic was. That's when I decided I needed to go back to the ranch. We went back and soon we had a second child on the way.

We didn't stay in Hayward very long, almost a year, maybe two. When we went back to the ranch, I started working for another rancher, Dexter. I had met him once before I left.

D. Hamilton's son was living on the ranch—in the house Isaac would eventually move into. He had a birthday party and that's when I first saw him, but we didn't really talk. When we moved

back from Hayward, we talked over the phone and arranged to meet up on the ranch. From then on, I started working for Dexter. This was in October of that year. I worked for Dexter until 1996-1997. He owned fourteen hundred sheep. It was me and a few others working there. One of them, Lloyd, was a retired veteran. I think from Vietnam or another war.

My dad came over from Peru in the 1990s. I was already a citizen by that time. All my brothers (in the U.S.) were employed on various ranches nearby. Dexter, Hamilton—A. McCormick, too. That was where my brother David worked. We got together for birthdays—sometimes for Christmas—New Year, and Thanksgiving. We also visited Zulema when she lived in the house by the river.

When it came to my dogs—they were all Border Collies—black and white sheepdogs. They were especially suited to their work. I remember Peeting. He was a good dog and understood everything. Willie was good too. He had red and white hair. They helped me so much and were so helpful and smart. We trained them by pairing them with an older experienced dog. They followed that dog's lead, and soon learned the commands and what different whistles meant. If you said "speak"—they would bark. They knew where you wanted them to go.

Sometimes we had to move a flock of sheep from one field to another. I had to open the gate, and the dogs stationed themselves in the back to make sure the sheep stayed together. Sometimes we walked nine or ten miles to get from one field to another.

Of all my dogs, I remember Chatsky and Peeting the most, but before that, I had another dog named Osso. He was my first dog, given to me to help with the sheep. They gave us two thousand sheep. Two thousand! They were big sheep too. Osso could do everything short of speaking. He understood everything. Since I was alone and had no one else to talk to, I talked to him and he would look from side to side, like he was telling me, don't worry, it will be okay.

Once, when I was on the little island only accessible by ferry, I told Osso to go ahead and wait for me at our destination. I followed a short while later with the flock of sheep. When he saw me approaching he perked up, waiting to be told what to do next. I told him to stay put, and I knew he was confused as to why I didn't want his help, but when we arrived, the sheep stopped where I needed them to because they were too afraid to cross past Osso.

There was another time the poor thing was sick. He was the first one up and ready to go to work. He waited for me outside, but I took one look at him and told him, no, it's best you stay here and rest. He looked up at me and walked back to the trailer alone. That was Osso.

I don't know what hurt Osso, but the rancher came to pick him up and take him to the hospital. A week later, he returned without him. He said I'm sorry he didn't make it. I was so sad about my dog. They had to do a blood transfusion or something, I don't really know. The poor thing, I had lost my dog. And then they gave me Chatsky.

It was around March or May of that year that they sent us to Los Angeles by Simi Valley up in the mountains. The area was covered in undergrowth and could easily conceal predators and other dangers. Chatsky was sent ahead to scout the best trails. Whenever a sheep was separated from the flock, he'd help me find them. Since the shrubbery and undergrowth were high, he'd jump up in the air to see over them. He'd look in all directions to find the missing sheep. He was very, very smart.

On the ranch, you had to be very careful. There are a lot of dangers like coyotes. They would come and take the sheep. There were like six or seven of them and they prowled in a pack. At 5 pm, they would start to howl. You could hear them from a distance, and in the morning I'd find one, two, or three dead sheep.

The last time I saw Chatsky, the poor thing—the rancher had put out poisoned pieces of meat to kill the coyotes. I didn't know he'd done that and Chatsky must have found some and eaten it. When we got home, I noticed he was lethargic and looked very ill. Then he started to tremble. I remembered learning somewhere that cooking oil could be used to counteract poison. I grabbed a bottle of cooking oil and forced him to drink it. It helped, and Chatsky survived. He got better, but I was then sent to Alturas, and he remained with the person who replaced me, I think another Peruvian. So I had to leave him behind.

I don't remember who told me this story, but I think it was another Peruvian on the ranch. Once, a rattlesnake bit his dog. The dog survived and never let another snake bite him. Whenever he saw a rattlesnake, he would find a way to kill it one way or another. When a rattlesnake is threatened, it coils, ready to strike with its head straight in the air and its tail emitting a warning rattle to a would-be predator. After the danger passes, they uncoil and continue on their way. That's when this dog would attack—he waited until they were unsuspecting, grabbed them from behind with its mouth and did whatever he had to do to kill them. He was never bitten by a snake again.

There was one time I took the livestock to graze during the summertime. It was hot, and the earth cracked beneath your feet. I remember looking down and seeing two tiny baby foxes. Red and white little faces. I tried to grab them, but they darted away. They were so beautiful. I have no idea how they wound up there. Who knows where their mother was.

Around that time, I was living in the big house close to town—the white house. My brother Plinio was also working for Dexter. There was also another guy named Norman who operated the tractors. When he left, I took over for him and Plinio was in charge of the sheep. At that time, he lived in the trailer and I lived in the little house next door. Norman lived in the big house, and when he left, Dexter said I could move in. We did a lot of renovations before moving in. There were 5 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms. I lived in the white house for almost twelve years starting from 1985 or 1986.

At the time, I think Dexter paid us \$1000 a month and partially covered our health insurance. He paid and we paid the other half. He gave us an additional \$300 on top of that for groceries. It wasn't bad. We started early in the mornings around 6 or 7 am until evening time. Practically all-day. I took Saturdays off for church and on Sundays, we went back to work, but it was a half-day. We worked almost all week. On the ranch, there were almost no breaks.

I remember once I was living in Stockton, alone in a trailer. Sometimes crops would alternate between harvests, and the sheep were brought in to graze and clear whatever remained of the last crop. There were 800 - 1000 sheep and only one person to look after them. They ate crops of wheat and carrots, and once even watermelon.

It was May or June, there were grapes leftover from the previous harvest. They grew high above our heads, and when it rained, grapes dropped from the vines into the grass below. When the sheep came across the grapes—after drinking lots of water, somehow they fermented and turned into wine in their stomach. The next morning, I was alarmed because I had thirty or forty sheep that refused to get up. We didn't know what was going on until we realized they had eaten the grapes and must've gotten drunk. The next morning they were hungover, all of them wobbly on their feet.

Sometimes I miss the ranch. There were a lot of beautiful times spent there and worrisome times too. During the summer you were always sweating and in the winter, no matter if it rained or poured, you had to keep going. It was work, work, work.

If you have the chance, you should speak to other members of the family—like my brother Manasas. Whenever I speak to him, he has something new to tell me. He also worked on ranches in Bakersfield and Utah and has a lot of stories to tell. I think you would have a good time together.

- Alcides Gutierrez (reimagined by Margie Cook)

Notes

¹“*Smithsonian Libraries Artists’ Books.*” *Smithsonian Libraries*,
www.library.si.edu/collection/artists-books. Accessed 05-05-2022.

²*Liza Zapol and Nicki Pombier Berger’s course Oral History and the Art of Storytelling was integral to formulating the ideas behind this thesis. Inspired by oral histories reimagined and channeled into performances (eg. Chloe Zhao’s film The Rider and the play The Laramie Project), I reimagined my uncle’s transcripts as a letter to a future reader. The foundation of this project was inspired and informed by our exploration of memory and space—through class activities and readings selected by the professors.*

³*Christina Sharpe, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016), Chapter “The Wake” .*

³*Cabezal, Nicolina. “Airmail Envelopes History – 1918 to the Present.” Jampaper, 30 October 2013, www.jampaper.com/blog/airmail-envelopes-history.*

⁴“*Air Mail Peruvian Stamps.*” *eBay*,

“www.ebay.com/b/Air-Mail-Peruvian-Stamps/145839/bn_27094960?_pgn=2.” Accessed 01-05-2022.

⁵*Conversations with family members. Anecdotes about racism and personal experiences they've shared with me (i.e. profiled as a shoplifter at a store, being told to go back "home", and countless other examples.)*

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