

BRACERO LIVES AND THE LACK OF IDLENESS IN “FREE TIME”³⁴

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Abstract: The Bracero Program recruited more than 4.5 million temporary Mexican male laborers to work in the agriculture industry in the U.S. from 1942-1964. This program represented one of the largest influxes of Mexican male migrants into the United States, and one of the biggest bi-national efforts of turning pre-modern laboring bodies into abject bodies. While the majority of Bracero scholarship focuses on nation, citizenship, modernity, the fracturing of the Mexican family, and migration, this essay provides an account of how power, legibility, and desire get configured in Bracero’s lack of leisure within the domestic sphere by examining selected images photographer Leonard Nadel’s 1956 documentary archive. It argues that even in times of supposed leisure, their gender roles were reconfigured through various forms of reproductive labor in the homosocial domestic sphere.

Keywords: Bracero; Leisure; Migrant; Reproductive labor; Desire; Gender.

The Bracero Program recruited more than 4.5 million temporary Mexican male laborers to work in the agriculture industry in the U.S. from 1942-1964. As this program represented one of the largest influxes of Mexican male migrants into the United States, it also demonstrates one of the biggest bi-national efforts of turning pre-modern laboring bodies into abject bodies. There is a long tradition of Bracero scholarship, in both Spanish and English, most notably beginning with the work of Ernesto Galarza. His report *Strangers in our Fields* (1956), takes a documentary approach, as did most of the texts of this era, demonstrating the failures of this program in the promise to protect the rights of workers and a lack of compliance with the contracts on the part of both the Department of Labor and the growers who hired them. Most recent historical scholarship by historians such as Mireya Loza, Ana Rosas, and Deborah Cohen has shown the complexity of these mass migrations, including the gendered dynamics in the breaking up and remaking of the Mexican family, and thus sexual and gender roles, citizenship and the modernizing impulse in brought about by Mexico’s shipping off poor rural men to the U.S. by a state that could not support them. Mexican middle and upper classes on both sides of the border reaped tremendous benefits from financing bracero migration and services provided to these populations in their migrations, and finally, Braceros have since began to organize politically for

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monetary compensation for wage theft and a recuperation of their rights as citizens. Overall, then, Bracero scholarship focuses on questions of nation, citizenship, modernity, the fracturing of the Mexican family, and migration.^{xvi}

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Further, most studies of the Bracero program use the Leonard Nadel Photographs from 1956 as evidence of exploitation and squalid living and working conditions that they endured.^{xviii} These photos are often taken as transparent truths of what really happened, and while the photos represent some truth in their moment, scholarship on representation in general, and on representation and photography in particular, would hotly dispute such a bare assertion; photographs cannot be ‘transparent truths of what really happened’ for several reasons. ‘What really happened’ is not transparent, and it is always open to interpretation; photographs do not give access to the emotions or bodily experiences of whoever is represented; photographs are edited productions which represent ideological choices on the part of photographers; etc. The assumption is that the visual is somehow more revealing of the truth is highly problematic. Indeed, this article rightly goes on to challenge the possibility of ‘transparent truth’, following Susan Sontag’s assertions in *On Photography*, where she states that “[b]oth the order and the exact time for looking at each photograph are imposed; and there is again in the visual legibility and emotional impact.”^{xix} Further, she argues that photography conveys the ways in which one “put[s] oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power.”^{xx} We can glean that the photograph, in and of itself, is an object that imparts knowledge to the world, but must simultaneously acknowledge that photos also travel and have an life after once they are initially produced. Sontag also reminds us that the question of legibility and emotional impact are just as crucial: how the photo is read and by whom and when seem doubly important. Thus taking these ideas about epistemology and reading practice together and the fact that Nadel’s photographs were produced for the Joint United States Trade Union Committee, this paper explores how power, legibility, and desire get configured in producing a lack of leisure within the domestic sphere for Bracero workers.^{xxi}

Further, no scholar, to my knowledge, has inquired about Nadel’s feelings, desires, or positionality in relationship to the Bracero photographs he took in 1956. As numerous scholars of photography, have shown, “[a] photographer’s power to redraw the line or blur the distinction between happening and trace, aesthetics and politics, or [...] spectatorship and performance, stems from [photography’s] constant renewal of an

original prolepsis and an original temporal transgression.”^{xxii} This idea of prolepsis, or anticipating and answering objections in advance and the frozen moment in time seem most critical to this essay, as the cataloging by the Nadel estate and repeated use of particular Bracero photographs over others, do not answer questions about what really happened to the braceros in a universal experience of exclusion and exploitation as workers, but in fact raise more. Further, Nadel’s catalog, in the repetition or numerous photos series produced of individual braceros or particular scenes, as Bajorek suggests, make the traces more sustained or apparent in their repetition, and therefore they create meaning at both the aesthetic and political levels. In other words, there is a particular politics as to why Nadel chose for some individual men to be photographed in 2-10 frame series or chose to repeat certain domestic, intimate, reproductive, or productive labor scenes from multiple vantage points in his photos. The gaze of the camera lingers upon them, and instead of claiming that these documents show men being violated and captured by the camera and the migration process more broadly, I suggest that the lingering has a political content and intentionality that is both homosocial and homoerotic in a multidirectional sense. In this article, I examine the photographic representations of domestic and leisure that made Bracero lives in their very limited aspects. Braceros were only allowed to “go into town” on Sundays, and to designated places. In addition, their confined lives in labor camps also made their leisure time extremely contained to the ramshackle housing they inhabited. By documenting their contained sphere of leisure with Nadel’s 1956 photographs, we can see how race, class, gender and sexuality become visible in spaces that were not that leisurely at all.

Critical to reading these photos is what critic Gayatri Gopinath offers as most projects of diaspora and nationalism rely on men’s experience and their narrativized centrality while simultaneously “demonstrating how female sexuality under nationalism is a crucial site of surveillance as it us through women’s bodies that borders and boundaries of communal desires are formed.”^{xxiii} The shadow text here is the absence of women from these scenes of labor, leisure, and migration in the U.S. Instead men have left the responsibilities of gender policing of female relatives behind and traded it for their own surveillance by the Mexican and Anglo American ranch foremen. What bracero histories do account for in terms of interactions with women while in the U.S. was revealed in their correspondence with female family members, Mexican American girlfriends, and relationships with prostitutes both at the labor camps and in the towns adjacent to where their labor was performed.^{xxiv} In addition, the gendered hierarchies of migration, race, and power, for Mexican men who had been in receiving communities for longer periods of time, became brokers for growers because they knew

the Spanish language but were either permanent residents or citizens themselves. Keeping in mind the shift in how male-female sociality structured both the bastion of the Mexican family back home and how male-male sociality structured almost every facet of bracero life, I want to turn to the ways in which the queering of gender socialization emerged in men's reproductive labor within their supposed spaces of leisure as braceros.

There are countless photos that reflect the contradiction between modern citizenship through participation in the bracero program and the actual materiality of being a bracero. The impoverished living conditions of labor camps where braceros lived most explicitly illustrate the cognitive dissonance of living in poverty as a means of upward mobility.



Picture 1. *Bracero washing dishes in hip boots. Bracero in a labor camp bunkhouse in the Salinas Valley, 1956, by Leonard Nadel, Leonard Nadel Collection, Bracero History Archive, Division of Work & Industry, National museum of American History, Item # 138.22.27 . Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC*

As we can see in this photo (Picture 1), the man is washing dishes in a basin inside of a makeshift housing unit. There are hundreds of photos of these interior spaces by Nadel, illustrating the levels of both productive and reproductive labor required for these men to exist. Their leisure time was filled with reproductive labor, in addition to simple relaxation. Instead of having wives, sisters, mothers and female children performing reproductive labor in the domestic space, they, as migrants representative of global labor market shifts, were retasked with maintaining living conditions that did not produce a normative gendered division of labor and thus cut down on the pleasure of

leisure time. Here, fieldwork hip boots used by those who operated and moved muddy sprinkler systems, productive and paid labor, suggest the ways that the bracero program institutionalized ethnic-racial hierarchies of labor for migrant men that did both productive and reproductive labor simultaneously, a queering of gender roles through migration. This shift from the regimes of racialized feminized labor to gender-bending racialized labor intervenes in the focus on this solitary, familyless, domesticated, working class, cultural object of memory, producing an alternative to the idea of the Mexican macho steeped in patriarchy and privilege. Further, the context is crucial here as Nadel tried to demonstrate the temporary and unsafe nature of bracero dwellings, often barns that were about to fall down, minimally constructed labor tents and encampments, or Army barracks that were condemned by the military, with men crammed into these spaces to sleep and conduct their limited leisure in life outside of work. In terms of the conventional images we see in bracero photographs this one is fairly typical: the unnamed man is engaged in domestic labor, in a substandard domestic space, intently focusing on the task at hand. It also replicates the trope of abjection, especially as it relates to Kristeva's theories in the Powers of Horror, in which the abject is situated outside of the symbolic order, being forced to face this existence as an inherently traumatic experience.^{xxv} But it also raises more questions: did Nadel tell this man he was taking the picture? Did he tell him not to look at the camera? How did the man feel that he, not someone else, was selected as the one who was photographed washing dishes in his hip boots? How does this tell us about leisure time as reproductive labor, a characteristic that is usually ascribed to women and not male migrants?

These liminal yet domestic interior spaces, or what we could loosely call the home space of the bunkhouse, were photographed extensively to prove to the U.S government that these guest workers were humble and but their labor and living conditions were squalid conditions and in need of reform. These photos also reveal a limited representation of how leisure time was spent the labor camps. In one photo series, Nadel has two pictures of the same young man, leaning on his bunk, body half turned, looking at the camera, smiling (Pictures 2 and 3).



Picture 1 and Picture 2. *Bracero in a labor camp bunkhouse in the Salinas Valley, 1956, by Leonard Nadel, Leonard Nadel Collection, Bracero History Archive, Division of Work & Industry, National museum of American History, Item #138.23.02 and Item #138.23.03. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.*

In both images, horizontal and vertical, the young man occupies approximately a quarter of the space in the right hand portion of the frame. To his left, are seven tightly organized bunks, as the far left-hand corner recedes into the darkness of the unlit room. The bunks stand empty, the thin mattresses exposed. They actually appear to be more like mats suspended upon springs, a Mexican blanket draped over them, work hats resting on each bed, signaling the end of the workday. In the dark corner, laundry hangs, blocking the sunlight from the window: white campesino cotton pants, heavier duty work pants, and long sleeved shirts. Also, framing the smiling young man who wears chinos and a long sleeved shirt, are towels, shirts, and a jacket. As he reclines forward against the bunk, the eye is drawn to his smile, the makeshift nature of the bunk, the cord for the light in the building, and the various jars of pomade and other self-care products that sit on the 2x4 behind him. To his left, a Tide laundry detergent crate doubles as a nightstand, and a box of Fab detergent sits above one of the bunks. The dirt floor shows a well worn-space. While the overwhelming presence of laundry detergent, clean clothes hanging from the walls and makeshift ceiling signal a domestic space that is concerned with cleanliness, the dirt floor disrupts those efforts. That is, how “clean” can a space be if its basis is dirt, a premodern building that signals underdevelopment, instead of materials of modernity such as wood, linoleum, aluminum or tile? We must remember that braceros did not chose to live with dirt floors in the labor camps; rather, their employers were mandated to provide them with housing and these floors somewhat reflect what growers thought of their workers. They were poor, working, and occasionally middle class Mexican migrant men seeking temporary work in the U.S. so there was no need to feel any political or social obligation to provide them with clean or modern living conditions. Further, these rudimentary

bunks, dwellings, and their floors mark the distance between the subject-position of farmer and Mexican laborers. As Deborah Cohen has argued, growers in this period constructed their public identities as rugged but intelligent and modern harnessers of technology and government resources.^{xxvi} But these marks of progress and technology were not passed onto the workers in terms of benefits, nor was this notion cultivated through them as subjects, and this is most clearly represented in the interior spaces of their dwellings.

That the young man is smiling, given the tightness of his space, the clean clothes, and their air of domesticity that surrounds him, can be interpreted through several key ideas. I want to read the engagement of the camera with a smile as a queer act, stepping outside of expectations of the abject, and instead, as Gopinath has argued, producing a “range of dissent and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian.’”^{xxvii} Smiling in the photographs is non-normative in the context of both Mexican photographic portrait traditions and in documentary photo evidence of farm workers suffering.^{xxviii} Here we do not see individual suffering, nor do we see outright markers of gay sexual subjects, although we could argue that the material conditions of the dwelling convey such a sentiment and the latent homoeroticism of the spaces are an absent presence. The smile here, perhaps prompted by a joke or a cajoling from the photographer, disrupts the quotidian display of poverty and domesticity, a clear reordering of gender expectations and marking the moment a leisurely one. Further, the young man smiles in both photos and playfully turns his face towards the camera while his body is turned away. There seems to be an affective structure of optimistic attachment in this scene. Lauren Berlant might say that it “involves sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing [you] desire will help you or a world to become different in just the right way.”^{xxix} The “thing” to be desired could perhaps be happiness, to be desired by the camera, to revel in a joke amongst men in a domesticated space that is less than aesthetically or materially pleasing. The smiles, as queer acts of disruption, stage an alternative set of expectations about how things could be different. The mere fact that millions of Mexican men left their homes to labor and dwell in squalid conditions shows how strongly the attachment to the dream of social and class mobility was—it led men to occupy unfamiliar homosocial spaces that eventually became normalized, in their domesticity, the reorientation of gendered labor, bonds of emotional attachment, and as simple expressions of quotidian life.

When Braceros were taken to town from the labor camps, it was often on Sunday mornings when people were in church. They were tasked with doing their grocery shopping, getting haircuts and if lucky, seeing a matinee movie in a segregated theatre. The main reason Sunday mornings were apt for bracero leisure in public was because most good Americans were in church on that day and would not see the workers. They also had to work 6 days a week, so Sunday was the only free day. Many people in communities in the Salinas Valley (where these photos were taken) were afraid that the Braceros would rabble-rouse, drink too much, transgress sexual and gendered lines by trying to go with white women, entrenched Mexican American women, and prostitutes, or were simply too dirty to mix with the townspeople. Instead, even in their limited leisure time, Braceros were segregated from the everyday people of communities. They had few opportunities to meet people outside of the labor camps, much less socialize with potential sexual partners and develop love interests. On those rare days when they were taken to town, Nadel photographed the men in 1956 in Watsonville (picture 4).^{xxx}



Picture 4. *Braceros on the street in Watsonville California, 1956. Bracero in a labor camp bunkhouse in the Salinas Valley, 1956, by Leonard Nadel, Leonard Nadel Collection, Bracero History Archive, Division of Work & Industry, National Museum of American History, item . Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.*

In these moments in town, Braceros were immediately and temporarily thrust into consumer life as leisure time. They could walk around the somewhat abandoned streets of town on Sunday mornings, window-shopping while consuming goods and services. These Sunday economic boosts no doubt helped business owners tap into a secondary and emerging Spanish language market of consumers. As we can see in the photo, the nine men in the frame are loitering and in the public space as if it is their own. It further demonstrates that the notion of “being with friends” is not equivalent across communities.^{xxxi} Such lived experiences of racialized and classed forms of living for Braceros ultimately separated them from communities other than their own even in their leisure time. Their friendships were forged around labor primarily and not

necessarily around questions of mutual affiliation. The isolated nature of their communities and Spanish as a primary language made it so that these were default communities. While this group of nine men waiting by a taxi stand is perhaps a sub-set of 200 men who worked at the Gondo labor camp, it nonetheless demonstrates affiliations and gestures of friendship by default, just like their consumption.

Curiously, the businesses they patronized all brandish Spanish names or perhaps were even Mexican owned. Rancho Grande (big ranch), Zacatecana Café (café from the state of Zacatecas Mexico with a feminized gendered ending of the place), and Monterey House (Monterey was the first capital of Alta California during the Spanish colonial period prior to 1848), all indicate that the community either a) had pre-established Mexican-American families who ran and owned such businesses or b) that Anglos in the community saw the utility of having such businesses to cater to the sentiments and consumptive desires of Spanish speakers. In *The Salinas Californian* newspaper for June 5, 1956, around the time when these photos were taken, there are numerous advertisements for “Spanish food” at the Rancho Grande in Watsonville.” Ideologically speaking, there are a number of dissonances registered in the Rancho Grande’s Spanish food. First, Spanish food, whatever that might mean for a knowledgeable reader of the expression, is an imprecise North American shorthand for ‘south of the border,’ or the food of those who are the product of Spanish colonialism in the Americas. Spanish food, in the proper sense, would indicate food from Spain. However, it is obvious from this photo that the consumers in such restaurants are Braceros who are Mexican national campesinos who are not from Spain. Second, both the Zacatecana and Rancho Grande refer to central Mexican states and rural ranch life, not Spain and European sensibilities more broadly. Third, Spanish or Castellano was the language spoken by Braceros and at least some of the employees in these establishments. Fourth, we can see in the photo that the Rancho Grande is packed to the gills with Braceros, drinking what appears to be beer and spending time with friends. That these establishments would call their food offerings Spanish marks a slippage: those owners and workers wanted to differentiate themselves from the Braceros, especially in their leisure time as consumers. The split between local Mexican families who were U.S. citizens and migrant braceros was an important one for those who tried to justify their incorporation into the daily fabric of American life. Using Spain, Spanish food, Spanish language, and thus whiteness was a way to mark the locals as non-Indian, non-migrant, and class-mobile. Still, this segregated portrait of leisure and consumption has much to say about the race and class boundaries of American life in the 1950’s.

In conclusion, these scenes from the intimate spaces of Bracero dwellings to their occupation of the public sphere as leisure consumers have much to say about the complex lives of migrant laborers in California in 1956. In particular, their leisure lives were highly constrained by the very conditions of their labor. They, like women, did reproductive labor in their leisure time. In addition, braceros could only really develop friendships and social groups within the communities they lived in. Even when they were allowed to go to town on Sundays, they were patrons in Spanish speaking (Mexican) establishments that still viewed them as differential consumers, individuals who were not citizens but migrants who only had leisure time in the public sphere once a week.

^{xvi} For more on this point see Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill; UNC Press, 2011), Loza, Mireya, “Braceros on the Boundaries” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 2011), and Rosas, Ana. “Flexible Families: Bracero Families’ Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942–1964”(Ph.D. Dissertation, USC, 2006).

^{xvii} See Cohen *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (2011), in particular, where the inset of images is used in a descriptive and documentary manner as a kind of material evidence.

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^{xix} Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. 5.

^{xx} *Ibid.* 4.

^{xxi} John Tagg’s *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* focuses with photography’s early relationship with surveillance and the registering of poverty through to the New Deal provide a broader historical context for such a reading. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

^{xxii} Bajoreck, Jennifer. “The State of Visual Matters.” *Theory, Culture and Society*. 27 (7-8), 2010. 156.

^{xxiii} *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 24.

^{xxiv} Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill; UNC Press, 2011), Loza, Mireya, “Braceros on the Boundaries” (Ph.D. Dissertation; Brown University, 2011), and Rosas, Ana. “Flexible Families: Bracero Families’ Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942–1964”(Ph.D. Dissertation; USC, 2006) all document these intimacies extensively in their work.

^{xxv} “The Powers of Horror: Approaching Abjection.” *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

^{xxvii} *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 11.

^{xxviii} There is a long tradition of solemn looks in Mexican portrait photographs and the Dorothea Lange Farm Security Association photos convey humility, most often without smiling as well.

^{xxix} Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 2.

^{xxx} This photo was taken in Watsonville California because the same Rancho Grande business was advertised in the *Salinas Californian* newspaper on March 23, 1956.

^{xxxi} Stewart and Floyd. "Visualizing Leisure." *Journal of Leisure Research*. Vol. 36, No. 4 (2004) 450.

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