Capturing Capitalism's Work

Competing Photo-Narratives of the Bracero Program

Erica Toffoli

In 1956, Leonard Nadel photographed Mexican workers undergoing fumigation as they entered the United States to work in the bracero program. In Nadel's image, the DDT spray prevents a bracero from meeting the viewer's gaze. The image invites viewers to witness his transformation into a dependent transnational laborer. The endless line of naked men behind him suggests that his subjugation will be repeated indefinitely. Published in *Pageant* in 1957, the image's caption extended this critique of the program's dehumanizing qualities, describing the conversion of braceros into "livestock . . . herded into lines for mass examination, into booths for mass fumigation, into buses for mass transportation."[1]

Two years later, Earl Theisen photographed the same spraying process. He gave his images an entirely different valence. Theisen's photograph shows a worker with his head held high. The official administering the DDT gently lifts the migrant's hat to spray his head. Theisen's photo-essay, published in *Look,* likened fumigation to "inoculation," transforming it into a moment of necessary purification that allowed braceros access to the material uplift the program promised.[2] These contrasting images of the same moment at the border demonstrate photography's critical—and conflicted—role in both justifying US capitalism's work on bracero bodies and serving as a medium through which braceros asserted themselves as political subjects.

Introduced to counter labor shortages during World War II, the program brought two million Mexicans to the United States under temporary contracts

Radical History Review
Issue 132 (October 2018) DOI 10.1215/01636545-6942453

between 1942 and 1964 for work in agriculture and the railroad industry.[3] In 1951, the US Congress formalized the program agreements through Public Law 78, which guaranteed "subsistence" and medical care. The Labor Department was required to supervise compliance with contracts' provisions.[4] Yet frequent violations occurred. As Cindy Hahamovitch suggests, twentieth-century guest-worker programs were akin to indentured servitude. The line between workers' "consent and coercion" was tenuous.[5] Mae Ngai uses the concept of "imported colonialism" to describe the conditions in which braceros lived and worked, arguing that they were subjugated, racialized, and classed aliens legally and socially excised from the rights-bearing community.[6] Drawing on Nancy Fraser's recent discussion of "racialized dependent labor," I frame the bracero program as a system of "expropriation-exploitation." This indicates its official use of a wage contract, albeit a minimal one—thus the *exploitation*—and underscores the reality that braceros were captive workers whose wages often went unpaid, *expropriating* them of their labor-power.[7] Braceros had little control over where they worked and relied on growers for lodging and provisions. The threat of deportation and the lack of effective mechanisms for challenging abuses left them vulnerable to contract violations and poor treatment.[8] In these ways, braceros were bound as expropriated, racialized dependent laborers.

The state-capitalist alliance that supported the program found both compliant boosters and critical detractors in US photojournalism. Photo-essays from the 1950s in nationally circulating outlets used the ostensibly "objective" powers of photography to demonstrate capitalism's ability to transform migrant workers. Images constructed braceros as laborers who benefited financially, psychologically, and socially from their sojourn. These photojournalistic accounts suggested that braceros returned to Mexico able to meet the Cold War ideal of the model patriarch and masculine breadwinner. Photo-essays sought to justify the program as an agent of class uplift, mobility that improved racialized workers. In doing so, they repressed braceros' political agency, reproduced capitalism and masked the labor regime's perpetuation of inequality and expropriation. Through 1950s photo-essays that made the laboring lives of braceros visible, migrants acted as political subjects by contesting these often buried features of capitalism's use and abuse of dependent workforces. In Nadel's published images, braceros subtly asserted alternate political subjectivities against the labor regime that constrained them and communicated their grievances to those who consumed the products of their labor. By articulating resistant political subjectivities through photographs, braceros critiqued universal features of capitalism's structural relationship to dependent workers: the erasure of labor, the expropriation of workers' labor-power, and capitalism's production of persistent inequality. Images of braceros thus show us photography's capacity to support capitalism's reliance on racialized dependent labor and the medium's potential to radically disrupt its workings by facilitating laborers' challenges to the larger processes that structure their working lives.

Seeing Dependent Labor

Given the transitory and usually hidden nature of their work, labor migrants' presence in the visual record is doubly important. The products of migrant labor were easily visible to consumers. The work and lives that brought those goods to market were not so readily apparent.[9] While the lives of braceros were defined by motion and their labor by invisibility, the camera enabled migrants to set down portions of their histories in the moments at which they unfolded. The meanings attached to these images are of course flexible. Yet the tension between photographs' ability to freeze an instant—their capacity, in Walter Benjamin's words, to deliver a "posthumous shock"—and the transience of braceros suggests that images are rich devices for accessing migrant workers' stories.[10] In its ability to fix presence, photography enables mobile, often unseen laborers to cement fragments of their histories.

I concentrate on a specific visual document to examine bracero photography's potentialities: the photo-narrative. In doing so, I contribute to scholarship on bracero photography by John Mraz and Jaime Vélez Storey, in their analysis of the Mayo Brothers' bracero images, and Ana Elizabeth Rosas, who shows how bracero family portraits were central to cross-border communication.[11] Richard Street embeds Nadel's work within the socially engaged documentary genre, situating Nadel as a descendent of image makers who captured braceros in the 1940s and those, like Dorothea Lange, who recorded US laborers as part of political campaigns to improve their working lives. Street argues that Nadel's work was the most "explicitly political farmworker photographic exposé" of the 1950s and condemned the program as "slavery reincarnated," noting that his printed photo-essays showed the "price" exploited braceros "paid."[12] Breaking from this focus, Nicole Guidotti-Hernández uses Nadel's images of bracero domestic space and consumption to discuss the ways in which "power, legibility, and desire get configured in producing a lack of leisure within [their] domestic sphere," illuminating these images' homosocial and homoerotic content, how they display men's desire and the "queering of gender roles" and show how "race, class, gender and sexuality become visible in spaces that were not that leisurely at all."[13] I contribute to scholarship on Nadel's images by arguing that the photographs he published in 1957 photo-essays on the program are vehicles through which braceros protested capitalism's enduring structural conditions and its impact on laboring subjects. I build on earlier studies by delving into key parts of Nadel's image archive disseminated in 1950s US periodicals. I consider these circulated photographs as documents in which braceros acted as political subjects by articulating resistant subjectivities as they lodged grievances against the labor regime and protested universal features of capitalism's structural workings and relationship with dependent labor. Nadel's images are, in my view, emblems of workers' broad opposition to twentieth-century capitalism. By comparing Nadel's 1957 photo-essays with those of other contemporary photographers, I demonstrate how the medium both repressed and propelled the political agency of

braceros. These visual documents operate through what art historian W. J. T. Mitchell terms a "division of labor" between image and text.[14] In tracing correlations and tensions between photographs and text—investigating the "labor" performed by each component—the purposes of the producers of photo-narratives become apparent.

To access photography's critical role in constructing the bracero experience, I attend to the perspectives of photographers, braceros, and the spectators of these images. As theorist Ariella Azoulay argues, photographs are a multivalent—but not necessarily equitable—interaction between the photographer, those photographed, and viewers. Azoulay's contention that a photograph cannot be definitively "owned" allows us to consider photographs as spaces in which braceros exercised a degree of agency in addressing spectators. Nadel's images enabled braceros to communicate complaints—to, as Azoulay puts it, present "grievances."[15] This thinking on the political aspects of photography can be useful to historians. Latin Americanist Kevin Coleman, for instance, theorizes photographs as potentially liberatory devices of "self-forging." Coleman argues that Honduran workers laboring under US neocolonialism used photography to construct themselves as political subjects, demonstrating the importance of photographs for accessing the Latin American working class's assertions of agency and their claims to rights.[16]

While I am unable to track Nadel's daily interactions with the braceros photographed—his archival holdings do not permit this analysis—I suggest that his photographs index a degree of bracero agency. This approach does not discount the roles of Nadel and magazine editors, whose decisions and political commitments were certainly important. It is, however, only because these photographs capture braceros engaged with the labor regime that their critical force becomes palpable. I read the political agency of braceros in these images through the observation that their participation in the photographic act and their presence in circulated images enabled them to use photographs to place their protests in public view, while acknowledging that this agential potential was amplified and supported by Nadel as a photographer and by his editors' interventions. If Nadel decided how to compose his photographs and his editors influenced how these images were framed, the bracero presence in the shots ensured that they left traces of their work and lifeways that outlasted the moment of photographic capture. These images sutured an immediate connection between workers and spectators, allowing braceros to lodge protests.

This study builds on scholars' recent turn toward the visual record to investigate the links between images, power, and sociopolitical representation. Much of this work traces photography's disciplinary capacity to reinforce power relations. Theorists like John Tagg and Allan Sekula argue that photographs' meanings stem from the social, institutional, and historical processes that surround their production and circulation. Sekula describes images as "context-determined utterances"

that carry the "instrumental potential" to regulate looking.[17] In the process, as Tagg notes, photographs perpetuate "codes of representation."[18] Historians have demonstrated how photographs produced before the 1950s conditioned US audiences' view of Mexican subjects. John Mraz and Jason Ruiz explore how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photography naturalized racial, social, and cultural divisions between Mexicans and foreign observers. These images often implied that Mexicans were backward and would benefit from US intervention.[19] During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), as Claire Fox shows, images taught US viewers that the border marked "class and ethnic difference," and that Mexicans were the "feminine," "barbaric," and "servile" foils to their "masculine," "civilized," and dominant northern neighbors.[20] Photography also reinforced the trope of the potentially dangerous Mexican migrant in need of regulation and improvement.[21] Bracero photographs of the 1950s thus entered an image world in which Mexican subjects were visually prefigured as "others" in need of uplift.

Importantly, braceros were both racialized foreigners and working-class subjects. Historians of the twentieth-century United States have illustrated visual culture's role in consolidating class hierarchies by facilitating different modes of looking—which, as Ardis Cameron reminds us, are "always exercise[s] in power."[22] Extending David Nye's insight that corporate images are "visualizations of ideology," Elspeth Brown outlines US corporations' use of photography to rationalize workers' bodies and subjectivities.[23] Gendered ideals infused images of the working class. Visual culture, as Melissa Dabakis argues, fused "definitions of labor and masculinity" in US public art from the 1920s through the New Deal era.[24] Bracero photoessays drew on these classed and gendered ideologies, harnessing photography's instrumental, evidentiary value to display the transformation of braceros into wealthy male providers. These images thus reproduced—and endorsed—capitalism by assuring viewers that braceros climbed the class ladder, met middle-class standards of masculinity, and became active consumers.

Nadel's photographs provided an antidote to this display of agro-capitalism's magic at work. In tracing the bracero presence in Nadel's images as a way to assert oppositional political subjectivities and critique the labor regime, I extend recent advances in visual culture studies that recognize the disruptive potential of photography. Even as he details photographs' complicity in serving "authority," Sekula acknowledges spectators' responsibility to "read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced, or made invisible by the machineries of profit."[25] This approach is particularly fruitful for historians concerned with migrants and workers, whose voices are often muted in the written record. Rather than seeing photographs as disciplinary tools that stratify and divide, recent scholarship argues that images can permit assertions of agency, identity, and opposition against sociopolitical, imperial, and corporate power. Anthony Lee reads Chinese workers' portraits as vehicles through which migrants tested individual

"distinctiveness" against the totalizing gaze of the residents of their New England factory town and the interests of local capitalists.[26] Tina Campt frames quotidian images as mechanisms of "self-fashioning" through which the African diaspora in Europe crafted unique subjectivities.[27] Through Campt's practice of "listening to images," passport photographs become records of new migrants' aspirations that "refuse" the regulatory regime they were created to support.[28] Following Ann Stoler's call to "read along the archival grain," Gabriele Moser attends to the latent potentialities of images. This method allows Moser to unearth "critique[s] of empire" in British colonists' "non-event" photographs of indentured laborers.[29]

The latent political subjectivities of braceros ripple through Nadel's images. At first glance, these photos seem to record powerlessness in the face of an exploitative, domineering labor regime. I argue, however, that they are subtle articulations of migrants' opposition to capitalism's abuse of dependent workers. Through these images, braceros achieved a measure of political agency in enactments of the "self-forging" and "self-fashioning" that Coleman and Campt discuss. Critically, these photographs show us that through quiet, less obviously confrontational images—these are not records of strikes or demonstrations—workers lodge profound critiques against the structural conditions that govern their labor. This is why the presence of braceros in the frame is crucial. In Nadel's images bracero workers are front and center. The photos are full of laboring bodies and braceros' faces. They are not "beautiful." And that is precisely why they are important. These photographs enable braceros to act as political subjects as they address viewers directly, reminding consumers that capitalism operates through and on workers in historically specific contexts. Seeing the braceros shows us how photography worked through migrant laborers to fortify capitalism, and allows us to appreciate how workers have employed the medium's radical potential to contest dependent labor regimes' workings.

Reproducing Capitalism: Visions of Class Mobility

Before the 1950s, photography trained US viewers to see Mexicans as inferior "others." Images of undocumented migrants in early 1950s photojournalism amplified these distinctions, encouraging audiences to view Mexicans as trespassers who threatened US sovereignty. In 1951, Loomis Dean's shots of clandestine border-crossers made this argument in *Life*.[30] Given their status as state-sanctioned arrivals, photo-essays portrayed braceros as harmless, helpful visitors. Yet the perceived divide between US "superiority" and Mexican "inferiority" continued to infuse these representations. It surfaced in photo-essays' construction of US capitalism as an agent of elevation capable of turning Mexican laborers into ideal patriarchs, contented workers, and consumers. As Mireya Loza notes, promoters often portrayed braceros as "respectable" fathers and husbands concerned with family uplift.[31] Photography helped create this image and argued that capitalist "aid" via

the program made these dreams a reality. Photo-essays were thus deceptive agents of what Deborah Cohen describes as the "circular logic" employed by program supporters. This reasoning justified the "racialized division of agricultural labor" by framing it as a form of advancement.[32]

These images were doubly persuasive because they appeared in seemingly innocuous popular magazines. Laura Wexler's concept of the "innocent eye" is useful for understanding this dynamic. Wexler argues that domestic visions fortified racial hierarchies and subsumed the violence of US imperial and industrial expansion.[33] The "innocent eyes" of many photographers of bracero life highlighted affluence, domesticity, and psychological satisfaction to shield spectators from the program's abuses and opponents' critiques. In 1955, for instance, United Packinghouse Workers President A. T. Stevens condemned the program as an "indentured servant system" before Congress.[34] Major news outlets covered the deaths and injuries of braceros, including the 1958 bus fire that killed twelve braceros in California.[35] Growers tried to deflect this criticism directly. In 1959, the Council of California Growers sponsored *Why Braceros?* The film claimed that migrants were properly compensated.[36] Photo-essays were the "soft" side of the agro-industry's effort. These publications rarely mentioned growers, giving the appearance of disinterested objectivity as they deployed photographic "evidence" to convince viewers that the program improved braceros' class status and turned them into ideal masculine providers.

Life's "Bulge of Braceros at the Border" was the first of these celebratory photo-essays. Family photographs, taken by Loomis Dean, anchored the 1954 piece's argument that braceros returned to Mexico as wealthy patriarchs. This technique followed *Life*'s promotion of the nuclear family. Wendy Kozol has traced the magazine's appropriation of documentary photography to nurture a national culture based on this gendered, middle-class ideal.[37] The upshot, as *Life* staffer Loudon Wainwright describes, was a proliferation of "'My, What a Wonderful Family' picture stories" in the magazine.[38] *Life* marshaled this domestic ideal to frame "proper" braceros. Ex-bracero Toni Barranco is pictured lounging in a hammock near the Mexican home purchased with his earnings. Readers also meet prospective bracero Angel Cos. The men's side-by-side family portraits point to the program's ability to create domestic harmony.[39] Toni and his wife are immaculately dressed. Apparently unaware of the camera, the pair encircles their baby in a visual affirmation of the family's unity. Their gazes index the gendered hierarchy thought to produce ideal families. Toni's wife's eyes are fixed on her baby as she flashes a warm, maternal smile. Standing over the pair, Toni protectively shelters and looks down on his wife and child as he fulfills the role of model patriarch. While the Barrancos seem secure and indivisible, Angel's "problem" family faces the camera for viewers' inspection. Their shabby attire and unkempt appearance denote their working-class position. Disarray marks the family's structure. Angel sits pointed in the

opposite direction from his disheveled son and wife. The differences in the images imply that the program transformed unruly working-class families, like the Cos clan, into composed, middle-class family units. These families were governed by men like Toni, able to provide financially and act as a model husband and father. *Life*'s argument relies on displacing labor. Viewers never see Toni at work. Readers are simply told that he "picked lemons for six months." Similarly, the accompanying text conditions the sole image of labor in the photo-essay. In the image, a bracero performs stoop-labor in a field, his back to the camera. Sunlight glints off his clothing. The man's position and the sun's rays mark labor's strain. Yet the caption draws on racialized assumptions regarding Mexicans' supposed aptitude for agricultural work, assuring readers that "Mexicans do not mind bending and the sun does not bother them."[40]

Today's Health further suppressed the arduous work braceros performed. In 1957, the magazine published "They Help Feed America," written by Thomas Gorman and photographed by freelancer Cy La Tour. The magazine's status as the American Medical Association's premiere publication leant La Tour's photographs an aura of scientific legitimacy. The photo-essay uses repeated images of jubilant, elated braceros to transform labor into pleasure. Lily Cho argues that Chinese migrants' "emotional neutrality" in head-tax photographs prefigured "what citizens should look" and "feel like."[41] By contrast, La Tour's images show us how emotionally charged photographs justified noncitizen dependent labor by obscuring migrants' grueling work. A close-up of a grinning bracero sits atop the photo-essay's title. Viewers sift through a collage of photos that display beaming braceros as they harvest crops. Captions focus readers' attention on the goods, rather than the effort, of the braceros. One caption reads: "String beans and strawberries are other products that are hustled to our tables." Echoing *Life*'s racialized argument, Gorman affirms the "innate Latin love for natural things."[42] Welding migrants' emotive displays to racialized ideas about Mexicans' fitness for agricultural work, the photo-essay assures spectators that labor produced satisfied bracero subjects. In doing so, these images prevent viewers from seeing the taxing, physically-draining work required to produce agricultural commodities.

Look chimed in with the assertion that braceros blossomed into avid consumers and entrepreneurs, model disciples of the culture of capitalism. In 1959, the magazine printed "New Deal for the Mexican Worker." The photo-essay revolved around Theisen's images of a bracero named Clemente Mendoza. A *Look* photographer since the 1940s, Theisen was well aware of how photo-essays made their arguments. The "perfect visual" that "requires no words," he argued, "is so seldom attained that a science called the technique of the picture story is being worked out."[43] Guided by text, Theisen's seemingly innocuous photographs suggested that the program created competent male providers. The title declares that braceros are destined for prosperity and implies that the program extends the New Deal's

state-sponsored security to Mexicans. Theisen's photos encoded class mobility. In one image, Mendoza holds up a nightgown purchased for his sister. The garment frames his wide grin, linking his delight with his ability to acquire consumer goods for his family. The US department store becomes a site of elevation, as a noticeably working-class subject—Mendoza wears the hat commonly used during field labor—ascends the class ladder by purchasing. The caption tells readers that Mendoza spends "wages from the first week," highlighting immediate financial gain. Despite frequent "buying sprees," Mendoza earns enough to open his own store in Mexico. The piece's finale ensures that viewers absorb the fairy-tale-like uplift elaborated in Theisen's images, announcing that though Mendoza was "a peon when he left, he is now a personage in his small village."[44] Theisen's images thus provided "evidence" of the transformation of braceros into ideal male providers, enterprising business owners and enthusiastic consumers.

Life, *Today's Health*, and *Look* crafted an ideal bracero for US audiences. In this capitalist fantasy, the migrant enjoyed his work, returned to Mexico enriched, and met the era's standard of a productive family man. Photographs provided ostensibly objective documentation of working-class uplift and suggested that this trajectory was the norm. It would be unwise to dismiss the ways in which these photographs allowed braceros to assert pride in their ability to better their lives. We should, however, remember that by deploying such "innocent" images, these photo-essays sanctioned, and diverted viewers' attention from, the expropriation of racialized dependent labor, thereby reproducing capitalism and stifling migrants' capacity to resist the labor regime.

Picturing a "National Scandal": Braceros' Photographic Protests

Ernesto Galarza's exposé, *Strangers in Our Fields*, sparked Nadel's interest in the program.[45] Sponsored by the Fund for the Republic, *Strangers* argued that rights guaranteed through the International Executive Agreement, contracts, and federal laws were consistently violated. Galarza documented braceros' isolated, "substandard facilities" and poor compensation.[46] The Employment Bureau dismissed *Strangers*' findings, arguing that it relied on the "unsubstantiated testimony of . . . unidentified workers." According to the bureau, the program's benefits were written on "the happy faces of hundreds of braceros."[47]

Faced with these denials, the Fund for the Republic financed Nadel's photography. In the summer of 1956, Nadel used *Strangers* as a "shooting script" to capture nearly two thousand images of the hometowns of braceros and their bureaucratic processing, poor living conditions, and labor in California and Texas.[48] After pitching his photographs to US and Mexican publications, Nadel's work was accepted by *Pageant* and *Jubilee*.[49] *Pageant* was a general interest magazine. *Jubilee* was the first national US picture magazine geared toward a Catholic audience.[50] Nadel sent out twenty-nine photographs from which editors chose the photo-essays'

images.[51] Many shots of braceros' recreation and outings in US towns were not published.[52] This curation highlighted the program's abuses. Nadel explained his images' argumentative force by referencing photography's indexical qualities. He told *Pageant*'s editor that "the photographs I made on the housing conditions in California camps are irrefutable proof."[53] His reasoning drew on the status of photographs as records of an encounter, what Roland Barthes calls the "what-has-been" quality that renders "every photograph a certificate of presence."[54] Through photographic images of their quotidian labor and lifeways, braceros critiqued capitalism's expropriation and exploitation of racialized dependent subjects.

Published in 1957, *Jubilee*'s "A National Scandal" and *Pageant's* "Between Two Worlds" charged that braceros were captive workers, performed strenuous and ill-compensated labor, and lacked the means to contest abuses.[55] Photography mitigated this silencing. As they address viewers, braceros exert their resistant political subjectivity by presenting their opposition to capitalism's structural conditions. Editorial decision-making facilitated this process. Nadel's archive is rife with panoramic shots of braceros at reception centers, aerial images of crop fields, and photographs of empty camp quarters.[56] None were published. The magazines' decisions to print only images where braceros appear as clearly differentiated entities forged affective links between protesting migrants and viewers, counteracting the "system," as *Jubilee* charged, "whose very massiveness and impersonality tend to dwarf the individual."[57] Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu argue that photojournalism's claims to "irrevocable reality" often turn on constructing "circuits of feeling" between viewers and the subjects of the images.[58] Braceros' grievances ran along such a "circuit," as migrants urged audiences to be outraged and disgusted by what they saw. As braceros dispatched complaints through Nadel's images, they confronted viewers with capitalism's systemic abuse of racialized dependent labor.

Stylistically, these photographs recall documentary photography produced in the 1930s that chronicled rural poverty in the United States and the Great Depression's victims. They echo the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) photographs of destitute sharecroppers, tenant families, and migrant workers. These types of images were circulated in the late 1930s and 1940s through publications like Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.[59] *Jubilee* bound Nadel's images to their Depression-era predecessors explicitly. The piece likened braceros to "Okies," invoked John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and proclaimed that the "new drama" of braceros' exploitation was "as tragic as the old one which in so many respects it resembles." The photo-essay equated Nadel's images with Margaret Bourke-White's photographs, like those of impoverished sharecroppers published in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. These references linked Nadel's images with the FSA-style tradition, advising audiences to see them as similar records of inequality and, as *Jubilee* put it,

"injustice."[60] Notably, this elaboration of "injustice" allowed braceros to assert and contest what *Life*, *Today's Health*, and *Look* concealed: their effort as workers, the expropriation of their labor-power, and the program's preservation of inequality.

Jubilee and *Pageant* revealed unsanitized, arduous labor and its expropriation. Both magazines printed an image of a bracero collapsing under a bag of cotton. Two overseers monitor his work (fig. 1).[61] Leaning on Christian symbolism, the photograph dignifies the physical effort of the braceros. The migrant's position reminds viewers of Christ carrying the cross, underscoring the bracero's sacrifice as he labors for consumers "who know nothing" about his work.[62] *Jubilee* paired this image with a lengthy description of agricultural labor, scolding growers for paying braceros a paltry "50 cents a day."[63]

Figure 1. Resisting invisibility. Image ID 2004.0138.18.03, Leonard Nadel Photographs and Scrapbooks, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Hunched over, the migrant is clad in working clothes. The overseer stands upright in a crisp white shirt and slacks, marking the class stratification that the program upholds. His back to the camera, the anonymous foreman encodes growers' control over braceros and what they produce. At the same time, the image demystifies the process through which a commodity displaces workers' labor. Viewers watch the bracero "as he waits to get checked off," witnessing the moment at which the bracero's work becomes just another bag logged by the overseer.[64] In the background, five working braceros imply that the cotton-carrier's effort and effacement will be replicated. Even as the image captures how dependent laborers' work disappears, the bracero protests this invisibility. While *Life* and *Today's Health* advanced the racialized claim that Mexicans enjoyed fieldwork, this bracero compels viewers to feel his usually concealed labor's palpable strain. The bracero confronts audiences with his effort, asking that they imagine the work done to fill the bag he carries. The image amplifies its critique by twisting the religious iconography upon which it draws. In Christian doctrine, Christ's suffering under the cross anticipates his eventual resurrection, the conduit to the salvation of his followers. The bracero's labor will be "resurrected" as a product—the cotton—and growers' earnings. Metaphorically, this image makes its protest by commodifying a spiritual, transcendent process. In distorting this symbolism, the photograph intensifies the bracero's objection to the erasure of his labor and that of other dependent workers.

Similarly, four braceros protest expropriation as they interrogate their pay stubs (fig. 2).[65] The migrants' arrangement reflects workers' solidarity in such quiet, everyday resistance.[66] The pair closest to the camera inspect each other's

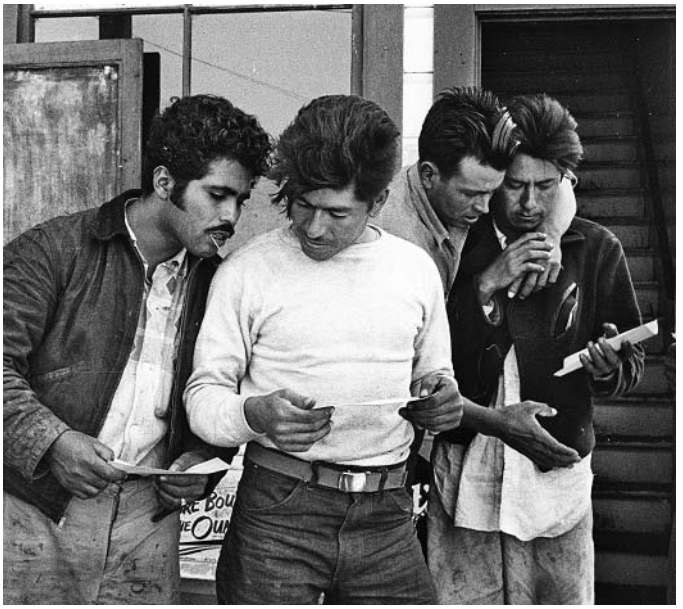

Figure 2. Checking capital's accounting. Image ID 2004.0138.44.11, Leonard Nadel Photographs and Scrapbooks, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

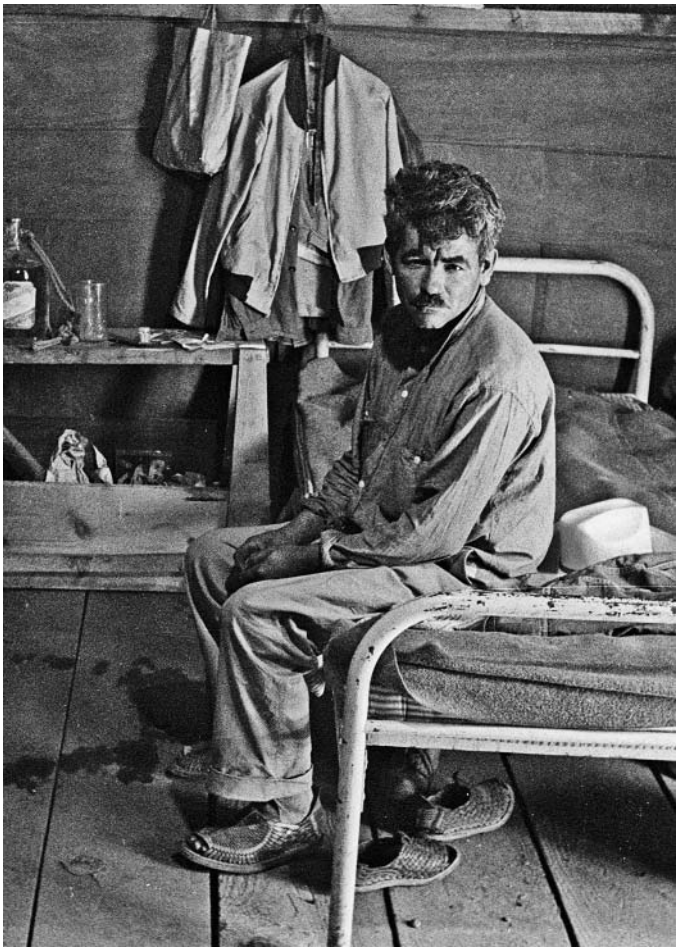

Figure 3. Contesting dependency and inequality. Image ID 2004.0138.23.26, Leonard Nadel Photographs and Scrapbooks, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

stubs, perhaps calculating whether they have been similarly cheated. In the background, a bracero cradles his friend's neck with one arm as he thrusts the other out in aggravation. Distressed by his paycheck's contents, the other man clasps his friend's hand for support. Perhaps they object to the stub's nonitemized deductions or struggle to decipher its English-language writing. The text notes that growers often used these tactics to swindle Spanish-speaking braceros.[67] As they telegraph their dissatisfaction, braceros demonstrate that they are not passive workers compliant with their abuse. These vigilant braceros are keenly aware of capital's expropriation of workers' labor, engaged with monitoring—and, through the photograph, contesting—this routine theft.

Through such abuse, the program perpetuated inequality. Braceros protested these futures through photographs. After giving viewers a tour of braceros' dilapidated, "flimsy," and "drafty" lodging, *Jubilee*'s piece ends with a bracero sitting on his bed (fig. 3).[68] The image resembles Evans's bedside portrait of impoverished

tenant farmer Bud Fields, printed nearly two decades earlier in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*[69] *Jubilee* notes the bracero's "boredom" during a work "shortage," underscoring migrants' inability to seek employment outside their contracts' terms. The bracero's address declares that the conditions chronicled—decrepit facilities and unrewarded labor—require redress, visually affirming the text's claim that the program destroys "human dignity."[70] Unlike his counterparts in photo-essays that praised the program, this bracero does not enjoy his work, go on buying sprees, or return to a smiling wife. Unable to amass fantastic wealth, he does not mimic the masculine ideal that other photo-essays exalted. Isolated on a US farm, he is vulnerable to the agro-economy's demands and separated from family and friends in Mexico. Almost scowling, the bracero looks directly at Nadel's lens, staring the camera down. His hands rest in his lap. Armed with this controlled, quietly seething countenance, he invites viewers to tally what his stint in the program has left him: sparse possessions and the guarantee that he will not achieve economic or social mobility. His time in the United States, it seems, has been fruitless and draining. Through the photograph, the bracero objects to his dependency, the program's abuses, and capitalism's reliance on migrants' prolonged, repeated, and ill-compensated sojourns as transnational dependent laborers. He thus opposes and resists capitalism's persistent reproduction of inequality.

Recently, US institutions and ex-braceros have recirculated Nadel's images as they grapple with the program's legacy.[71] Nadel's documentary ethos reverberates in the work of photographers like Philip Decker, who captured undocumented Mexican citrus pickers in 1980s Arizona.[72] Like Nadel's, Decker's camera enables migrants to critique US capitalism's enduring exploitation of racialized, dependent workers.

Capturing Capitalism at Work

Photography played a double-edged role in constructing the bracero experience. In *Look*, *Life*, and *Today's Health*, images applauded Mexicans' transformation into model patriarchs, satisfied workers, and consumers. Photographic "evidence" thus reproduced capitalism and repressed the systemic exploitation-expropriation of a racialized dependent workforce. As they voice their grievances through Nadel's photographs, braceros resist the commodification of their work, protest the expropriation of their labor-power, and contest persistent inequality. These images critique both a particular iteration of US industry's abuse of Latin American workers and capitalism's broader exploitation of racialized, dependent laboring subjects. Critically, Nadel's images demonstrate photography's capacity to serve as a space in which workers assert themselves as resistant political subjects. Such quotidian images of laboring lives are rich portals through which historians can access workers' subtle—yet powerful—challenges to regimes that exploit and expropriate their labor.

Erica Toffoli is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Toronto. She is the editor of *Revolution and Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: A Special Research and Teaching Collection of The Americas.* Her work is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the American Historical Association.

Notes

My thanks to Kevin Coleman, Daniel James, Jayeeta Sharma, Russell Kazal, Donna Gabaccia, Susan Colbourn, Allison Graham, and the two peer reviewers, whose insightful comments and suggestions helped me greatly in writing this article.

1. Nadel, "Two Worlds" (hereafter TW), 143. Richard Steven Street is the first scholar to bring Nadel's work to light. In his definitive history of California farmworker photography, Street discusses Nadel's photographic record of braceros' mistreatment. Street's compelling readings of photographs documenting braceros being inspected and sprayed with DDT likens these images to those of prisoners in Nazi camps. See Street, *Everyone Had Cameras,* 372–76. In a 2007 research report on Nadel's complete archive—his entire "photo essay"—Street suggests that these images prompt consideration of an "agricultural system that rests" largely "on an imported peasantry." See Street, "Leonard Nadel's Photo Essay," 155.
2. Theisen, "New Deal," 55.
3. See Cohen, *Braceros*, on braceros' transnational subjectivities, and Gamboa, *Bracero Railroaders*. Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, demonstrates oral history's importance for understanding braceros' complex subjectivities and acts of "defiance."
4. Migrant Labor Agreement of 1951, Pub. L. No. 78, 82 Stat. TK (1951), 78, 119.65 Stat. 119 (S. 984).
5. Hahamovitch, "Slavery's Stale Soil," 229–30.
6. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 98–99, 129.
7. Fraser, "Expropriation and Exploitation," 170–75.
8. Cohen, *Braceros*, 23, 104, 145.
9. See Cohen, *Braceros*, 123, and Gamboa, *Bracero Railroaders*, 145, on braceros' isolated conditions.
10. Benjamin, "Baudelaire," 175.
11. Mraz and Storey, *Uprooted*; Rosas, *Abrazando.*
12. Street, *Everyone,* 372–76.
13. Guidotti-Hernández, "Bracero Lives," 275, 277.
14. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 91.
15. Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 85–136, 143, 187–216.
16. Coleman, *Garden of Eden*, and "Photographs of a Prayer," 490–92.
17. See Tagg, *Burden*, on the link between "regimes" of power and sense; Tagg, *Disciplinary Frame*, on how photography's "realist strategies" support modes of governance; Sekula, "Body and the Archive," 343–88, on photography's "instrumental" and "repressive" potential. The implications of Sekula's attention to context—images' capacity to be transplanted and made to "utter" differently—are addressed below.
18. Tagg, *Disciplinary Frame*, 54.
19. Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*, 76–82; see Ruiz, *Treasure House*, for images' role in the cultural politics of US empire.
20. Fox, *Fence and River*, 85.
21. See Pegler-Gordon, *Sight of America*, on Mexican migrants' identity photographs, and Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*, on images that constructed Mexicans as criminal, diseased aliens.

22. Cameron, *Looking for America*, 3.
23. Brown, *Corporate Eye*, 120, 217–19; Nye, *Image Worlds*.
24. Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor*, 6.
25. Sekula, "Reading an Archive," 443–44, 452.
26. Lee, *Shoemaker's Story*, 240–41.
27. Campt, *Image Matters*, 7, 113–14.
28. Campt, *Listening*, 5, 31.
29. Moser, "Historical Negatives," 237–39.
30. Dean, "Wetbacks."
31. Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 7.
32. Cohen, *Braceros*, 50–52.
33. Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 6–7, 301.
34. US Congress, *Mexican Farm Labor*, 258.
35. *New York Times*, "12 Mexicans."
36. Wilding, Inc., Council of California Growers, *Why Braceros?*
37. Kozol, "*Life*'s Family Ideal," in Cameron, *Looking for America*, 202–6.
38. Wainwright, *Great Magazine*, 214.
39. *Life*, "Bulge," 27–28.
40. Ibid., 26. See Ruiz on the roots of the idea that Mexicans were suited to labor, and how photography implied that US industry could turn Mexicans into productive, modern workers.
41. Cho, "Anticipating Citizenship," in Brown and Phu, *Feeling Photography.*
42. Gorman, "Feed America," 25–26.
43. Theisen, *Making Pictures*, 6. Theisen's daughter, Roxann Livingston, recalls that he collaborated with editors to select photo-essays' images. Roxann Livingston, pers. comm. with the author, June 2016.
44. Theisen, "New Deal," 56.
45. Street, *Everyone*, 373.
46. Galarza, *Strangers*, 54–55, 70–71.
47. Bureau of Employment Security, "Report," 2–9.
48. Street, *Everyone*, 373–75; Nadel, "Foundations," 5.
49. Galarza to Nadel, September 26, 1956; Nadel to Strage, November 5, 1956; Nadel to Rice, April 16, 1957, Leonard Nadel Photographs and Scrapbooks (hereafter LNPS), Box 10, Folder 1; Street, *Everyone*, 375.
50. See Rivera, "Jubilee," 77–83, on *Jubilee*'s mission.
51. Nadel to Strage, December 6, 1956, LNPS. Nadel approved the photo-essays' layout. He credited the magazines with writing the text, telling *Jubilee* that he was "pleased with the [. . .] story *you* did." Nadel to Rice, April 16, 1957, LNPS. Emphasis added.
52. Images 16.01–02, 16.43–44, 21.29–30, 23.20–23, 44.25–30, LNPS, digitized in Kenneth E. Behring Center, "Collections." All image numbers begin with 2004.0138. I cite each image's unique four-digit number.
53. Nadel to Strage, May 17, 1957, LNPS, Box 10, Folder 1.
54. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 85–87.
55. Nadel, "National Scandal" (hereafter NS), 39–42; TW, 145.
56. Images 07.01–12, 04.01–04, 03.41–43, 19.27–34, 23.30–31, LNPS.
57. NS, 42.
58. Brown and Phu, *Feeling Photography*, 11–15.
59. See Raeburn, *Staggering Revolution*, on FSA photography.
60. NS, 37.

61. NS, 41; TW, 145.
62. TW, 145.
63. NS, 41.
64. Original caption to Image 18.03 in the Bracero History Archive. Nadel, *Bracero Picks*.
65. NS, 42; TW, 146.
66. TW, 144.
67. NS, 42.
68. Ibid., 40; NS, 43.
69. Agee and Evans, *Famous Men,* front matter.
70. NS, 43.
71. Nadel's images anchor the National Museum of American History's *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program*, which debuted in 2009. Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 174–77, traces the exhibit's focus on heteronormative histories that further divisions between braceros and undocumented migrants. Advocacy groups, like the Alianza de Ex-Braceros, use Nadel's images to publicize the program's human rights violations.
72. Decker, "'Illegal Alien.'"

References

Agee, James, and Walker Evans. 1941. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* Boston: Houghton.
Azoulay, Ariella. 2008. *Civil Contract of Photography.* New York: Zone Books.
Barthes, Roland. 1980. *Camera Lucida.* New York: Hill and Wang.
Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "Motifs in Baudelaire." In *Illuminations.* New York: Schocken.
Brown, Elspeth. 2005. *The Corporate Eye.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Brown, Elspeth, and Thy Phu. 2014. *Feeling Photography.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Bureau of Employment Security. 1956. "A Report on 'Strangers' In Our Fields." Records Relating to the Mexican Labor ("Bracero") Program, 1950–1964. General Records of the Department of Labor. National Archives and Records Administration. research.archives.gov/description/296744.
Cameron, Ardis. 2005. *Looking for America.* Malden, MA: Blackwell.
Campt, Tina. 2012. *Image Matters.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Campt, Tina. 2017. *Listening to Images.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Cohen, Deborah. 2011. *Braceros.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Coleman, Kevin. 2015. "Photographs of a Prayer: The (Neglected) Visual Archive and Latin American Labor History." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 95, no. 3: 459–92.
Coleman, Kevin. 2016. *A Camera in the Garden of Eden.* Austin: University of Texas Press.
Dabakis, Melissa. 1999. *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture.* New York: Cambridge University Press.
Dean, Loomis. 1951. "Wetbacks Swarm In." *Life*, May 21.
Decker, Philip. 1986. "Mexican 'Illegal Alien' Commute." *Migration World* 14, no. 3.
Deverell, William. 2004. *Whitewashed Adobe.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Fox, Claire. 1999. *The Fence and the River.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Fraser, Nancy. 2016. "Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson." *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1: 163–78.
Galarza, Ernesto. 1956. *Strangers in Our Fields.* Washington, DC: United States Section, Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee.
Gamboa, Erasmo. 2016. *Bracero Railroaders.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Gorman, Thomas. 1957. "They Help Feed America." *Today's Health,* October, 24–27.
Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole. 2013. "Bracero Lives and the Lack of Idleness in 'Free Time.'" *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2: 275–85.

Hahamovitch, Cindy. 2015. "Slavery's Stale Soil." In *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism,* edited by Daniel Bender and Jana Lipman, 227–63. New York: New York University Press.
Kenneth E. Behring Center. 2018. "Collections." americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object-groups (accessed November 2017).
Lee, Anthony. 2008. *A Shoemaker's Story.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Life. 1954. "Bulge of Braceros." February 15.
Loza, Mireya. 2016. *Defiant Braceros.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Mitchell, W. J. T. 1994. *Picture Theory.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Mraz, John. 2009. *Looking for Mexico.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Mraz, John, and Jaime Vélez Storey. 1996. *Uprooted: Braceros in the Hermanos Mayo Lens.* Houston: Arte Público Press.
Nadel, Leonard. Photographs and Scrapbooks. Archives Center. National Museum of American History. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
Nadel, Leonard. 1956. *A Bracero Picks up a Load of Cotton near McAllen, Texas* (photograph). In Bracero History Archive, Item #1789, braceroarchive.org/items/show/1789 (accessed October 17, 2017).
Nadel, Leonard. 1957. "Between Two Worlds." *Pageant*, April, 140–47.
Nadel, Leonard. 1957. "Foundations." *Infinity,* August, 4–5.
Nadel, Leonard. 1957. "National Scandal." *Jubilee,* April, 36–43.
New York Times. 1958. "12 Mexicans Killed." June 18.
Ngai, Mae. 2004. *Impossible Subjects.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Nye, David. 1985. *Image Worlds.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Pegler-Gordon, Anna. 2009. *In Sight of America.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Raeburn, John. 2006. *A Staggering Revolution.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rivera, Mary Anne. 2007. "Jubilee: A Magazine of the Church and Her People: Toward a Vatican II Ecclesiology." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 10, no. 4: 77–103.
Rosas, Ana. 2014. *Abrazando el Espíritu.* Oakland: University of California Press.
Ruiz, Jason. 2014. *Americans in the Treasure House.* Austin: University of Texas Press.
Sekula, Allan. 1989. "Body and the Archive." In *Contest of Meaning,* edited by Richard Bolton, 343–89. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Sekula, Allan. 2003. "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital." In *The Photography Reader,* edited by Liz Wells, 443–52. London: Routledge.
Smith, Shawn, and Sharon Sliwinksi. 2017. *Photography and the Optical Unconscious.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Street, Richard. 2007. "Leonard Nadel's Photo Essay on Bracero Laborers in California." *Center 27: Record of Activities and Research Reports*, June 2006–May 2007: 153–55.
Street, Richard. 2008. *Everyone Had Cameras.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Tagg, John. 1988. *Burden of Representation.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Tagg, John. 2009. *Disciplinary Frame.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Theisen, Earl. 1947. *Making Your Pictures Interesting.* Chicago: Ziff-Davis.
Theisen, Earl. 1959. "New Deal for the Mexican Worker." *Look,* September, 54–56.
US Congress. 1955. *Mexican Farm Labor.* 84 Cong., 1 sess. Washington, DC.
Wainwright, Loudon. 1986. *Great American Magazine.* New York: Knopf.
Wexler, Laura. 2000. *Tender Violence.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Wilding-Butler Division of Wilding, Inc., Council of California Growers. 1959. *Why Braceros?* Prelinger Archives. archive.org/details/WhyBrace1959 (accessed April 14, 2014).