

# UC Santa Barbara

## Journal of Transnational American Studies

### Title

Excerpt from *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4bd8j8pg>

### Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 3(1)

### Author

Cohen, Deborah

### Publication Date

2011-03-15

### DOI

10.5070/T831007003

Peer reviewed

Excerpted from Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Published with the permission of University of North Carolina Press (<http://uncpress.unc.edu/>).

## INTRODUCTION

"I lived with many other men, in a barracks," Álvaro García told me as he snipped the hair of a young man. He was, as always, holding court in the local barbershop he owned in a pueblo, a small village, in the central part of the Mexican state of Durango. "I had never done that—lived with other men before—only with my family." The barbershop served as a central meeting place for adult men of the small town and thus was where I spent most afternoons during my fieldwork. It was the summer of 1995. As Don Álvaro, then in his late sixties, recounted his tale, an audience of several other men seated with me on a low wooden bench or poised in the doorway, all of the same age, nodded in agreement.<sup>1</sup> This man of a complicated geography and social positioning was blessed with salt-and-pepper hair and an engaging smile, which he flashed at unexpected moments. "I remember lying in bed at night," he continued, "right before the lights went out, and listening... After we had been there awhile, after we had gotten paid and bought radios, you'd hear lots of music... You'd hear television, a phonograph, too; men bought those things. I brought back one that used batteries... a small one. Someone who went before me brought back one that required electricity when we didn't have electricity... I liked that radio... Only braceros had them. They were progress."<sup>2</sup>

Don Álvaro had gone north as part of the bracero program, the unofficial name for a series of agreements between Mexico and the United States that began in 1942, during World War II, and lasted till 1964. He came as part of a program that brought Mexican men to the United States for temporary work in agricultural fields and then sent them home again.<sup>3</sup> In our many conversations, Don Álvaro taught me much about what it meant to be a bracero, as program participants were called. He spoke of the electricity that his pueblo did not have when he migrated, of the consumer

goods that his small wages bought, and of the music that added to the cacophony of his U.S. labor camp barracks. He spoke of modern technological innovations and the all-around progress that he sought. Between long days in the field and nights in crowded barracks, Don Álvaro learned to cut hair and started to practice this trade. Upon his return, he used the money he had saved to buy a few more head of cattle, invest in his land, and open the community's first barbershop. By the time I met him, he owned a tractor and more land, which he and hired laborers worked a few mornings a week; the barbershop was doing a brisk, if often unpaid, business. Though far from wealthy, Don Álvaro was now one of the pueblo's most influential men. He had left his country a poor farmer and returned to become a small business owner and prominent local citizen.

Don Álvaro's upward mobility was not unique, for the bracero program indeed yielded economic benefits for many of its nearly two million participants though most remained migrant laborers, many continued to migrate, and few shifted to making an entrepreneurial living.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, his economic upturn was understood as a by-product of the modernization that the program was designed to extend to all braceros: an individual modernization figured as key to Mexico's national transformation. The story that Don Álvaro recounts also has a deep U.S. resonance. It parallels a grand narrative of opportunity, progress, and self-refashioning that newly arrived immigrants have been told and which some, in turn, have recited about the promise of their nation. While this narrative shaped public expectations for the program, its actual history is not a simple account of progress. Rather, the bracero program spurred a broad and complicated remaking of the relationships between citizen and nation, state and world, which did not mirror the trajectory from premodern to modern that U.S. and Mexican program architects imagined for the men who would travel northward. Stories such as Don Álvaro's speak to this dissonance between expectations held by principal parties and the actual transformations that these actors would undergo.

These expectations, and the struggles to realize them, are a lens onto the profound transformations that occurred. The Bracero program involved negotiations between many influential parties, such as U.S. and Mexican government officials, and U.S. growers and labor activists. Yet

those actors ostensibly lowest on the economic ladder—the labor migrants themselves who traveled from their communities in Mexico to the American agricultural fields and back—also shaped the end results of the program. When a man (the program excluded women) applied to migrate, he began a crossing that would bring him into contact with not only various Mexican state representatives but also the program's other U.S. critical actors: domestic farm workers, agricultural labor union leaders and rank and file, growers and their foremen, shopkeepers, tavern owners, and Catholic priests.

This is not a story of braceros' transformations alone, however. The interactions, negotiations, and struggles between critical program actors produced a particular transnational system and space. Transnational, as used here, connotes a mutually constitutive process, not a relationship that merely extends its roots or ties beyond the nation.<sup>5</sup> Nor am I suggesting that braceros were the only transnational actors. Although many of these actors—in particular, state agents, growers, and U.S. domestic farmworkers—appear to be securely and fully positioned within a single national context, the positions and subjectivities of all these actors were nevertheless negotiated vis-à-vis ideologies, experiences, social categories, and practices that mapped this transnational world.

Yet migrants were the ones who came to be seen as transnational. The process through which braceros became transnational offers a lens onto the complexity of this transnational world and how this system operated at its center and its seams. This privileging of braceros' transformations, then, problematizes the conventional ways and arenas in which the effects of migration and relations between nations have been seen. Even though the bracero program formally ended over forty years ago, the U.S.-Mexican economy remains predicated upon ongoing labor migration built on the ties and knowledge from this earlier period. Today's migrants are courted by U.S. growers (and a host of other businesses) even as they are objects of derision and nationalist fears, and the vexed focus of state policymakers and labor organizers.<sup>6</sup> The ways braceros inhabited political and social borders between, beyond, and in relation to the nation reveals how these nation-states and their attendant actors were mutually constituted, largely through a language of the modern.

The heated battles over labor migration culminated with a showdown at the United Nations. I suggest that this transnational arena—which I talk about as the border—and those actors most associated with it—the braceros—became the focus for nationalist, often xenophobic, anxieties, because many of those involved actors were deeply invested in a worldview for which the transnational constituted a dire threat. Core to this worldview is the belief in, and accompanying narrative of, progress and opportunity. Its privileged agent was the citizen of one sovereign nation-state that engaged in fraternal—that is, equal—relations with other sovereign nation-states. The promise of progress lay at the heart of the "modern," the then broadly accepted term for an ideological package that figured progress, democracy, and technological and scientific advancement as unquestionable goals. Modernization theory, the theory of the process by which nations and peoples achieved the modern, defeated Eugenicist models of national development that strictly correlated the modern with the whiteness of a nation's citizenry. While modernization theory never explicitly denied, a priori, the ability to achieve the modern or reap its benefits to any nation or people, *the modern* (like nonmodern or its variants, traditional or primitive) carried lingering overtones of gender and race from early eugenicist models—linked to whiteness and maleness as the standard, with the nonmodern associated with the feminine and nonwhite. Understandings of the modern not only shaped U.S. and Mexican expectations for the program and the scope of government policies; they also acted as fodder for the profound transformations—full of fits, starts, and dead ends—that program participants underwent. The modern anchored entrenched alliances between some program actors (U.S. growers and the state; and the U.S and Mexican states), framed the questioning and realignment of others (braceros and the Mexican state), and severed the hopes of solidarity between still others (braceros and domestic farmworkers). While all stakeholders were transformed through the program, braceros alone came to be seen as problematically and perpetually transnational. Examining the social world framed by the modern and produced in the negotiation of these multiple relationships makes vivid issues of national identity, exploitation, the rise of consumer cultures, development, and gendered class and race formation.

I am not suggesting that the program's importance comes from the modernization of bracero workers—others before me have noted this unintended result for earlier migration.<sup>7</sup> Nor am I implying that this was the first moment in which U.S. foreign policy promoted the modernization of those countries deemed backward and primitive, for a related logic undergirded policies from the Monroe Doctrine to the then-reigning Good Neighbor Policy. Nor was this the only time that the Mexican government recognized migration's modernizing possibilities: a policy in the mid-1870s, grounded in eugenicist beliefs, offered land to southern European immigrants, seen as white and more advanced than rural Mexicans, and in the 1920s and 1930s bureaucrats against used land offers, this time to lure U.S.-resident Mexicans and their U.S.-acquired skills back home. While these migration policies courted those *already* modern, the bracero program sought to transform the backward into the modern through migration. Those deemed ready for modernization were to be sent to the quintessential place of the modern (the United States), transformed, and returned home. That is, the program not only had modernization as an explicit goal and not an incidental outcome, which *both* state signatories supported; this modernization was built around human transformation through migration. Ironically, then, a program that coincided with the heyday of the nation-state as a global organizing principle produced not just national actors, but transnational ones.

Migrants were the intended subjects of transformation, yet all involved were transformed. Braceros, however, would come to be seen as problematically and perpetually transnational, and they disproportionately bore the costs of this system. These men left their homes as peasants, members of communal landholding projects (*ejidatarios*), sons of revolutionary soldiers, urban factory laborers, paid farmhands, and Mexicans; came into contact with growers, foremen, priests, domestic farmhands, and U.S. and Mexican state agents; and returned as transnational subjects and part of a larger transnational world.<sup>8</sup> By transnational subject, I refer to a particular kind of political and social person with ties to, claims on, or self-understanding beyond the nation.<sup>9</sup> Such social/political persons recognize themselves as participants in multiple national communities, albeit not equally or in the same way, as well as in a community that transcends the nation. This occurs despite the fact that

national communities do not always recognize such persons as fully either.<sup>10</sup> In short, a transnational subject is both national *and* supranational; s/he simultaneously exceeds or is misaligned with these affective political bodies because of multiple border crossings.

While braceros are key in making this transnational world visible, it would be a mistake to presume that they always started as fully national subjects. The nation was not the only, or even the strongest, imagined community in play for men who sought to migrate. Often their vibrant connections were familial, local, sometimes regional, and even transnational, since many already had work experience and family north of the border. Part of migrants' transformation, then, was into national subjects—indeed, in the United States braceros were literally termed "nationals." Their often fragile national connections were due, in part, to the timing of the program, which began during an explicit moment of Mexican nation building. 1942, the year of the program's initiation, was only two and a half decades distant from the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) that had torn apart principal state institutions and devastated poor communities in many parts of the country.<sup>11</sup> It had wrenched the president, state officials, and former oligarchs from elite positions, as those who had demonstrated military prowess and bravery established a new state structure. Because new elites were linked to different industries, regions of the country, and competing revolutionary factions with distinct priorities, the revolutionary state's orientation changed radically over time.

Crucial in this reorientation was who could exert pressure on the state and make demands for national inclusion. Since the revolution was animated by calls for land, liberty, and better lives, and was carried forward through the efforts of peasants and the poor, officials were beholden to this mobilized constituency, even as they sought to bring these citizens into the national sphere in a way that diminished their organization and power. To ground the nation-state project designed in the revolution's aftermath, bureaucrats used a collectivist language, one that contrasted, at times explicitly, with the often individualist rhetoric of the United States. That is, Mexican officials sought to make citizens national in a particular mold.

Fundamental to making braceros national was making them modern. President Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-1946), like the earlier Mexican elites and government officials who had faulted peasants for the country's backwardness, imagined that the bracero program would transform the country's poor rural men into modern national subjects.<sup>12</sup> Mexican bureaucrats contended—and the California legislature would later agree—that, in the United States, braceros would learn modern techniques and absorb a highly efficient work ethic.<sup>13</sup> Armed with such knowledge and a pot of money from the program's mandated saving plan, these now-modernized men would put this knowledge into practice and transform unproductive Mexican land into modernized farms. As we will see, the conditions under which braceros labored too often challenged any depiction of the United States as modern, or the program as a vehicle for modernization. Still, these unmodern conditions did not shake the faith that Mexican or U.S. state actors had in this work as modernizing or in the rewards that a democratic capitalist modernization would yield.<sup>14</sup> Braceros would come to share state officials' belief in the value of the modern, often using the modern to maneuver within a constrained set of options.<sup>15</sup> The modern, then, undergirded the transnational world that the program tapped into and fostered.

The negotiation of this world involved complex interactions between braceros and the array of program principals. Braceros, whether in California fields or their home state of Durango, searched for respect for their work and for themselves in the United States, but faced *a priori* obstacles that denied them this respect. They demanded the national belonging promised by the Mexican state in both its overarching revolutionary agenda and at men's induction into the program. In short, braceros simultaneously became racially marked aliens in the United States, Mexican citizens, workers, and transnational subjects as they moved and interacted within and between U.S. and Mexican national spaces.<sup>16</sup>

A broadly cultural approach to questions of state-to-state relations, the political economy of labor migration, and the intensification of large-scale corporate agriculture shows these issues to be rooted in the postwar period and to be the foundation for current concerns of globalization and



transnational politics. By focusing on state and global level actors and processes while prioritizing braceros' transformations, we see the economic practices that various Mexican officials sought to instill in migrants, along with the kinds of attachments deemed essential to transform braceros into proper citizens. At the same time, large agriculturalists petitioned for support from the U.S. state, solidifying a state-grower alliance. This alliance shaped the program's diplomatic context and the resulting relationship between Mexico and the United States. Struggles over such multiple and often competing agendas and political projects, which every all significant protagonist brought to the program, shaped the ensuing transformations.

This struggle over competing projects produced a specifically transnational subjectivity, along with a transnational space from which braceros tried to and did assert claims on each state. Here I draw upon three senses of the term "trans": trans as going beyond, which denaturalizes the nation; trans as relational, made in the in-between; and trans as change, as in the subject position formed and in play between nations and through crossing borders. Although the program made braceros protagonists of the Mexican nation, even as in the United States they continued to be excluded from the status of modern, the ideological borders between Mexico and the United States, and thus of the nation-states themselves, were mutually constituted. The nation-state was a transnationally, not just nationally, contingent and ongoing project.

The modern, then, was the ultimate border that braceros had to cross. Men's attempts to cross it produced new, distinctly bracero subjectivities, which were set in dialog with state functionaries, local officials, and community and family members and fostered different claims on the nation. Thus, the process of becoming foreigners in one country and new kinds of citizens vis-à-vis the other made them transnational subjects: tied to these nation-states and yet not fully or uncomplicatedly of either. For the United States, Mexico, and the braceros themselves, the program put into play questions of who was modern, what the modern looked like, and who could make these determinations. In short, through relationships with other program stakeholders, braceros became

simultaneously national, alien, transnational, and modern, a process with important implications on nation-state formation.

...

Who were these men? Why did they want to migrate? How did they understand the complexities of their journeys northward? How, in turn, did their complex experiences shape understandings of themselves, of Mexico, of the United States, and of the transnational world of the program? The world that I construct here, with its particular social and spatial arrangements, draws for evidence on my almost four years of ethnographic fieldwork spread out across two Durango pueblos, the city of Durango, and the Chicago neighborhood home to The Eatery, a local restaurant (like most in the city) with a large Mexican immigrant workforce, and my analysis of a range of other primary and secondary historical sources (government documents, newspapers, songs, rituals, papers of U.S. and Mexican activists, testimonies written by growers, as well as research by political scientists, economists, and historians). I also conducted over thirty interviews with former braceros (and several Mexican state officials) to answer these questions.

When I first met Álvaro García, the barbershop owner whose story opens this chapter, and others residents of the small Durango town of Santa Angélica, they asked me what I was doing in there—even though they knew I was friends with a lawyer whose family lived in the pueblo and owned a small general store. After all, I was not family to anyone, and Santa Angélica is far off the tourist path. I briefed them about my research on the bracero program and how neither the Mexican nor United States governments had adequately recognized the value of their work. The Mexican government, I said, denied both the extent and importance of migration, while in the United States, Mexican migration was framed in terms of illegality and the loss of jobs for American workers. I spoke of how I wanted to publicize the contributions that they, as former braceros, had made to the economic, social, political, and cultural lives of both countries.

As people learned of my project, my presence alone would shift the barbershop conversations to recollections of journeys or memories associated with migration. Men would talk

amongst themselves about these experiences, while I sat and listened. I avoided asking specific questions or guiding the discussion, although frequently I requested additional explanation. Still, the resulting discussion would move in a direction more of their making than of mine and in ways that I could never have predicted. I was able to interact with the men over a long period of time and to develop deeper friendships with many, as well as providing me an in to other pueblo events.

These open-ended barbershop conversations stands in stark contrast with the interviews I conducted in San Andrés, the other Durango community I studied. Again, I entered the community through a contact (in this case, through Roberto, a colleague at the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas [Institute for Historical Investigations] of the Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango [University Juárez of the state of Durango]), where I was affiliated. During my fieldwork in 1995–1996, I stayed at his in-laws' house there. In their late seventies and unable to maneuver the pueblo's unpaved streets, they asked a neighbor, Guillermo, to help me. This young married man spent his mornings baking bread and pastries and his afternoons escorting me around the village.

Strolling the rocky streets of San Andrés during my first visit, Roberto and I came across a group of older men hanging out on a street corner. We walked over; Roberto introduced me, saying that I was interested in talking to those who had been braceros. I chatted with each of them individually for a few minutes and jotted down their names. I told them that I would return the following week and asked if I could talk to them at greater length. One man on the corner that afternoon was Mauricio Herrera, then almost completely blind, who had first migrated during the mid-forties. During a subsequent conversation at his house he would mimic the bodily motion required to pick cotton, which I describe in chapter 5 as I analyze how this arduous work contributed to the creation of a transnational subjectivity. I also met Antonio Ramírez and Luis Camarena, both in their mid-seventies, and Don Antonio, a musician, who told me that he had been asked to play the guitar and sing at a prison while abroad. Don Luis, bequeathed a broad and now deeply wrinkled face, talked about the troubles he had with Mexican border guards when he returned. As I elaborate

in chapter 7, the whole of my conversation with him focused on those incidents, so fundamental to his understanding of the program.

San Andrés had no singular meeting place akin to the barbershop, so my escort Guillermo and I went from house to house to talk to former braceros. During my second visit, we compiled a basic list of all the residents who had migrated during the program—about forty—and sought to interview each in his home. At the start of these interviews I gave the same vague synopsis of why I was there and tried to let the men just talk about their experiences. Yet the act of interviewing individual men in their homes a single time, with family members roaming about, meant that I asked more direct questions and obtained information that was different from that I gained in Santa Angélica. Whereas the barbershop generated extensive conversations about the braceros' various experiences, to which I usually remained peripheral, here the men talked only to me...or rather, to Guillermo, since the conversation was largely directed at him. These in-home interviews focused on details about the program and the work routine: how much money they had made, when they went and with whom, which crops they hoped to or hate to pick. With a few notable exceptions, which I attribute to the deeper relationship some had with Guillermo, men were less forthcoming with stories not directly connected with work, such as how they spent their time outside of work or the moments of confusion they faced.

At first I was disappointed in what these men were telling me. Their precise details did not draw me in as much as the lengthy barbershop conversations did. Plus, because I spoke with them only once, I did not get to know them as I did the men of the barbershop. However, as I later reflected on how each group of men portrayed their experiences and what they each considered important, I realized that their portrayals, alongside my other evidence, revealed the nuances of a transnational world and of braceros as its critical constituents.

I did not recognize the complexity of this transnational work until I returned to Chicago and poured over my fieldnotes and documents. Former braceros expressed satisfaction at having had the chance to work in the United States and refused to see themselves as victims or martyrs. They

portrayed themselves instead as actors: they fought for their rights (however this term is defined) and made their world, an attitude captured with equal clarity in the archival materials. Document after historical document showed the strategies that men used to push their grievances and the lengths to which men went to have them favorably resolved. These men, labeled passive and docile by U.S. agriculturalists (and even Mexican American workers), demanded that Mexican consular officials, U.S. state employees, and growers take them and their demands seriously. Moreover, the attitude of ex-braceros when describing experiences suggests that they saw their participation as important—not just in own lives, but in the resulting economic and social configuration of Mexico and the United States. They wanted recognition for their important contribution. In the end, I began to see their words and my analysis of literary texts, state records, newspaper articles, letters from union activists, and the like, as a lens onto social hierarchies and relationships at work both within the United States *and* Mexico, and to a world comprised of experiences unique and momentous, and dull and monotonous. This book has been shaped by the very ways that migrants depicted and understood their experiences, the program, and its legacies, and their refusal to be seen as victims.

\* \* \*

Braceros' interactions with other critical program actors, such as growers, U.S. union leaders and rank and file, religious leaders, and state actors from both countries, shaped a particular social world. The first of this book's three parts, "Producing Transnational Subjects," exposes the transnational connections and ideological underpinnings of all principal actors involved in the program—bureaucrats for the two states, the U.S. growers, and the braceros. These shaped the expectations of individuals and groups, and those that formed the foundation of the program itself. Chapter 1, "Agriculture, State Expectations, and the Configuration of Citizenship," analyzes the expectations that U.S. and Mexican state actors had for the program. Understandings of the modern, grounded in prior transnational economic, social, and political relationships and the realignments then underway, configured these expectations. Key ideological components embraced by state agents undergirded the very design and mission of the program, a mission communicated to the men who

sought to migrate and larger domestic audiences. Chapter 2, "Narrating Class and Nation: Agribusiness and the Construction of Grower Narratives," turns to growers' expectations for the program and about their farm hands, domestic and foreign. These expectations were conditioned by longstanding narrative of the small, family farmer as bulwark of Jeffersonian democracy, a narrative that was recast as one about modern businessmen and selectively used during the program to coincide with the prominent place that the entire nation placed on all things modern. This dual narrative and its necessitated juggling show the transnational grounding of seemingly nation-based claims, which enabled the formation of elite growers as a class. Chapter 3, "Manhood, the Lure of Migration, and Contestations of the Modern," explores the hopes of aspiring and actual migrants, specifically, the masculinist desire to be modern and its imagined benefits. This desire was a site of braceros' negotiation with the Mexican state over the gendered form for the nation's modern citizen. Various actors each saw something at stake in the program and sought to shape it correspondingly, drawing on a specific set of nationally and transnationally resonant symbols.

Part 2, "Bracero Agency and Emergent Subjectivities," examines the emergence of a particular transnational subjectivity that occurred as migrants struggled to realize their migration expectations. These moments were productive of a particular transnational subjectivity and world. Chapter 4, "Rites of Movement, Technologies of Power: Making Migrants Modern from Home to the Border," analyzes the bracero selection process as a set of moments in which men recognized, engaged, accommodated, and resisted state demands that they act like the backward rural men they were supposed to be, a position that would enable their modern transformation. The program was set up to function as a linear path moving men from backward to modern, but men attempted to subvert its function in multiple ways or to use it to their benefit. The next chapter, "With Hunched Back and On Bended Knee: Race, Work, and the Modern North of the Border," uses men's living, working, and leisure conditions to analyze how these challenged what men understood to be the point of the program and the ways they rebutted those challenges. The gendering and realignment of certain connections, such as class and nation, came to the forefront, while more localized others took

backstage. Chapter 6, "Strikes against Solidarity: Containing Domestic Farmworkers' Agency," picks up on the previous chapter's engagement with class. Domestic farmworkers refused to align themselves with braceros as a class, but instead retrenched around national difference, itself racialized. Given the preemptive closing off of this potential bracero–domestic farmworker alliance, we can understand why other possible bracero claims, such as that on the nation, became more salient. This leads into the next chapter, "The Border of Belonging, the Border of Foreignness: Patriarchy, the Modern, and Making Transnational Mexicanness." Men went to great lengths to claim their place in the Mexican nation, anchored in their newly acquired position as modern subjects. Braceros' encounters with Mexican border guards and others, such as family and friends, once they returned home reveal the realms that men sought to modernize and for which they sought recognition as modern citizens, as well as those spaces off limits from this modernizing transformation—the domestic. Men struggled to accomplish their own particular goals for the program, struggles that opened up certain alignments and closed off others in ways that brought about a transnational subjectivity.

Part 3, "The Convergence of Elite Alliances," shows the impact of braceros' emergent subjectivities, how men's actions and demands on both states and nations strained and reconfigured elite alliances. Its sole chapter, "Tipping the Negotiating Hand: State-to-State Struggle and the Impact of Migrant Agency," draws back to expose the ways that bracero transformations affected the wider terrain of the bracero program, the relationship between the United States and Mexico, and larger global political, economic, and social arrangement. While program rules were officially dictated by states and elite actors in ways that set the context for braceros' struggles, braceros' actions also constrained the hands of actors from both states and forced these actors to take braceros' needs seriously, even as it also shows the limits to braceros' agency. Taken together, we see the formation of this transnational world.

The book ends by revisiting the opportunity-versus-exploitation dichotomy, strains of which repeatedly emerged throughout the program and which I have suggested figure our understanding of

braceros' actions, demands, and claims on the states and nations in question and formed the context for their transformation into transnational subjects. This dichotomy not only structures the current U.S. debate over migration and the push to militarize the border, but is a particular response to our general distrust of the transnational subject. That is, the continued demand for unhyphenated Americans, whose fealty to a single nation (and state) is without question, is part of a longer historical unease with this kind of subject, the lingering specter in a nation whose foundational fiction is of immigrants with prior affective (and political) ties. In looking at the legacies of the program and logics of immigration, we can begin to understand how, despite talk of transnationalism, globalization, and the irrelevance of the border, the transnational subject is still very much suspect. This suspicion, and ways of fighting it, is a constituent part of the transnational world in which we now live.



## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

---

<sup>1</sup> Don is a title of respect, social status, honor, and age used in conjunction with a man's first name.

<sup>2</sup> Álvaro García, Santa Angélica, Durango, November 1995. I have used pseudonyms for all individuals I interviewed and the interview locations. Unless indicated, all translations from Spanish are mine; unless otherwise indicated, quotations are taken from interviews I conducted and from my fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> There was a similar shorter program to staff railroads; here I speak only of agriculture.

<sup>4</sup> The number of participants in the program fluctuated from, 38,345 in 1948 to 445,197 in 1956 and 177,736 in 1964. California Assembly Committee on Agriculture, The Bracero Program and Its Aftermath, 4 < [http://are150.ucdavis.edu/class/cid\\_330/are150\\_chapter-2\\_braceros-ca-assem-1965.pdf](http://are150.ucdavis.edu/class/cid_330/are150_chapter-2_braceros-ca-assem-1965.pdf)>. According to García y Griego, the earlier claim of scholars that nearly five million people participated reflects the number of contracts offered and migrant journeys taken. See "The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers.

<sup>5</sup> I expand Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton Blanc's definition. They refer to a single "field" that spans national borders and describe migrants' "interconnected experience" of this field—that is, for them it is a particular space that unbinds the nation-state. I move from one focused on im/migrants' space delinked from nation-state territory to focus on the processes by which the space is produced, processes in which many sets of actors are caught. The term has become extremely popular since their book's publication, now often referring to anything that transcends national borders. In using it to connote a set of processes, I aim to reinvest it with some rhetorical specificity and vigor. See Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton Blanc, Nations Unbound, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Legal scholar Jennifer Gordon, in speaking about the contemporary situation, advocates for bringing migrant guest workers into unions prior to their departure from their home country. This idea was attempted during the bracero program (see ch 6). Gordon, "Transnational Labor Citizenship."

<sup>7</sup> The first prominent scholar to highlight migration's modernizing effects was Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio. In research on earlier migration, he lauded the work habits and ethic these

---

migrants had adopted as benefits for Mexican nation building. See his Mexican Immigration.

<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting that each migrant left Mexico with these subjectivities, only that they were the social, economic, and cultural positions available at this historical moment.

<sup>9</sup> I use *bracero* as a descriptive category and transnational subject as an analytic one. The use of transnational subject engages with Ngai's "impossible subject." Hers denotes a category of lived experience whose subject is denied a recognized position of legitimacy in the United States—the claim on rights that citizenship affords is deemed impossible because of the particular U.S. alignment of race and empire marked on these particular bodies and affixed to their attendant social position. Transnational subject, by contrast, refers to a social position resulting from the demands that actors made on more than one nation, in this case, the United States and Mexico. The exercise of these demands did (and still does) provoke discomfort and anxiety for those with solely national relations. Moreover, while no *bracero* would likely refer to himself as such, many did recognize and tell me of affective connections that went beyond the limits of a single nation-state. Ngai's Impossible Subjects.

<sup>10</sup> I used "him" for readability, although transnational subject is shaped by an array of axes, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, as contingent in each community.

<sup>11</sup> The armed phase of the revolution took place from 1910 to 1920, and state institutions, practices, and national myths were consolidated over the following forty years.

<sup>12</sup> This program logic, however, drew upon a long history dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century in which elites had pondered the question as to why Mexico's development lagged behind that of the United States, France, and England. For a broader discussion of how this pertains to the *bracero* program, see the introduction to "Masculine Sweat, Stoop Labor Modernity." For additional work on Mexico's attempts at modernization, see Overmyer-Velázquez, Visions of the Emerald City; Wells and Joseph, Summer of Discontent; González Navarro, Raza y tierra; Historia moderna de México; Sociedad y cultura; and Vasconcelos, The Cosmic Race. For an earlier vision of how migration could modernize Mexico,

---

which would then be incorporated into official state policy, see Gamio's several books: Forjando patria; Mexican Immigration to the United States; and The Mexican Immigrant. By peasant, I refer to an economic position, relationship, and set of priorities not automatically coextensive with a particular cultural or social worldview.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Anderson, Fields of Bondage, 73.

<sup>14</sup> For a compelling vision of the Cold War as a struggle between two versions of modernization, one democratic and one socialist, see Westad, The Global Cold War.

<sup>15</sup> In his book on state formation in 1940s León, Mexico, Newcomer argues that not only did elites fail to galvanize non-elites onto the modernization bandwagon; they knew of this refusal and it provoked "major concern." This concern, he says, was not to modernity per se; it emerged because modernity was used as a rationale for elite governance. Reconciling Modernity, 17; and personal communication with author.

<sup>16</sup> In advocating this position, I build on the work of scholars who directly question the power of the Mexican state to impose its national vision and ask when it became able to, if it ever did. Some advocate examining the local-state relationship as a way of seeing the unevenness of the model imposed and of the success of the imposition, while others push to do away with the nation as a category. See, for example, Van Young, "Conclusion: The State as Vampire"; Vaughan, Cultural Politics in Revolution; Lomnitz, Deep Mexico; Joseph and Nugent, ed., Everyday Forms of State Formation.