Sí, me afectó: The Women of Bracero Families in Michoacán, 1942-1964

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Si, me afectó:
The Women of Bracero Families in Michoacán, 1942-1964

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Spring 2018
Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my thesis advisor, Danielle Terrazas Williams. Our conversations always renewed my energy and passion for this project, and I am honored to have worked with her. I would also like to thank everyone who has provided insightful feedback throughout the writing process: my readers, Ari Sammartino and Ellen Wurtzel; all of the history honors students; our honors seminar advisor, Leonard Smith; and my mom, Ginny. My passion for the subjects of immigration, labor, and feminism have been encouraged by many people I admire and appreciate: my family, my co-conspirators in Obies for Undocumented Inclusion, Dulce Cedillo, Zurisaday Gutierrez-Avila, and Jesus Martinez; my extended family from Tucson, Adriana Gomez and Holly Apsley; the staff and students of Earlham College Border Studies Program; and many professors at Oberlin College, including Yveline Alexis, María Balandrán-Castillo, Titas Chakraborty, Shelley Lee, Pablo Mitchell, and Gina Pérez.
Michoacán and relevant Bracero contracting centers, map by author.

Michoacán, map by author.
I. Introduction

In 1955, María Guadalupe Salcedo Gudiño’s husband left the pueblo they had grown up in near Jiquilpan, Michoacán to work as a temporary laborer in the United States. María Guadalupe was twenty-five at the time, with five children, and she had been married to her husband for seven years. Like everyone else in the pueblo, they did not own their own land, lived modestly, and often could only afford to buy tortillas. Interviewed at the age of seventy-eight, María Guadalupe recalls her husband’s decision to migrate to the United States:

Interviewer: And what did you think when your husband told you?
María: Well, he said to me, “I’m going to go earn something,” right? “To earn something there to live on. At least to make us a roof for this house,” which was just adobe and straw. And, well, that was the illusion.

Interviewer: And that didn’t scare you, for him to go?
María: No, well, he wanted to go there, so he went.

Over the next decade, her husband made five trips across the border as part of the Bracero Program. At times, María Guadalupe would not hear from him for months. In his absence, she worked in the home and the fields, while her mother took care of their children. When asked if she knew before she married him that life would be so hard, she replies, “Well no, because at that time nobody went to el norte.”

This recollection provokes us to consider the Bracero Program’s impact on the women of Bracero households. As the title of this paper affirms, the lives of women in Bracero families were profoundly affected by the temporary transnational migration of wage-earning men. The “illusion” of the Bracero Program was that their labor in the United States would bring long-lasting financial benefits to their families. However, as María Guadalupe and many other women

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2 “Sí, me afectó” can be translated in several ways. “Yes, it affected me” is the most literal, but the verb afectarse can also be translated as “to be concerned,” “to be moved,” and “to be altered.”
experienced, the men’s participation in the Bracero Program more often destabilized their families in a number of ways. Alongside changes to their daily routines during the absence of Braceros, women were required to contend with their transgressions of gender expectations. As a method of survival, women met the Bracero Program’s disruption of the rural peasant family structure with the reinscription of traditional gender values.

In 1942, the United States and Mexico signed a bilateral agreement to bring Mexican men to work on farms and railroads in the United States. Initially created in response to wartime labor shortages, the Bracero Program would be extended for more than two decades. It formalized existing migration patterns that had been active since the beginning of the twentieth century and also ushered in unprecedented levels of new migration. A great number of Braceros came from the Mexican countryside, where the Bracero Program would have a profound impact on peasant communities. Research on the participants’ experiences show that the Bracero Program involved extensive disciplining and surveillance of Braceros by the United States government and employers. At the border, they were subjected to invasive physical exams and their belongings were fumigated. Once transported to their place of employment, their activities and movements were restricted and monitored.

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3 “Bracero” comes from the word “brazo” (arm) and describes a manual laborer. Though the word was used prior to the creation of the Bracero Program, it came to be associated with labor migration to the United States. I use the capitalized “Bracero” to refer to Mexican men who participated in the Bracero Program specifically.


However, the Bracero Program’s capacity to discipline Mexican bodies went beyond the workers, extending to the families they left behind. The absence of Braceros from their communities of origin required a great deal from women in particular, in both economic and social realms. Examining women’s daily lives in rural Michoacán reveals that during these periods of separation, women were placed at a nexus of social stigmatization and economic instability. This paper will address why they were positioned there, and how they responded. These structures and choices appear through an analysis of the work they did as temporarily single mothers, the networks of dependency and kinship they belonged to, and the role of Catholicism in determining the language they used to describe their experience.

Recently, inroads have been made in understanding the impact of the Bracero Program on Mexico beyond a macroeconomic view. The importance of women and families left behind emerges clearly at this level. This research has tended to examine the experiences of Braceros and their families in specific regions of Mexico, and often relies heavily on oral history sources. It brings the Bracero Program into broader conversations about gender in transnational labor systems and has gathered valuable primary sources attesting to the intimate struggles of both Braceros and their families. Nevertheless, these studies rarely travel far beyond the space of the family and the home to examine how regional conditions and histories informed their experiences. My project’s focus on Michoacán demonstrates that incorporating these regional specificities is critical to understanding women’s experiences with the Bracero Program.

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Historian Stephen R. Niblo writes that throughout the mid-twentieth century “the village remained the center of the world” for the majority of Mexico’s population, and rural insularity meant that each village possessed a distinct “complexity of interpersonal relationships,” formed over generations. These locally-oriented worlds and relationships determined the challenges that women-led households faced in the absence of Braceros and how they formulated responses to such challenges. Within the village, pueblo, or rancho, the household was the integral unit of social and economic life. The Bracero Program’s institutionalization of temporary labor migration would profoundly affect the relationships of both village and household.

In Michoacán, peasant families often experienced increased economic instability during the absence of Braceros. Oral testimonies from the women of Bracero households indicate that they recognized that the ensuing disruption of the peasant family structure came at a social cost that could threaten their family’s livelihood as well. Thus, they took pains to defend the household against claims of loss of patriarchal control. Women survived these periods by taking on nontraditional economic roles but mitigated against the social consequences that followed by reinforcing traditional social values and framing their actions within the boundaries of Catholic gender ideologies.

Analyzing local impacts allows for a clear articulation of the interdependence of patriarchy and Catholicism in determining the true impact of the Bracero Program. Patriarchy demarcated social boundaries and determined the social consequences that followed the transgression of these boundaries. Like all structures of power in Mexico, it was intertwined with a behavioral architecture enforced by the Catholic Church that emphasized distinct roles for men

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7 Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 1999): 1. According to the 1940 census, 65% of the national population lived in rural areas. In 1950, the figure was 57.2%.
and women. Often, the boundaries of patriarchy and Catholicism worked together to compound the limits on women’s lives. However, this project reveals that occasionally, Catholicism provided women more movement. During the absence of Braceros, it allowed women to cross patriarchal boundaries because they maintained adherence to Catholic ideologies.

Methodology

The role of women who maintained households and communities during the Bracero Program can be analyzed as part of a global history of transnational capitalist development in the mid-twentieth century, but such broad understandings can only be reached through attention to their manifestations in quotidian life. The close-up images of these women’s experience are most accessible through oral histories, which are at the heart of this project. Ten testimonies of women in Bracero households in Michoacán offer the most extensive representations of the story I seek to illuminate, and also provoke many of the questions this project addresses. Rather than incorporating their voices as complements to an existing narrative of the Bracero Program or Michoacán’s post-Revolutionary era, I seek to produce a new narrative that is concerned with representing these women’s lives. In other words, their lived experiences are not incidental to this study, but rather define its purpose and limits. The importance of Catholic morality in this story, for example, emerged from women’s constant invocation of such ideologies throughout their interviews.

The oral histories were collected through the Bracero History Archive at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP). Through partnerships between UTEP and community groups,
“Bracero Heritage Meetings” were organized across the American southwest and northern Mexico, as well as some locations in central Mexico. At these gatherings, graduate students interviewed ex-Braceros and their families.10 While the majority of the oral histories in the Bracero History Archive feature men who participated in the Bracero Program, there are also interviews with their female relatives. Reflecting the regional distribution among Braceros’ states of origin, most of the women interviewed were from the states of Michoacán (10), Guanajuato (9), Zacatecas (8), and Jalisco (8). The existence of these state aggregations provides the opportunity to place the male absences within the context of that region’s historical moment. Though only two women explicitly mention their indigenous racial identity, it is safe to assume that all the women are of Purépechan descent.11

There are several broad patterns among the ten women from Michoacán whose oral histories have guided this project.12 Five were born between 1925 and 1930 and experienced the absence of husbands. Five were born between 1943 and 1962, and had fathers, grandfathers, and uncles who participated in the Bracero Program. All ten were born into large peasant families living in small pueblos or ranchos, with family sizes ranging from five to over fifteen.13 Their

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10 Leon, “Digital Resources.”
11 An understanding of Michoacán’s racial landscape will be developed throughout this paper. The social, economic, and geographical segregation of indigenous, mestizo, and Spanish shows that the women’s lives strongly correlate with broader trends for indigenous Purépechans.
12 Five of the selected interviews were conducted by Mireya Loza, who was pursuing her master’s in Public Humanities from Brown University at the time. She later received her PhD from Brown University, and her 2011 dissertation, which she developed into a manuscript titled Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom, was the first scholarly work to rely on documents from the Bracero History Archive. Two interviews were conducted by Violeta Mena, who was pursuing her master’s in History from UTEP. One interview was conducted by Alma Carillo, who was pursuing her master’s in Public Arts and Cultural Heritage at Brown University. One interview was conducted by Marina Kalashnikova, who was pursuing her master’s in Language and Linguistics at UTEP.
13 Pueblos refer to small towns or villages, while ranchos refer to collections of homes that were usually connected to a nearby hacienda that employed many of the rancho’s inhabitants.
communities are all located in central and northwestern Michoacán and include Isla de Janitzio (2), Pajacuarán (2), Paracho (1), Parácuaro (1), and four small ranchos outside of Jiquilpan and Morelia.

As primary sources in this project, the oral histories offer a particular set of advantages and challenges. In his thesis on the process of history-making, Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes that “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences.”

The narrative stitched together across these ten oral histories is no exception. Their testimonies are often inconsistent, digressive, and provoke more questions as they answer. Nevertheless, they are rich in illuminating the daily lives of subjects who do not often appear in this way in the historical record. In *Oral History in Latin America*, David Carey Jr. writes that engaging oral histories is about “unearthing the buried memory and the forgotten presence of the unnamed and the silenced.”

The oral histories uncover the interactions between social institutions, such as the Catholic Church, social roles, such as mothering, and women’s agency during the Bracero Program. Their private and domestic experience is not relegated to the “context” of their actions, but instead is central to making visible their socio-political struggle. The women’s recollections inform us of how they adapted to these historical circumstances in ways that echo trends identified by historians of the period, but also challenge the way peasant women have been written into history.

As both primary sources and reconstructions of the past, these oral histories embody what Trouillot calls “double historicity,” the notion that people are both actors in and narrators of the past. To approach the issue of how the women have reformulated their roles in the intervening

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years, practitioners of oral history recommend recognizing the presence of dominant discourses and ideologies that may shape their formulations of the past while also avoiding seeing these structures as entirely prohibiting the subjects from giving their own meaning to the past. To do so, I turn to secondary sources that can corroborate their description of the historical moment. This dialogical approach has the potential to produce new analyses of the past, linking previously unconnected historiographies through the prism of women who lived at the intersection of these histories. These include that of the Bracero Program, post-Revolutionary politics in Michoacán, and the agency of indigenous Purépecha women. Working with the audio and transcripts of oral histories conducted by historians with different research objectives means that the work of interpretation is tantamount. This analysis involves a careful balance between uncovering silences while also resisting the urge to fit these women’s voices neatly within a theoretical frame.

The Bracero Program is an early example of what Silvia Federici in 1999 called the New International Division of Labor, in which the global expansion of capital is “premised… on the separation of the producers from the means of (re)production” and relies on the use of women’s unpaid labor.

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16 Carey Jr., *Oral History*, 81. Some historians question whether or not this should be a concern at all. Louis Menand insists that “All history is retrospective. We’re always looking at the past through the lens of later developments. How else could we see it?” (113)

17 In cautioning against the leaps made between oral history and interpretations suggested by theory, Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack advise three kinds of listening. First, listen for women’s moral language and self-evaluative statements, which allow historians “to examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms.” Next, the historian listens for meta-statements that “alert us to the individual’s awareness of a discrepancy within the self – or between what is expected and what is being said.” The final step involves attending to the logic of the narrative, “noticing the internal consistency or contradictions in the person’s statements about recurring themes and the ways these themes relate to each other.” (Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York, NY: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1991): 20-22.)

employers are relieved of the burden of social reproduction by means of geopolitical boundaries, this responsibility is transferred to the worker’s family. It is for this reason that Isabella Bakker calls women the “shock absorbers”\(^{19}\) of macroeconomic trends that have restructured global economic systems. The Bracero Program, which brought about a new era of United States-Mexico labor relations and spurred the development of the “global” worker as a category of analysis, was certainly one of these shocks.\(^ {20}\)

Structural aspects of the Bracero Program encouraged a veiling of the larger communities to which Braceros belonged and were accountable. Border enforcement and physical inspections, the deportation of undocumented workers, low wages, and the censorship of letters sent between Braceros and their families all served to make the existence of the Bracero family invisible. Keeping these larger networks out of view allowed employers to pay Braceros an individual rather than family wage, and thus redistributed the burdens of social and economic survival on the family. The life stories of these ten women make clear the importance of these elements.

For the purpose of this project, I define women’s informal labor as work that is not recognized as part of the market economy and is naturalized through gender ideologies of maternalism.\(^ {21}\) Formal labor, on the other hand, involves a wage and is recognized explicitly as economically productive. During the Bracero Program, the amount of both formal and informal labor performed by the women of Bracero families increased. Capitalist expansion has relied on

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the informal and subsistence labor that women perform, disproving the thesis that “development” would reduce these practices. On the contrary, they have become more and more important to the survival of workers and their communities, as I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five.

The oral histories included in this project indicate that the household faced multiple challenges when the patriarch was temporarily absent on a Bracero contract: in a social sense, the respectability of the household was subject to doubt, and in an economic sense, the household took on new burdens of production to compensate for the underpay of Bracero workers and the lack of remittances. Women were responsible for mediating both challenges. Upon the return of Braceros, women then navigated the men’s reintegration into the community and the household. Often, this involved the men’s attempts to reassert patriarchal control. Because the Bracero Program generally failed to provide significant economic benefits to Braceros, women often continued to work in these new realms after their husband’s return, and the household’s adherence to patriarchal ideologies had to be reformulated. Thus, the Bracero Program provoked the adaptation of existing gender discourses to new contexts. Much of this ideological work was done by the women of Bracero households, who used the moral language of Catholicism to render their transgressions across gender boundaries acceptable, as well as to recognize the difficulty that the absence of Braceros caused them.

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The following chapter, “The Bracero Program,” analyzes the Mexican government’s investment in this labor program as it pertained to their visions of Mexico’s rural peasantry. It also discusses the state of Michoacán at the Bracero Program’s initiation in 1942, introducing the various economic and social factors that impacted the decision to obtain a Bracero contract and remained relevant throughout a Bracero’s absence. Chapter Three, “Women Negotiate the Departure, Absence, and Return of Braceros” turns to the oral histories to show the arch of women’s experience that will be revisited throughout the paper, with emphasis on how they negotiated family dynamics and intra-communal relationships. Chapter Four, “Women’s Work,” examines the types of labor that women in the oral histories took on during the absence of Braceros, discussing the social meanings of this work. It contextualizes these activities within the gendered division of labor and space that had developed in Michoacán since the colonial era. This leads to Chapter Five, “Networks of Dependency,” which discusses what types of communal support were at stake and suggests the ways women accessed these networks to survive as temporarily single mothers. Chapter Six, “Gendered Catholicism in Post-Revolutionary Michoacán,” places the Catholic ideologies that pervade the oral histories within the context of Michoacán’s contemporary religious history to illuminate the region’s unique image of a Catholic woman. It suggests how women adapted this image to their role in Bracero households to recognize and dignify their struggle.

II. The Bracero Program

The Mexican government called their partnership with the United States in creating the Bracero Program “a collaboration of forces in the war of democratic Nations,”25 but it also fit

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into a longer project of post-Revolutionary nation-building. In the 1920s, academics and politicians began articulating an idealized Mexican national identity of *mestizaje*, a cultural rather than racial identity with which the new Mexican state could move forward uniformly into modernity. The targets of this remaking were indigenous Mexicans, who in 1940 made up between a quarter and a third of Mexico’s population.

Anthropologist Manuel Gamio expressed contemporary notions of a cultural rather than racial distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous people, writing in *Pacific Affairs* in 1929 that, “the Indian has always belonged to the lowest economic and cultural strata,” but that this was not attributable to racism, because “when an Indian rises to higher levels, he finds no obstacles to his union with a white.” In Gamio’s logic, the Bracero Program would facilitate this homogenization: in the United States, indigenous men would be placed in positions where their national identity became more meaningful than their local ties, effectively severing “long-standing bonds with local and regional elites and power brokers who anchored such alternative ties.” The extent to which this occurred has been questioned by scholars of Bracero communities in the United States. Braceros were certainly required to navigate the United States’ racial dichotomy and consider their position as “Mexicans” in the eyes of their employers. However, Gamio overestimates this integrating force. Regional identity remained critical to the men’s sense of identity within the social world of migrant laborers. Furthermore, oral histories in this study indicate that women were careful to maintain the family’s local ties as a strategy of economic and social survival.

28 See Loza, *Defiant Braceros*.
Presidents Lázaro Cárdenas (1936-1940) and Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) both viewed indigenous peasants as backward and primitive, but they promoted different projects to remake them.\textsuperscript{30} Cárdenas undertook a massive project of \textit{ejidal} land redistribution, public education, and secularism, which came to be known as “Cardenismo”; Ávila Camacho focused on industrial projects, the “Green Revolution” in agriculture, and international migration. To Ávila Camacho and his administration, international migration through the Bracero Program would teach Mexican peasants how to be “productive” citizens through learning modern labor practices. They would return to Mexico prepared to put their new agricultural skills and capitalist attitudes to work for “National Unity,” a catchphrase of his presidency.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the location of contracting centers in cities, half of the 4.6 million Bracero contracts awarded between 1942 and 1964 were to Mexicans from rural areas.\textsuperscript{32} This reflects an official effort to target indigenous peasants for disciplining abroad.

Migration to the United States, by both men and families, had existed at notable rates since the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1930, an estimated 1.5 million Mexicans migrated across the northern border due to the Revolution’s violence and proceeding economic downturns.\textsuperscript{33} During the Great Depression, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States were scapegoated for unemployment and low wages, and over 400,000 were

\textsuperscript{31} Monica A. Rankin, \textit{¡Mexico, la patria!: Propaganda and Production during World War II} (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010): 119.
\textsuperscript{32} Harry E. Cross and James A. Sandos, \textit{Across the Border: Rural Development in Mexico and Recent Migration to the United States} (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies, 1981): 35 and Wiest, “Wage-Labor Migration,” 29. The number of contracts does not equal the number of men who participated in the Bracero Program, as many individuals were awarded multiple contracts. Wiest estimates that this factor divides the figure by three.
\textsuperscript{33} Cross and Sandos, \textit{Across the Border}, 10.
deported. They shared their experiences of discrimination and lack of employment opportunities with the communities they returned to, and the 1930s saw a lull in migration to the United States despite persistent rural poverty. Nevertheless, when the Bracero recruitment process began in 1942, obtaining a contract was immediately competitive. This can be largely attributed to aggressive recruiting, as will be discussed below.

Michoacán’s residents, the majority of whom were rural peasants, had only recently emerged from an extended period of violent conflict that began with the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and ended with the Cristero Rebellions (1926-1929 and 1930-1934). The prolonged conflicts interrupted economic activity and left thousands dead, and the region struggled to recover as wheat and corn production faltered. Mexico’s economic crisis in the late 1930s lowered agricultural prices, leading to high un- and under-employment. Agrarian land reforms to redistribute the infamous and centuries-old hacienda land proved largely ineffective, and peasants who were able to become small landholders of ejidos often found themselves permanently struggling in the subsistence sector. Despite a growing population, Michoacán produced less maize in 1940 than it did in 1900.

The profits of “Green Revolution,” which began in 1943 to increase cash crop

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34 See Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s (Santa Fe, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).
35 Cross and Sandos, Across the Border, 11.
36 Haciendas were a colonial institution that survived long after Mexican independence. Under this system, large estates owned by hacendados (Spanish and mestizo elites) employed laborers (usually indigenous people) as supposedly free wage workers. However, hacendados tied laborers to the land through debt. Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution made all land, water, and minerals the property of the Mexican people. In practice, this led to the creation of ejidal land and the breakup of haciendas. The ejido system is one that grants land tenure to communities and allows for individual use. The land cannot be sold, though it can be rented. According to a survey by the Departamento Agrario in 1945, land owned by hacendados and the Church in Michoacán was redistributed as ejidal land to 30,818 recipients between 1920 and 1940 (Cross and Sandos, Across the Border, 136).
37 The Green Revolution, which lasted from the 1940s into the 1970s, was a state-sponsored effort based on the import-substitution model. Its benefits to small landholders and peasants were marginal at best, and often harmed them by making farming a more expensive occupation overall. The overarching goal was a drastic increase in agricultural production, but it did little to improve the lives of peasants. This involved specialization in commercial crops; development of irrigation; mechanization through the import of tractors; use of fertilizers and pesticides; and
production, were unevenly distributed and rarely benefitted small landholders who could not afford the initial investment in new technologies that would make their small parcels profitable.\textsuperscript{38} The landless peasants fared even worse, often working as day laborers on the remaining haciendas and facing unemployment for most of the year.\textsuperscript{39} Emigration was a primary response to rural poverty.\textsuperscript{40} While the more well-to-do often migrated to Mexico City, Michoacán’s poorest looked to the United States. At the start of the Bracero Program, 26\% of Braceros (approximately 35 thousand) came from Michoacán.\textsuperscript{41} By 1962, more than 30\% of Michoacán’s male population had traveled to the United States at least once.\textsuperscript{42} This concentration resulted from a combination of targeted recruitment by government officials and an economic situation that left peasant families with few options.

As the first migratory movement in which the Mexican state intervened, implementing the Bracero Program involved a great deal of bureaucracy and thus opportunities for corruption. First, the Mexican Ministry of the Interior created regional contract quotas based on their analysis of surplus labor. These quotas were communicated to local magistrates in cities and towns, who were charged with distributing permisos to locals.\textsuperscript{43} In 1945, Mexican academic Ignacio García Téllez included “speculation” and “exploitation” by these magistrates as one of the expansion of monoculture crops including cotton, sugar, coffee, and basic grains. Those with the most land, credit, and access to irrigation benefitted the most. Ejidarios and small landholders were hurt more than helped by these efforts, and Jesús Gil-Mendéz shows that in small communities in Michoacán, this led directly to an increase in migration to the United States. (Jesús Gil-Méndez, “Neoliberalismo, políticas agrarias y migración. Consecuencias de un modelo contra los productores,” Ra Ximhai 11, no. 2 (July-December 2015): 148-149, Open Access; Cross and Sandos, \textit{Across the Border}, 26).

\textsuperscript{38} Cross and Sandos, \textit{Across the Border}, 12-17.\textsuperscript{39} Cross and Sandos, \textit{Across the Border}, 31. In 1950, landless workers nationally worked an average of 190 days out of the year.\textsuperscript{40} Cross and Sandos, \textit{Across the Border}, 35.\textsuperscript{41} Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, \textit{Los Braceros}, 19; Cross and Sandos, \textit{Across the Border}, 44. Michoacán’s total population was just over one million in 1940.\textsuperscript{42} Ina R. Dinerman, “Patterns of Adaptation Among Households of U.S.-Bound Migrants from Michoacán, Mexico,” \textit{The International Migration Review} 12, no. 14 (Winter 1998): 491, JSTOR.\textsuperscript{43} Permisos were official, state-issued permits.
the top factors contributing to the high demand for Bracero contracts. In states like Michoacán, there could be as many as twenty men with permisos for every contract available. Next, those with permisos would have to find a way to travel to “migration centers.” Men traveling from Michoacán often went to centers in Guadalajara, Mexicali, Monterrey, and Irapuato.

Permisos could rarely be attained without paying a bribe, and though a lottery system was designed to govern the selection process at migration centers, bribes were more common there as well. In the pueblos and ranchos of Michoacán, men seeking work rarely had the cash to pay these bribes and transportation costs, which could range from 200 to 700 pesos. For some, this was more than a month’s salary. While smaller loans would have been attained among kin, loans of this size came from patrones and middle- and upper-class families in nearby towns. With interest rates of 5% to 10%, loaning to Braceros was a lucrative business, and in some communities lenders came to be regarded as exploitative. Interestingly, these lending families often benefitted doubly from peasants’ economic reliance on them, as they often employed the children of prospective Braceros at very low wages during their absence, coding their labor as educational experience. This is one example of how the Bracero Program preserved and expanded rural dependency structures, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

46 Cross and Sandos, Across the Border, 36.
48 Belshaw, Village Economy, 249; Rosas, Abrazando, 192.
49 Belshaw, Village Economy, 181.
50 Rosas, Abrazando, 193.
Men received permisos and traveled to the migration centers alone or in groups from their village. The oral histories show that this difference had a large impact on the experience of families in their absence. When large groups of men from the village departed together, the women were more likely to gather to discuss the struggles they were having as temporarily single mothers. These meetings were never organized with the intention of “complaining,” but discussing their common experience often brought them to tears of frustration and sadness.51 When a male family member was the only man from the community to participate in the Bracero Program, his family often felt more shame for his absence and what it required of them.

Men in Michoacán were motivated to seek Bracero contracts for a variety of reasons. In Luis Gonzalez’s landmark study in the field of microhistory, San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition, he writes that many men from this small village in Michoacán sought work abroad out of a sense of adventure and an aspiration for a life the village could not offer. “Those of this generation did not have as much love for the soil or the same community spirit their parents had… They were fiercely individualistic, with no faith in anything or anybody.”52 While this may have been a prevailing attitude in San Jose de Gracia, other studies of Braceros and the oral histories in this project indicate that it was not the principal motivation for most men.

According to the study conducted by the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social that surveyed returning Braceros in 1946, 12.4% had been searching for adventure while 72% went because they wanted to earn more money.53 In the oral histories, women usually mention economic concerns as the reason for the Braceros’ departure, though they were rarely consulted in the decision to migrate. Several, like María Guadalupe’s husband, hoped to improve their

51 María Guadalupe Salcedo Gudiño, interview.
53 Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, Los Braceros, 189.
homes or buy new land. Often, the hope of earning more money was unrealized, leading Gonzalez to remark later in his text, “When everything is added up, it turns out that the Bracero Program took more than it gave.” In attempting to calculate what was taken and given, it is critical to incorporate the experiences of the women who upheld Bracero households. Their efforts were formative not only during Bracero absences, but also in the periods of departure and return.

III. Women Negotiate the Departure, Absence, and Return of Braceros

It is difficult to conclude what information about the logistics and details of the Bracero Program reached various rural communities in Michoacán at its commencement. Most rural residents would have been aware of the phenomenon of migration to the United States for temporary employment, and some may have had acquaintances who did so. They may have seen it as an extension of existing internal migration patterns which often took men and families to Mexico City. But even for those more familiar with migration, the Bracero Program varied in nature from previous migrations due to its regulatory structures. The bureaucratic contracting process, the financial investment required, the travel to migration centers prior to the United States, the censoring of mail sent from Braceros, and the pre-determined length of contract asked more of Bracero families in terms of both economic and emotional investment. Thus, the decision to participate in the Bracero Program was a substantial one.

The oral histories indicate that men considering work as Braceros did not consult their wives directly in the process of making such a decision. María Zarate, who lived as a temporarily single mother for a year and a half while her husband worked as a Bracero, explained, “Well, I… one is accustomed to what the man says, that has to be. ‘You’re going to go? Well, God bless

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54 González, 243.
55 Gledhill, *Casi Nada*, 188.
you.’ And so I gave him my blessings and all that. And he left.” Similarly, María Guadalupe says, “Well, he wanted to go there, so he went.” The interviewer pushes María Zarate to say more, asking specifically if she thought it was necessary. She responds, “No, well, I said it was necessary, at least so we could buy a little house.” This ambiguity suggests that though the women often adhered to patriarchal scripts, they were in fact already involved in the financial workings of the home and pueblo. María understood from her own evaluations that migration was one of their only options. Economic pressures exerted by Bracero absences would require an expansion of women’s involvement in family economics. Equally important were changes to a variety of interpersonal relationships: dynamics between wife and husband, parent and child, neighbor and neighbor were strained and reformulated by the phenomenon of men’s temporary migration across the border.

Women in Bracero households were deeply aware of how their extended family and the broader community stigmatized their situation, and they felt responsible for defending themselves and their family against such negative perception. In the small pueblos and ranchos that they lived in, very little could be kept private, and women’s behavior came under a microscope because of assumptions of how male absence could undermine the family. While these interviews may have been the first formal inquiries about their husbands’ and fathers’ participation in the Bracero Program, the women were certainly well-practiced in explaining their absence in certain terms. Many families of Braceros confronted assumptions about the meaning of the men’s absences, and this defensiveness determined both their actions at the time and how they talk about the Bracero Program years later. In close-knit communities where

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57 María Guadalupe Salcedo Gudiño, interview.
notions of reciprocity and kinship governed both the social and economic realm, negative rumors had the potential to threaten a woman’s ability to provide for her family. They were thus tasked with the work of narrating their husband’s absence in a way that dignified their situation.

One assumption was that men who went to the United States were often unfaithful, and might even start a new family there and never return. The Catholic hierarchy in both the United States and Mexico widely denounced the Bracero Program by claiming that over one million Braceros had abandoned their families, which had contributed to a rise juvenile delinquency and the “sexual promiscuity” of Braceros’ wives. Though the purpose of the Bracero Program was to employ workers on a temporary basis, between 1950 and 1960 it was relatively easy for Braceros to obtain permanent residency through their employers. Margarita Murillo recalls that in the pueblo where she grew up, Pajacuarán, there were many “families that had been left behind.” The fear of becoming one of those “abandoned” families is evident in Clara Eligio Tenorio’s oral history, in which she explains that when her husband was gone she considered leaving Isla de Janitzio to be with him. She asked her mother to go with her, but her mother refused and told her daughter, “‘No, no. Don’t look for your husband, just leave it alone,’ (laughs)… ‘Don’t look for him, let him go. He is going to work, or who knows what.’”

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58 Niblo, Mexico, 2.
59 Loza, Defiant Braceros, 73.
mother believed that after leaving their community, her son-in-law would no longer feel accountable to his wife and children.

This suspicion was heightened by the reasons for his departure. Unlike most women, Clara portrays her husband’s decision to obtain a Bracero contract as selfish, one made from boredom and lack of a job that he liked. Beforehand, she had suggested to him that he could make nets or go fishing, but he insisted that there was no work. Clara is the only woman to assert that her husband’s absence was not made with their family’s interests in mind. All the others explain that the purpose was a ganar algo (to earn something), so that they could better provide for their family. Normally, migration to the United States was considered only when all other options had failed to provide enough.  

Equally powerful in this stigmatization was the belief that Braceros would pick up vicios, bad habits. Audelia Bentura Cortéz, whose husband returned from the United States suffering from alcoholism that would eventually lead to his death, explains in her oral history, “But those who go there [to the United States] … there are a lot of people that go, lots of men … they go there, and they say that they start to drink.” Audelia phrases this as not only part of her personal experience, but as something known and experienced by others. Indeed, a survey conducted by the Secretaría del Trabajo y Provisión Social in 1946 found that 72.5% of men interviewed drank only water before participating in the Bracero Program, but afterwards that figure fell to 55%. Their consumption of moonshine, pulque (a fermented drink common in central Mexico), wine and beer increased. More important than the reality of changes in consumption is that in this

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64 For example, see Margarita Murillo, interview.
66 Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, Los Braceros, 220.
context, alcoholism became coded as a consequence of a man spending time alone in the United States. Thus, it was symbolic of a breakdown in familial order.

However, Braceros could also harness their experience in the United States to gain social prestige and respect in the eyes of the community, as notions of their experience as “modernizing” in a positive sense were present as well.67 While acquiring some “American” habits, such as drinking, was understood as destabilizing, others were appreciated. These discourses are most often invoked in the oral histories by the daughters of Braceros (Luz María, María Soledad, Carmen, Alma, and Margarita). They tend to speak more about the changes they observed in their fathers’ character and behavior after returning from the United States. María Soledad, whose father travelled on Bracero contracts continually during the first five years of her life, says that he returned “a half-modernized man,” who spoke some words in English and was “very clean… [he] wanted everything to be washed, to wash our hands, he wanted everything to be very clean.”68 Both María Soledad and Margarita recall asking their fathers to tell them stories and say words in English. Sharing stories of their experiences in the United States, demonstrating knowledge they acquired, and speaking a few words in English could do a great deal for a man’s status upon return – María Soledad claims that his new knowledge made him “an important man.”

Tariffs were waved on U.S.-made commodities carried home by Braceros, and three of the men returned with gifts for their families, such as clothes, women’s pants, socks, underwear, chicken, bread, and meat.69 Cohen found that these also served as gifts to local elites who had assisted them in the contracting process. She argues that bringing back various goods and

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68 María Soledad Herrera de Reyes, interview.
69 Cohen, *Migrant Citizens*, 180. For examples in the oral histories, see María Soledad Herrera de Reyes, Margarita Murillo, and Audelia Bentura Cortéz.
souvenirs expressed a man’s commitment to his family and place as provider, reducing the negative assumptions about his absence, including lack of control over his wife’s sexuality. She argues that former Braceros’ use of gifts thus symbolizes an “attempt to realize promises of migration not always fulfilled.” However, they were not necessarily received by their wives as such: when Audelia recalls that her husband returned with clothes for her and some money, she emphasizes that the money only lasted six months, “and what is six months?”

Like María Guadalupe, Audelia believed the benefits of the Bracero Program were an illusion. The oral histories demonstrate that the Bracero Program was met with suspicion, and that women’s concerns about men in their family participating came from an understanding of the social consequences that could follow. Assumptions about the Bracero Program’s ability to change the character of men were inscribed on their wives and families. Women in Bracero families became responsible for negotiating this stigmatization, countering accusations of instability or dishonor with a demonstration of their adherence to traditional values.

This is evident in women’s responses to the gifts that the men brought home. They approached these new items and attitudes with caution. María Soledad’s father, who brought back women’s pants, faced opposition from his wife and daughter. He encouraged them to wear pants because they could walk around more easily, but they never wore them because they did not think they were flattering and because to this day it was “rare” to see a woman in pants in their pueblo. This collision of sensibilities, superficially a conflict between “traditional” and “modern,” speaks to the women’s sense that the Bracero’s reintegration into pueblo life had to be

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71 Audelia Bentura Cortéz, interview.
72 María Soledad Herrera de Reyes, interview.
guided so as to garner the benefits of his experience in the United States without disrupting the community’s behavioral architecture and damaging their family’s reputation.

Nevertheless, the returns of fathers and husbands are generally remembered as moments of relief and excitement for many of the women interviewed, who often went for long periods without hearing from them. In eight of the oral histories, the women are asked if they or their mothers received letters from the men during their absence. Four did receive letters, including one who remembers that her husband wrote her every eight days, often with encouragements such as “I’ll be leaving soon, don’t lose hope, take care of my children, I’ll be home soon, God willing, just enough so that I can buy a little house.”73 Others received letters sporadically or just once. These letters sometimes included cash, and sometimes cash was sent without a message. Sending letters often required both men and women to find someone to transcribe their message, and in Michoacán it could also involve walking significant distances to the nearest post office.

Importantly, the question asked in the interviews is always if they received letters, and not if they sent letters that the men never responded to. It is possible that this was the case for Luz María’s parents, as her response to the question was that her father could not read or write, though her mother could. In Elizabeth de Rosas’ study of Bracero families in Jalisco, she portrays letter-writing by the women left behind as an expected practice that indicated their faithfulness. Even if they never received letters in return, they were not only expected to continue writing but also to keep to themselves the fears of abandonment that this silence caused.74 Rosas also finds that in letters to their husbands, women often minimized the amount of work that they and their children were taking on in their absence so as not to “discourage” the

73 María Zarate, interview.
74 Rosas, 101.
men, while still conveying the importance of sending whatever remittances they could manage.\footnote{Rosas, 195.}

These changes to women’s work will be discussed in the next chapter.

Thus, letters could function to safeguard long-distance relationships by demonstrating women’s adherence to gender roles. They also maintained the Bracero’s sense of family and their position as provider, despite disappointing wages in the United States. The communication between Braceros and their wives speaks to a demand on women’s affective labor, which I include within the category of women’s work. Scholarship on emotional labor indicates that women are expected to nurture the emotional well-being of their families, labor that provides its own reward because it is done out of love and obligation.\footnote{Bergeron, “Formal, Informal, and Care Economies,” 183.} Caring becomes an even greater task when families are confronted with geographical distance. Studies of emotional labor in transnational families often focus on long-distance mothering,\footnote{For more on mothering transnational families, see Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, “Mothering from a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations in Filipino Transnational Families,” Feminist Studies 27, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 361-390; Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden, “Love and Intimacy: The Gender Division of Emotion and ‘Emotion Work,’” Sociology 27, no. 2 (1993): 201-220; and Leisy J. Abrego, Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 2014).} but similar ideas can be applied to women who wrote to their husbands in the Bracero Program.

Many of the interviews end with a question about how the Bracero Program changed their life or impacted their families. Interestingly, this rarely provoked long answers from the women. Even after pointing out the difficulty of the experience throughout the preceding interview, many evaluate it more forgivingly in response to that question. For those who did gain some economic boost from the Bracero Program, they often mention it here. This reluctance to indict the Bracero Program directly reveals that even decades later, women felt the need to defend their families from presumptions of failure. Women confronted a variety of assumptions about the effect of a Bracero’s absence on familial stability, and patriarchal and Catholic
ideologies established women as guardians of familial morality. The weight of this responsibility was compounded by the fact that communication between a Bracero and his family was usually irregular and unreliable. When letter-writing did occur, it was seen as an opportunity for women to reassure their husbands, but they did not always receive reassurance in return. With this in mind, the following three chapters endeavor to show the many ways, obvious and subtle, that women labored during the absence of Braceros. The work they did, and the terms they use to define this work, were shaped by their navigation of multiple structures. Tantamount were the networks of social and economic dependency within their communities and Catholic gender ideologies.

IV. Women’s Work

The delegation of women to the private and domestic sphere remained a societal ideal, but in rural Michoacán, poverty demanded that the gendered division of labor was not entirely static. Long before the Bracero Program began, women’s activities often shifted in response to a family’s changing economic conditions. As married couples, men generally worked in agriculture or fishing while women worked in the home, taking care of children and elderly relatives, cooking, and often producing various goods for sale. These cottage industries included sewing fishing nets and making food to sell to neighbors and day-laborers. At times, women would assist men in their work or travel to larger towns to sell goods in the market. However, in the context of a Bracero’s extended absence, women’s movement into traditionally male economic roles seemed more transgressive. They minimized the ensuing social consequences and sustained their positions by framing their work within traditional scripts. The shifts that

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occurred during the Bracero Program cleaved some permanent and new, albeit small, spaces for women in their communities.

The designation of gendered economic spaces in Michoacán, such as the home and the field, was constructed during Spanish rule. Colonial laws had dictated the creation of “chartered communities” of the indigenous Purépecha people. The relationship between chartered communities and colonial urban centers was heavily regulated so as to guarantee the supply of indigenous labor and raw materials, and these structures would play a part in constructing new gender roles. The town-hinterland relationship was largely achieved by restricting manufacturing to urban centers and proscribing direct trade between indigenous communities. Whatever labor and raw materials the villages did not absorb were transported and sold, along with craft goods, in colonial towns.

Isla de Janitzio, the home of Audelia Bentura Cortéz and Clara Eligio Tenorio, had such a relationship with Pátzcuaro. Established as a center of colonial administration in 1540, Pátzcuaro had maintained its economic supremacy for centuries. It was the home of the market, and indigenous fisherman from Isla de Janitzio would travel there regularly to sell dried fish. Pátzcuaro drew from many other pueblos and ranchos in the region, and in the mid-twentieth century, peasants continued to travel there on market days by bus or on foot to sell surplus produce and cottage-industry goods. What emerged in the colonial period was a racial separation between the rural producers and the urban managerial elite, a “unilateral, upward transfer” of labor and goods. This racial and economic structure persisted after the end of

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80 Dinerman, *Patterns of Adaptation*, 487. Obviously, trade within the community could not be regulated, and people sold food and some craft goods to their neighbors. However, the limited variety of raw materials they could produce necessitated reliance of colonial centers.
81 Dinerman, *Patterns of Adaptation*, 486.
82 Belshaw, *Village Economy*, 90, 113.
83 Powers, *Women in the Crucible*, 146.
Spanish rule and into the twentieth century, encouraged in part by urban elites who remained invested in their role as “brokers” to the regional economy.\textsuperscript{84} Without markets or manufacturing, indigenous families produced goods for subsistence and commerce in their private living spaces. As a result, the household became the central economic unit in rural communities.

At the same time that the Spanish constructed this separation between rural and urban, indigenous and Spanish, they also established ideologies of gender that had clear manifestations in divisions between men and women’s work. In her study of gender in Spanish colonial society, Karen Vieira Powers’ argues that while women and men were not entirely equal in indigenous societies before the Spanish conquest, colonial rule did a great deal to establish binary gender ideologies and define the differences between men and women’s labor.\textsuperscript{85} The encomienda tribute system, for example, held indigenous men legally responsible for the tax, even though men and women worked together to produce the tribute. Unlike pre-Hispanic systems, in which unmarried people were not taxed because they did not have a partner with whom to share labor,\textsuperscript{86} the Spanish tribute did not recognize women’s contribution to family finances.

Consequently, the primary location of women’s work, the household, came to be perceived as a reproductive and social space. The labor performed there was disassociated from the monetary economy. This labor was, as Silvia Federici describes, “mystified as a natural vocation.”\textsuperscript{87} As a social rather than economic space, the home held a Catholic meaning: as a representation of women’s sexual purity and loyalty to the family.\textsuperscript{88} This imperative, accompanied by restrictions on her presence in public space, was enforced by Catholic gender

\textsuperscript{84} Dinerman, Patterns of Adaptation, 488.
\textsuperscript{85} Powers, Women in the Crucible, 143.
\textsuperscript{86} Powers, Women in the Crucible, 147.
\textsuperscript{87} Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004): 73-75.
\textsuperscript{88} Powers, Women in the Crucible, 124.
ideologies, which I will discuss in Chapter Six. Despite this discursive obstruction to the reality of women’s labor, their work remained critical to the survival of peasant families and expanded throughout indigenous community’s integration into the growing market economy.\textsuperscript{89} While historians of economic development sometimes measure the success of capitalism by the disappearance or persistence of the household as an economic unit, Florencia E. Mallon argues that the household endures capitalist transitions through the adaption and flexibility provided by women and children’s work.\textsuperscript{90} In \textit{Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico}, Jocelyn Olcott cites Mexico’s 1930 industrial and population censuses, which report that women made up only approximately 3\% of Michoacán’s economically active population and 9\% of its paid labor force. Olcott estimates that while census figures vastly underestimate the multitude of ways women were economically active, it is unlikely that more than 20\% of women received a wage for their labor.\textsuperscript{91} If they were paid, women in rural areas earned around 18 pesos per week, while male day laborers made 6 to 7 pesos per day.\textsuperscript{92} The categorization of someone as “economically active” likely depended on whether or not they received a wage, prohibiting women’s unpaid labor from being recognized. The scope of their contributions can be read into

\textsuperscript{89} Sen, “Unsettling the Household, 135.
\textsuperscript{90} Mallon, “Patriarchy,” 379, 401.
\textsuperscript{91} Jocelyn Olcott, \textit{Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004): n19, 254. Olcott describes that in the early 1930s, “wage labor figured just as prominently into Cárdenas’ modernizing vision for women as temperance and anticlerical campaigns.” A vocational school for women was established in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, to “transform ‘women’s labor’ into ‘skilled labor.’” Interestingly, this school targeted young girls “orphaned at least by their father,” reflecting a notion that women’s labor was only deemed necessary in the absence of a male wage-earner. Graduates of the school were channeled into the Revolutionary Labor Confederation of Michoacán (CRMDT), a political organization that Cárdenas found and presided over. Olcott’s analysis of the CRMDT leads her to conclude that though “it took seriously the task of organizing and backing women workers” in industry, organized labor as a whole “still viewed women’s income as supplementary rather than as a family wage” (64-67). By the time the women are interviewed for the Bracero History Archive, much of the work that had previously been defined outside of the realm of waged-labor had become a part of the market economy. Audelia Bentura Cortez comments: “We never worked back then like they do now… we didn’t go out ever and we didn’t earn anything, washing clothes… Now the ones who go out… everyone earns something. And making tortillas, but back then we didn’t earn anything” (Audelia Bentura Cortez, interview).
\textsuperscript{92} Rosas, \textit{Abrazando}, 195; Dinerman, \textit{Patterns of Adaptation}, 491.
these figures through other means: according to the Mexican census, in 1940 and 1950 the number of “women at home” consistently outnumbered the number of men working in the agricultural sector by a vast margin.\textsuperscript{93} The oral histories provide some examples of the types of economic activities that women performed at home prior to and during the Bracero Program. These included child care, elder care, sewing fishing nets,\textsuperscript{94} cooking for the family as well as selling meals to day laborers,\textsuperscript{95} sewing clothes for the family,\textsuperscript{96} working in the fields alongside male relatives,\textsuperscript{97} washing clothes, gathering firewood, and retrieving water from the river.\textsuperscript{98}

This labor was uncompensated within the home, but when it did involve working for people beyond the household, there could be alternative transactions. For example, after her husband returned from the United States, María Zarate began sewing clothes for people. She insisted to them, “‘No, don’t pay me, don’t pay me.’ Or, they paid me a little or gave me some corn, or they gave me a handful of beans.” Accepting cash could have felt inappropriate to María for several reasons. Given the small size of her pueblo, Paracho, it is possible that a social cohesion among families deemed cash exchanges inappropriate.\textsuperscript{99} In her analysis of rural women’s work in the capitalist periphery, Deere includes a recognition that both “pre-capitalist” and “non-capitalist” social formations persist during capitalism’s uneven expansion.\textsuperscript{100} The relationship between María and the people she sewed for may have been of that nature, and María would have been hesitant to redefine it despite her economic troubles. This was

\textsuperscript{93} Quoted in Niblo, \textit{Mexico}, 2. The Mexican census should be regarded cautiously as a source. Niblo notes that people working in villages were often listed as “inactive,” because “to the purveyors of modernity, the village economy counted very little” (20).
\textsuperscript{94} Audelia Bentura Cortez, interview; Clara Eligio Tenorio, interview.
\textsuperscript{95} Audelia Bentura Cortez, interview.
\textsuperscript{96} Margarita Murillo, interview.
\textsuperscript{97} María Guadalupe Salcedo, interview; María Zarate, interview; Margarita Murillo, interview.
\textsuperscript{98} Margarita Murillo, interview.
\textsuperscript{100} Deere, “Rural Women’s Subsistence,” 16.
compounded by her gender. María’s reluctance to accept cash payments speaks to her understanding of wage-labor as a male realm. This view made it difficult for women in Bracero households to move into waged work in the absence of Braceros without disrupting social networks of dependency and kinship that were equally critical to their family’s economic well-being.

Despite the apparent prevalence of women’s economic activity and the fact that poverty necessitated the adaptation of gender norms, these were still transgressions and had to be navigated carefully. Women expressed the belief that, as Audelia Bentura Cortez says, “a woman [couldn’t] work the way the men do.”¹⁰¹ Because work outside of the home had been defined as male, women’s participation in such labor was understood as contrary to her position as a nurturer for the family. Margarita describes that her mother “always worked,” but she takes care to clarify that despite this, “her work didn’t mean she neglected us or left us, not like that… [she didn’t work] for ambition or to have this or that, no, not for that, just to give us what we needed.”¹⁰² Margarita’s defensive tone indicates that when she was growing up, women’s direct participation in the market economy was seen as a threat to family stability. Patriarchal ideologies meant that male mobility, whether it took men out of the home or across international borders, was an acceptable strategy to provide for his family. Women’s attempts to do the same, however, were seen as selfish.¹⁰³

Margarita and her mother knew that women’s presence in public space, even for economic purposes, could have severe consequences. María C. Ayón recalls an incident in which her abusive father threatened to kill her mother for that reason:

¹⁰¹ Audelia Bentura Cortéz, interview.
¹⁰² Margarita Murillo, interview.
In the rancho they sold things like thread… and [my mother] was paying [a man] and she was outside… they were talking there when my father came… he saw her talking with the man… it got him all worked up. He was already drunk, and he yelled: “Hide, because I’m coming!” And he grabbed her and went to the kitchen to look for a knife.¹⁰⁴

María’s mother escaped this particular incident by hiding outside, but eventually died at the age of thirty-eight after becoming sick “from the shock, I believe, from all of that, she got sick.” A woman’s presence outside of the home, let alone her labor beyond the domestic realm, was seen as a threat to her sexual purity and to her husband’s dominance.

A variety of factors shaped the degree to which women changed their activities during the absence of Braceros. The existence of support systems, such as children and extended family, could help to compensate for the men’s absences, as I will show in the following chapter. Remittances varied as well, and the existence of this cash flow was critical to Bracero families. Some families received no money from the Braceros, some received enough to fulfill the majority of their modest needs, and one was able to live on remittances alone. The amount of remittances that women in Bracero households received, and thus the amount of change they experienced in demands on their labor, was not always just a matter of how much a Bracero was able to save from his paycheck. María Zarate explains that when she received 50 dollars by mail from her husband, ya estaban destinados (it already had destinations). In his letters, he included precise instructions on how to spend the money. Even from the United States, men continued to exercise control over the family’s finances, regardless of whether or not their decisions corresponded to women’s realities at home.

Similarly, it was not uncommon for women to receive remittances indirectly. One Bracero, Manuel, from a pueblo near Irapuato remarks in his interview that, “Instead of sending

[the money] to my wife, I sent it to my father and he bought what he needed for himself to plant, seeds and all that. And whatever was left he gave to her.” Manuel says that he did this because his wife was “foolish,” implying that he believed she would waste the money on items he deemed unnecessary. Despite having witnessed his mother struggle to survive when his father was a Bracero years earlier, Manuel believed that it was his father, rather than his wife, who would become the head-of-household in his absence. Later, he decided that “it would be better to send [the money] to my wife,” and though Manuel does not explain this change, perhaps his father had failed to support Manuel’s wife and child. Manuel had assumed that in his absence the fundamental roles within his family would be unaffected, and that his wife’s dependency on him could be upheld through his father.

Men’s evaluations of what were “necessary” purchases also speak to their understandings of the work that their wives and daughters performed. Luz María tells a story of how her mother bought an electric iron from a traveling salesman while her father was in the United States. Luz María’s mother knew that keeping her children in well-ironed clothes was important for maintaining respect in the eyes of her neighbors, and an electric iron made this a shorter and easier task. She deemed the investment worthy despite their poverty but feared the consequences. Her husband had told her before he left that she was not to purchase anything on credit, so when he returned unannounced one evening, she hid the iron and instructed Luz María and her siblings not to tell him about it. Ironically, their father arrived carrying a radio from the United States, which he proudly showed to his family and his neighbors. Even after her husband returned home permanently, she kept the iron hidden from him. This suggests that her trepidation was not only due to having disobeyed him by purchasing on credit, but that he would see it as an unnecessary

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appliance, incompatible with his vision of his home and his wife. Though ironing was “women’s work,” men could still dictate the proper way to run a household and perform such labor.

In general, the work that women took on during Bracero absences falls into several categories: men’s work, the commercialization of their domestic skills, and the acquisition of new skills. Their movement into these new areas of labor had to be negotiated so as to maintain ideological adherence to an overarching patriarchal structure. Changes to the character of women’s work was not just a matter of physical intensity, but also its effect on patriarchal relationships in many areas of communal and familial life. Importantly, one shift that was not seen as transgressive was increasing reliance on work by older daughters. In their oral histories, discussions of how they gave up educational opportunities to work for their families indicates that young women were expected to take on the work that their mothers could not manage alone.

Most of the women had worked for their family’s subsistence in their youth, but those practices did not translate into socially acceptable behavior later in life, as wives and mothers. As young girls, all of the women had worked with their mothers in the home and many also “helped” their fathers and brothers in the fields. María Guadalupe began working in 1938 at the age of eight because her mother was sick, “so it was me who had to make the tortilla soup so that my siblings could eat.” Her daily routine included walking to the river to get water, and in her interview seventy years later, she laughs when recalling that those where the only times she saw other girls. “I worked almost always... the visits I had with friends, they were when we went with the water jugs on our heads to the river.” Similarly, at the age of seven María Zarate started working in the fields every day with her older brother, walking barefoot behind him and

106 María Guadalupe Salcedo Gudiño, interview.
107 María Guadalupe Salcedo Gudiño, interview.
the ox to place seeds in the furrows.\textsuperscript{108} Later in life, as temporarily single mothers during the Bracero Program, their presence in the fields was stigmatized.

María Guadalupe, whose story opened this paper, dealt with this stigmatization during her husband’s absence. Prior to his migration, he had been employed by some hacendados as a day laborer, and after he left, María Guadalupe took up this work. Once, she fell of a horse in the fields:

\textit{Interviewer:} And did you tell your husband that you had been injured?
\textit{María Guadalupe:} Well no, he wasn’t there, how was I going to tell him? And I was expecting a daughter, you know. And… well you’ve seen how tall those animals are, no? And I fell of the side.
\textit{Interviewer:} And while you were working outside, who watched your children?
\textit{María Guadalupe:} Well my mom. I had my mom and she watched them until I came back. And when I went to wash, to the woodpile, she watched them for me.

It is likely that her decision not to tell her husband was not only due to the challenge of communication, but also a number of concerns that made sharing her struggle with her husband difficult. María Guadalupe may have worried that this incident would change her relationship with him at a time when maintaining their connection was already difficult. Would the thought of her working in the fields while pregnant have changed his perception of her, or made him think that she was not fulfilling the responsibilities of mothering? She may have also worried that telling him about her difficulties would have caused him to feel guilty or demoralized. As mentioned in Chapter Three, women were understood as responsible for providing Braceros with emotional support. For María Guadalupe, “maintaining a family” involved reproduction and childrearing as well as laboring for an income. She had to work in the fields while pregnant despite the danger it posed to her health.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{108} María Zarate, interview. María says that her family did not own their own land. It is likely that she and her brother worked as day laborers on a hacienda.
\textsuperscript{109} Several women mention in their interviews that whenever their husband or father returned home between Bracero contracts, he would leave his wife pregnant. In Mireya Loza’s text, she cites an interview with a man who
Later, the interviewer asks, “And did your children have to work more too [when your husband was gone]?” María Guadalupe affirms this, as they helped her gather firewood and the oldest went to the river to get water. Older siblings were expected to take on additional work. What that work was and how it was valued and defined depended on their gender. While this was not the case in these women’s experience, it was not uncommon for older sons to seek work through internal migration. Luz María explains, “I’m the oldest girl in my family and I was in charge of my siblings… I provided for my siblings and raised them and I supported my mom too. I was her compañera.” Luz María emphasizes the affective aspect of this work, particularly as her mother’s friend. Luz María’s comment that she was her mother’s compañera is even more meaningful after she tells the story of how, at seven years old, she perceived the barriers her mother faced in trying to provide for her children in the absence of their father:

I was a little older… I think around seven years old, and I just saw her crying and everything. So I said to my mom, “I’m going to talk to my uncle Juan to see if he’ll give us some coffee so we can grind it for the store, and I’ll help you… we’re going to carry zapotes (fruit) to the fields and we’ll boil it, and I will sell it. And if you want to make pazole, I will sell it.” Because my mom was ashamed… So I told her, “If you want I’ll tell the ladies that we’ll make tortillas and I’ll bring them over and I’ll help you.”

Luz María’s mother agreed to her suggestions. These proposals demonstrate her awareness of the shame her mother felt about transgressing social expectations limiting women’s economic activities. She understood that her mother was uncomfortable asking for help from the uncle, and that speaking with the tortilla-sellers would have made her ashamed. Acting as the salesperson would seem inappropriate for a proper woman, so Luz María offered to take on these roles. As a

left his wife pregnant because “that’s why no one won her over, the trap was already occupied.” Loza posits that he was acting on the assumption pregnancy made her less sexually appealing to other men (Defiant Braceros, 73). Leaving their wives pregnant allowed Braceros to maintain a belief in their control of their wives’ sexuality. María Guadalupe’s story of falling off the horse indicates that pregnancy could also be seen as a way to control women’s activities.

For further discussion of the migration of sons, see Gonzalez, San José de Gracia: Village in Transition.
young girl, norms of women’s behavior had not yet been applied to her. She could be present in public spaces to sell their goods and participate in economic transactions in a way that her mother could not. Luz María’s ideas also emphasize the importance of their connections to various people in the community: her uncle, the store owners, and the women who sold tortillas. These networks could provide critical support for the family but had to be accessed through respectable means.

María Guadalupe and Carmen Lua also speak at length about the work they did for their mothers during their fathers’ absences. Prompted by questions about access to education, both reveal that schooling was sacrificed so that they could work to support the family. Carmen Lua stayed home to wash other people’s clothes, receiving one peso for each item. She says that she didn’t go to school because “I wanted to help my mom so that the other children could eat.”

When Audelia told her mother that she wanted to go to school, her mother replied, “If you don’t make the tortillas, you won’t eat.” This sacrifice was not seen as regrettable, as many people in these communities did not believe in a woman’s need for education. Margarita’s father did not allow her to go to school because he held this view, and told her that it was through marriage, not professionalization, that she would achieve a stable economic livelihood.

María Zarate was the only woman who survived on remittances alone as a source of income during her husband’s absence. However, the Bracero Program still marks a profound change in demands of her labor because of the particular circumstances of her marriage. Previously widowed, María married her second husband very shortly before he left on a Bracero contract. He was a widower as well, with several young children.

112 Audelia Bentura Cortez, interview.
113 Margarita Murillo, interview.
He wanted me so that I would take care of the kids. “[I want to marry you] so that you will be my wife but what I want is for you to take care of my kids, because I’m going to go to the other side” … So there I was in the house, I never left or anything, I was a housewife, I didn’t go out, I didn’t go out for anything.114

While María responds to the interviewer’s direct question about whether or not she worked while her husband was away with “no,” it is clear to her that her caring for the children enabled her husband to go to the United States. The explicit need for women’s mothering labor as a reason for marriage was not unusual. Raymond E. Wiest, who conducted a case study of Acuitzio, Michoacán in 1970, found that widowers with children rarely stayed unmarried for long. Wiest explains that it would have been socially unacceptable for a widower to take on “female domestic chores” or raise the children himself. These responsibilities would also “conflict with his efforts to gain a livelihood.”115 María’s new husband could not migrate for work unless a woman in his family or new wife could take on the responsibilities of caring for his children.

Several women responded to the absence of their husband by turning their domestic skills into commercial activities. Sewing, ironing and washing clothes for other people was a common activity, such as for Carmen, whose father “almost never sent money” and was “very irresponsible.” She sees this work as resulting from her father’s behavior, because “he was over there floating around in the United States and us [at home] suffering.”116 Audelia and Clara, who both lived in the fishing community of Isla de Janitzio, expanded beyond the traditionally female

114 María Zarate, interview.
115 Wiest, “Wage-Labor Migration,” 46. While Wiest gives evidence for regularity of widows and other scholars have discussed the economic power held by widows, Alma Fraile Barozio’s oral history indicates that this was not without struggle. In her pueblo, Parácuaro, she recalls that there was a widow who was fighting to gain control of the ejidal land her husband had owned: “It was always thought that that kind of work was for me, not for women, so women shouldn’t have had participation in the return of land,” the ejidal system (Alma Fraile Barozio, “Interview no. 1392,” interviewed by Mireya Loza, Bracero History Archive, UTEP, December 21, 2007, transcript, 1-40).
116 Carmen Lua, interview.
role of net-weaver. They took the nets out themselves to fish, a job their husbands would have done. Clara then traveled from the island to the lakeside town of Pátzcuaro to sell her fish. María Soledad’s mother sewed for other people as well, working on her little machine late into the night. Margarita’s mother washed and sewed clothes for people, but she also acquired a new skill as an injectadora who went around the pueblo administering immunizations and other injections. She was trained and paid 50 centavos per injection by an agency of the United Nations called the Centro Regional Para la Educación Fundamental Para la América Latina (CREFAL).

The oral histories suggest that overall, a Bracero’s return to his family after the end of his contract entailed a renegotiation of the meaning of women’s labor. Cohen explores the possibility that Braceros’ experience as migrant laborers could have affected their perception of women’s work in Mexico because of its exacerbation of the separation between men’s labor in the United States from women’s labor in Mexico. This created a “gendering of place” that “ultimately feminized Mexico and situated it as a site of family and community reproduction, not modern production.” If so, men would have been less likely to value the work performed by female family members. Margarita is asked in her interview if it bothered her father that her mother continued working after his return. She explains that because the work did not lead her...

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118 Audelia Bentura Cortez, interview. 
119 Clara Eligio Tenorio, interview. 
120 María Soledad Herrera de Reyes, interview. 
121 Belshaw, Village Economy, 111. CREFAL, the Regional Fundamental Education Centre for Community Development in Latin America, was a project of the United Nations and the Organization of American States that began in 1951. Inaugurated in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, it existed across Latin America. CREFAL classes were held in rural areas to “help students better understand village problems and needs.” They were often hosted through Cultural Missions, a project of Cardenismo, which will be discussed below (Lloyd H. Hughes, “Crefal: Training Centre for Community Development for Latin America,” International Review of Education 9, no. 2 (1963): 230, JSTOR). 
122 Cohen, Migrant Citizens, 188.
mother to neglect her children, and presumably her other responsibilities as mother and wife, he was not bothered.

However, he did not like that as an *inyectadora*, she was “walking around to all the houses… that she was accustomed to doing that, going to this house or that, no, no.”\textsuperscript{123} Before he went to the United States, the only occasion she had to visit other homes was to pray the rosary. Those religious gatherings did not disturb him, but her work as an *inyectadora* led Margarita to remark that her father was “very short-tempered with us and very possessive, he never let us go out.”\textsuperscript{124} As an *inyectadora* in the pueblo, Margarita’s mother would have interacted with and possessed an intimate knowledge of others’ bodies. Though her husband accepted that she might enter another’s home for the purpose of prayer, the professional and physical nature of this role upset him. Traditionally, indigenous communities had received medical care from *curanderas*, women who cured, who provided herbal remedies within their communities for a fee. They were almost exclusively women, usually middle aged and older, and treated children most often.\textsuperscript{125} The *inyectadora* was younger, trained in Western medicine, professionalized, and did not have a traditional place within the community. For these reasons, Margarita’s father resisted her new role. While Catholicism may have provided women independent mobility for religious practices, its patriarchal values proscribed other types of interaction.

Without regular remittances, women took a variety of risks during the absence of Braceros to earn additional income. The tools they used to mitigate against the social consequences of this work opened new spaces for women at the same time that it reinforced traditional patriarchal structures, such as those embedded in networks of dependency and the

\textsuperscript{123} Margarita Murillo, interview.  
\textsuperscript{124} Margarita Murillo, interview.  
Catholic Church. The family’s position in communal and kinship networks of dependency was a primary factor in necessitating the reinscription of these ideologies.

V. Networks of Dependency

Women were concerned with explaining the Braceros’ absences to their families and communities in certain terms. Both extended family and community acquaintances possessed the capacity to alleviate or exacerbate their struggle depending on how they evaluated the situation. Dinerman argues that during the Bracero Program, “social mechanisms,” not remittances, remained the primary means of insuring a household’s economic viability in Michoacán. These social mechanisms functioned as long as the household retained respectability within the community. As Luz María says, “in the small pueblos, people are always noticing things.” The pressure exerted by these networks encouraged women in Bracero households to reinforce traditional social values, particularly through adherence to traditional gender roles. The fact of the absence of men, regardless of the details of each situation, immediately placed the entire family in a community spotlight. The women anticipated this and adjusted their behavior accordingly. When they had no choice but to act outside of traditional gender roles, they used other ideologies to maintain respectability through discourse. Catholicism’s gendered concept of self-sacrifice was particularly useful, as I will discuss in the following chapter.

The community’s familiarity with the Bracero Program and the prevalence of participation could affect to what extent women were burdened to defend their family’s respectability. If a group of men from the community left, Bracero absences were more

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126 Dinerman, Patterns of Adaptation, 496.
127 Luz María Ayala, “Interview no. 1070,” interviewed by Alma Carillo, Bracero History Archive, UTEP, May 26, 2006, transcript, 1-26. She gives several examples of how this was expressed, including this amusing story: “(Laughs) There were some cicadas outside of the houses and if people had the radio on or if they were ironing the cicadas would start to screech (laughs) … and when the cicada started to screech, well everyone would start saying: ‘Ay, she’s using too much electricity.’ So that’s how they looked after things… My mother [was] careful that the cicadas (laughs) didn’t screech.”
normalized. Furthermore, it created a new network of women who shared the experience of being temporarily single mothers. In Maria Guadalupe’s interview, she shares the following:

*Interviewer:* Did [your husband] go with other people from the *rancho* or did he go alone?

*Maria Guadalupe:* Yes, they went… a lot of men went with him too, people I knew.

*Interviewer:* Did you get together at the time to talk with other women who had their husbands away?

*Maria Guadalupe:* Yes, of course, yes.

*Interviewer:* And what did you talk about?

*Maria Guadalupe:* Well, what do you think? Well, just about the absence of the men.

*Interviewer:* Did some of them complain because they were left with all the kids?

*Maria Guadalupe:* Well, yes. How could one not complain? And I did too, what with the weight of the firewood on my head and the rain and me slipping everywhere.128

While these were not formal gatherings, such as the “awake houses” organized by women in Rosas’ case study to facilitate difficult discussions about the experience,129 their effect was great. Even small moments of sharing between female family members stand out as unusual and powerful expressions of pain and catharsis. Margarita recalls a vivid memory of her mother and aunt conversing after their children went to sleep:

I remember they were really sad because they were alone … with the kids … so they started to talk, and to talk, and to talk, and later, *este*, well my father really liked to have a *canelita* (rum) in the morning which has a tiny bit of alcohol … so they, I remember, they started to drink these *canelitas*. And I remember that they were crying and they sang, and it was something that I never forgot, and they stayed there almost until dawn … It made them sad, feeling nostalgic and being alone, and with so many kids, and with nothing to eat.

At all other times, her mother was “very good, very quiet.” The psychological toll of Bracero absences, while not always expressed at the time or in recollections, was undoubtedly immense. Some women could rely on communal and familial emotional support, but others decided to keep silent about these difficulties due to the stigma associated with their husband’s absence. Importantly, both María Guadalupe and Margarita’s stories involve women conversing with

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128 María Guadalupe Salcedo Gudiño, interview.
other women in the domestic space. The extent to which sympathy was extended to Bracero families beyond this realm is uncertain; the insular nature of their communities did not always translate to mutual support of temporarily single mothers. If it was felt, it was likely to be expressed in other terms.

At times, the line between emotional and economic support blurred. Audelia first learned about her husband’s alcoholism through her brother-in-law, who went to the United States with him. Her husband did not communicate with Audelia, but his brother informed her that “they earned a lot of money” but her husband was not sending very much home because “he drank, he drank a lot.”

Similarly, when Clara’s brother went with her husband, he told her, “I am watching out for my brother-in-law.” He informed her that they were working, but that what they earned was only enough for their own living expenses.

Through the language of economics, they communicated painful and personal details about Braceros that they felt their relatives should know. It is possible that prior to the men’s departure, Audelia and Clara asked them to keep an eye on their husbands. While migration expresses a mobility only granted to men at the time, it is also evident that the men could feel the watchful eyes of their community while in the United States as well.

The most common type of support given to Bracero households by their extended family was providing them a place to live. When Margarita’s father left on his Bracero contract, she moved with her mother and step-siblings to a relative’s house. Over the course of his absence, she describes moving from one home to the next in their pueblo of Pajacuarán, living wherever they could for as long as they could:

When we were alone, my mother and us, sometimes we would go sleep at one of my mom’s relative’s houses, and, well… people were left without any money … sometimes

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130 Audelia Bentura Cortéz, interview.
131 Clara Eligio Tenorio, interview.
my mom’s sister gave us some ham … a bit of sugar. These are the little things that I remember from when I was a little girl, that one has many, many needs when, well, when the husband who supports is not there.132

It was even more common for women to live with their in-laws. The arrangement was a common practice in the early years of marriage but was often reinforced by the Bracero Program. When Audelia was in her late teens, she married a local man. When asked in the interview about their courtship and marriage relationship, Audelia speaks more quietly and taciturnly, simply saying that “back then it wasn’t like it is now, that’s all,” and then quickly clarifying “they didn’t steal me.”133 “They” are her husband’s family, whose presence became as important in her life as that of her new husband. Audelia’s defensive pose, insisting that she was not “stolen,” is not simply a metaphor. In his 1967 case study of Huecorio, located near Pátzcuaro, Michael Belshaw observed that marriages often took place as a result of a boy “stealing” a girl, which meant taking her virginity. While she was not required to marry him afterwards, virginity was considered a prerequisite for marriage and it would therefore be unlikely for her to find another option.134

While Audelia may not have experience this violence herself, she was clearly aware that it existed.

Her marriage was understood as a transaction, an exchange of her labor for protection. Immediately after their marriage, Audelia moved into the home of her husband’s family. In a study of migration from the same region of Michoacán, Dinerman describes that this practice was understood as a “training period” for the new bride, during which she would take over much

132 Margarita Murillo, interview.
133 Audelia Bentura Cortéz, interview.
134 Belshaw, Village Economy, 242. An article published by The Guardian in May 2017 discusses the persistence of marriages between Mexican girls and older men. Of the 320,000 12- to 17-year-old girls who are cohabitating, nearly 70% live with a partner who is at least 11 years older than them. Pregnancy is one reason for their marriages, but other factors also contribute. “While many girls are driven into relationships as a means of acquiring status and security – or to attempt to escape poverty and violence at home – early unions often perpetuate a cycle of abuse and deprivation rooted in gender inequality” (Hannah Summers, “Mexico’s lost generation of young girls robbed of innocence and education,” The Guardian, May 2, 2017.)
of her mother-in-law’s work, providing for the entire family until she started her own. It was also seen as beneficial in that it cloistered young women from sexual temptation during the early years of marriage, a notion rooted in Catholic colonial practices that will be discussed further in Chapter Six. While it is likely that Audelia would have expected this arrangement, she clearly did not believe that her mother-in-law’s supervision provided her with protection or support. Instead, she describes those first six years of her marriage as one of the most difficult periods of her life.

For six years, she worked constantly for the family and was not permitted to leave the house, recalling in the interview, “I didn’t even know when the sun came up or went down.” She sewed fishing nets and labored in the kitchen grinding corn and preparing meals for day laborers. Two years before her husband left as a Bracero, Audelia gave birth to several children and they moved out of her mother-in-law’s home. When asked later in the interview if other wives of Braceros were saddened by the absences, she mentions the experience of a friend who had not moved out by the time her husband became a Bracero: “One woman stayed with her father-in-law… she was always sad to stay alone with the family. It is very difficult to be alone.”

Women who stayed with their in-laws felt “alone.” Their position in the household often came in exchange for long days laboring in the kitchen, and sometimes outside the home, on behalf of her husband’s family. In contrast, women who lived with or received support from their immediate family are more likely to characterize the support they received as generosity and

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136 While Audelia does not explain the details of this arrangement, it is likely that her husband’s family sold food to day laborers who were headed to the mainland each day. Prior to the marriage, her mother-in-law would have prepared the food.
137 Audelia Bentura Cortéz, interview.
caring. Margarita recalls visits with her mother’s family during her father’s absence: “It made me happy to go visit them because… they gave us cheese, they gave us milk, and we were so poor.” Though Margarita’s mother would often insist that her children pass on these gifts to the poorer people they passed on the streets, Margarita implies that she did this not out of guilt but rather out of Catholic charity.

Bracero families trying to insure their economic stability dealt with broader networks as well, such as the vertical relationships between *patrones* and Bracero debtors. Who these *patrones* and funders were could vary. In Belshaw’s case study of Huercorio, he asked male inhabitants who they respected most in the village. Their responses did not point to a single figure, but instead to three primary reasons for why they respected a variety of community members: friendship, personality qualities, and economics. Responses that emphasized economic reasons included men who lent each other money and tools, while friendship was about “getting along well.” Belshaw concludes that care was taken not to insert economic transactions, including simple cash exchanges, into friendships.\(^{138}\) Thus, men who became Braceros departed from rural Michoacán in debt to *patrones*, middle- and upper-class men in the *pueblo* or a larger town nearby who provided favors in the contracting process or loaned them money for bribes and travel. Cohen calls this a “social debt,” because the process of requesting, granting, and receiving money and favors “enmeshed both receivers and grantors in a community of ties… connecting the poor to their benefactors and structuring social relations.”\(^{139}\) These middle- and upper-class men invested in Braceros who they believed would be able to make a profit in the United States.\(^{140}\)


\(^{139}\) Cohen, *Migrant Citizens*, 76.

\(^{140}\) Wiest shows that the profits of a Bracero were rarely redistributed to the community. Apart from repayment of lenders and the trend of increased spending on alcohol at local *cantinas*, the money remained within the family.
Until paid, the burden of this debt was carried by Braceros and their families. Luz Maria recalls that one afternoon during her father’s absence, her mother was roasting coffee outside the house. “A señor came by who had loaned money to my father so he could go north. He came [and said to my mother], ‘Doña Esperanza, how nice that smells.’ Well, it was the coffee she was roasting. But he came to see if the money had come yet so that she would pay him.”\textsuperscript{141} Such intimidations were another type of surveillance that Bracero families encountered. Esperanza would have been conscious of not only the señor, but what her neighbors would think if they saw him visiting her. In the absence of her husband, she had to deal with the consequences of his inability to pay the debt. Social standing and respectability in the community was an important way to encourage forgiveness and flexibility in debt relationships.

Contrary to Manuel Gamio’s theory that the Bracero Program would minimize the importance of kinship ties in rural communities, the experiences of women in Bracero households show that these networks became even more enmeshed during Braceros’ absences. Women relied on their families for food and a roof over their heads; in-laws took advantage of their daughter-in-law’s traditional dependence on them to extract more labor; and debtors transferred responsibility for loans on the Bracero’s entire family. Women understood that though some of these relationships burdened them, maintaining their place in the social world of the pueblo was critical to providing for their family. As will be discussed below, social standing was closely tied to behaviors and morals dictated by the Church, and women struggled greatly to balance traditional gender roles with the demands of economic survival.

VI. Post-Revolutionary Gendered Catholicism in Michoacán

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Most used it to purchase land and make improvements to their home, labor that was performed by family members (\textit{Wage-Labor Migration}, 5).

\textsuperscript{141} Luz María Ayala, interview.
Nearly all the women invoke Catholic ideologies to describe how they experienced the men’s absences. Themes of respectability, self-sacrifice and honor emerge throughout their oral histories, sometimes with direct connection to the women’s religious practices and sometimes through their articulation of a woman’s appropriate behavior during the absence. Evidently, the Bracero Program’s gendered division of labor was bolstered by Catholic ideologies about men and women’s roles. However, women also utilized these ideologies to justify their movement into new economic and social spaces.

Luz María, recalling memories of her father’s absence throughout her youth, describes her mother Esperanza’s emotional suffering and devoutness:

My mother was, *este*, a woman who gave us so much, gave us… (crying) well, it was really hard. And sometimes at night when were little … my mother prayed the rosary, she prayed and then we’d say: “I want chocolate, I want bread.” [She would tell us.] “Our Father, if you don’t pray He won’t give it to you.” And so we started to pray, praying so that… well, always with the hope that my father would return. That’s how it was. How it almost always was, always. But my mother, *este*, is like the model of a woman who takes care of her children, who carried herself so well and was careful with my father’s money so that he wouldn’t go… she didn’t waste anything so that he wouldn’t go.142

The metamorphosis of Luz María’s memories of her mother’s prayer to her mother’s honorable behavior reflects a connection between Catholicism and gender roles among peasant communities in Michoacán. In this family’s case, ideas about what it meant for a mother to take care of and “give” to one’s children had to be reshaped when they collided with pressure for her to carry herself well as a temporarily single mother facing extreme economic hardship. When women of Bracero families found it necessary to transgress the boundaries of patriarchy, they mitigated against the ensuing social consequences by emphasizing how their actions embodied Catholic womanhood.

142 Luz María Ayala, interview.
Doing so involved respecting her husband’s financial decisions. Esperanza was pained to provide basic care to her children—“at times my mother couldn’t find anything to give us to eat”—while also navigating social norms of respectability. Over the course of twenty years, Luz María’s father would return home from the United States between his eighteen-month contracts, and when he left Esperanza would be pregnant. She lost at least seven infant children during his absence. Facing all of this, she felt responsible not only for surviving her husband’s present absence in economic and social terms, but also for preventing his future absences. In Luz María’s narration of this time, her mother’s struggle is mediated through the Catholic ideology of abnegation. By defining her mother’s decisions and actions as “self-sacrifice,” the difficulty of the experience gains dignity.

Studies of Catholicism in Michoacán show a clear conversation between its unique Catholic history and these attitudes in Bracero households. In Setting the Virgin on Fire, Marjorie Becker argues that by the mid-twentieth century, inhabitants of rural Michoacán had come to practice a very specific form of Catholicism, “a symbolic system largely based on gender that called for self-denial that priests referred to as purity.”¹⁴³ This system began to develop after 1521, when the Spanish invaded the Purépecha empire. As they did across Latin America, conquistadores used conversion to Catholicism as the primary tool of social control in Michoacán, and at the heart of conversion was a remaking of gender roles in Purépecha communities.

A central gender ideology prescribed to indigenous people was that of honor, at the level of both individuals and families. While men could acquire honor through their actions, women could only maintain or lose it. Women’s honor in Spanish colonial society was entirely based on

sexual purity, and their sexual transgressions reflected poorly on the woman as well as her family. Among the upper class, the enclosure (recogimiento) of women in homes and religious schools demonstrated their virtue and sexual honor. While historians have debated the extent to which poor women internalized this notion, the experiences of women like Audelia Bentura Cortéz and Clara Eligio Tenorio suggest that the Catholic ideology of preserving a woman’s honor through isolation persisted in the form of living with in-laws during early marriage. In the context of peasant communities, the arrangement was also a transaction. “Protection” was exchanged for women’s labor.

Women’s honor, modesty, and self-sacrifice are embodied in the Virgin Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe, often referred to in Michoacán as la purísima, an image of “modesty and public powerlessness,” despite her immense importance to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican identity. Bernardino Verástique argues that in the conversion of Purépecha people to Catholicism, the persistence of indigenous identity occurred through their veneration of saints as divine beings, replacing indigenous celebrations of nature and gods. Thus, la purísima and the behaviors she modeled were commonly understood and celebrated. While many studies of gender and Catholicism in colonial Mexico focus on women of the middle and upper classes and

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147 Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*, 160.  
148 The Virgin of Guadalupe symbolizes mestizaje because she first appeared to Juan Diego, an indio, in 1531. Like pre-colonial earth gods, she had power over fertility, disease, and natural disasters. Her cult grew, and reproductions of her image proliferated in the late seventeenth century. Invoked by Miguel de Hidalgo during the war for Mexican independence as a symbol of nationalism, it was in the late nineteenth-century that she came to firmly symbolize a transcendence of divisions in Mexican society, which “disappear only in front of the altars of the Virgen de Guadalupe” (Luis Enrique Murillo, “The Politics of the Miraculous: Popular Religious Practice in Porfirian Michoacán, 1876-1910,” PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2002): 213, 224).  
leave uncertain the impact on the majority of women, these oral histories indicate that the gender ideologies embodied in *la purísima* held great import within the peasant class.

It was women who transformed the Virgin Mary’s characteristics into practice. Though the Virgin was ideally un-laboring, her image was adapted to the reality of peasant life. If peasant women could not be un-laboring, clerics developed an understanding of their labor that preserved notions of purity, modesty, self-denial, and submissiveness. While peasant women’s work was less visible as economically valuable or equal to her husband’s work, she was rewarded by clerical recognition of the social value of domestic duties. Women who sacrificed for their families were celebrated for modeling *la purísima*. At the same time that this acknowledged their efforts, it also reinforced the erasure of women’s work: women were applauded for working hard, but the definition of women’s hard work included modesty. Catholic ideologies encouraged people to define women’s work in moral rather than economic terms. Consequently, the suffering of women in Bracero families was respected and understood as natural.

In the absence of a male authority and with the standard of *la purísima* in mind, the wives of Braceros felt pressure to reassure the community of their household’s honor. The rumors of Bracero men with second families in the United States and the fear that they might not return was a threat to the honor and sexual purity of the family, and women felt responsible for absolving their household of this possibility. Margarita’s father worked as a Bracero from before she was born until she was four, but she speaks extensively about the good character of both of her parents. She knew of other Bracero families, including several “abandoned” families, and thus emphasizes that both her parents imparted “good principles” on their children, which were closely tied to diligence and suffering:
My father was always, well, very attentive to us, very hardworking too, a quiet person, he barely talked, often he didn’t talk. Este, that was my mother’s experience too, she was very patient (muy sufrida), patient people, well, who suffered, and [suffered] in silence so that nobody knew.150

When the Bracero Program began in 1942, Catholicism in Michoacán had been recently reinvigorated. In the 1930s, the height of Cardenismo in Michoacán, a struggle over land reform came in the form of a struggle over “campesino culture,” as Cardenistas took up the task of reforming and secularizing peasants. Cardenistas tended to be people who had grown up in the same region but were distinguished from the indigenous peasantry by their access to education, their mestizo ethnicity, their middle-class status, and their secularism.151 They held a particular understanding of the peasantry’s worldview, shaped by the Cristero Rebellions (1926-1929 and 1934-1936).

Following a move by the federal government to subordinate the power of the Church, a conglomeration of Catholic organizations formed militant groups, cristeros, the majority of whom were rural peasants. With fifty thousand cristeros at the peak, the uprisings were particularly strong in the states Jalisco, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Michoacán, Zacatecas, and Colima. The Second Cristiada (1934-6) responded to the socialist education projects of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) and the revival of anticlericalism. Cárdenas’ education reform sought, for example, to replace Catholic Sunday with “Cultural Sunday.”152 These violent

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150 Margarita Murillo, interview.
151 Becker, Setting the Virgin on Fire, 44.
152 Lewis, “The Nation,” 186. For Michoacán’s Catholic peasantry, Cardenismo was damned by its secularism. The first of the Cristero Rebellions (1926-9) was provoked by President Plutarco Elias Calles (1924-8) efforts to undermine the power of the Catholic Church. Liberals had begun to corrode the Church’s power with the 1857 Constitution and Reform Laws. Anti-clericalism resurfaced during the Mexican Revolution, and the Constitution of 1917 reflected a desire to subordinate the Church to the new Mexican state. Calles announced the enforcement of these articles in 1926. On July 31, the Church responded with a general strike suspending religious ceremonies. (Don M. Coerver, “Cristero Rebellion,” Mexico: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Culture and History, (Oxford, UK: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004); Sarah E. L. Bowskill, “Women, Violence, and the Mexican Cristero Wars in Elena Garro’s ‘Los recuerdos del porvenir’ and Dolores Castro’s ‘La ciudad y el viento,’” The Modern Language Review 104, no. 2 (April 2009); Stephen E. Lewis, “The Nation, Education, and the ‘Indian Problem’ in Mexico, 1920-
uprisings, tailored by local political contexts that pitted cristeros against agraristas, led Cardenistas to interpret peasant Catholicism as “fanatic.” Cárdenas also sought to target the institution of the Church, which held political and economic power. Priests were often related to hacendados, and haciendas were often educated in Catholic institutions, meaning that the profits and prestige of the landowning class and the Church were intertwined.

As a result, Cardenista reform projects often focused on minimizing the presence of the Church in peasant life. This anti-clerical tone led to a politicization of belief that polarized peasants and secular reformers, precluding the development of common ground on the issue of land ownership. For example, the local officials charged with land redistribution at times made anti-clerical declarations or enrolling children in socialist schools a condition for receiving land. Presented with a choice between defending institutions and clerics that had provided for them through paternalist practice or accepting the terms of elite reformers they had recently been in conflict with, many peasant communities became even more adamant in their religiosity and defense of the Church. This piety was increasingly practiced within the home, as religious services in churches had been interrupted during the Rebellions.

153 At the start of Cardenismo in Michoacán, 350 people owned the majority of land in the state, and 80% of the male labor force were employed as peons on haciendas (Becker, Setting the Virgin on Fire, 19-20). The imperative of land redistribution was an area in which cristeros and agraristas had more common ground that some historians have acknowledged. General Gorostieta, who led the cristeros in 1928, wrote a manifesto that included “laws based on people’s wishes and traditions,” votes for women, and land redistribution. The importance of agrarian reform to the cristeros is also reflected in the fact that the largest landowners in Michoacán opposed them. (Gonzalez, San José de Gracia, 166.)

154 Becker, Setting the Virgin on Fire, 123. Cárdenas’ socialist schools were run by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), a department created in 1921 for the purpose of “national development” in accordance with Article 3 of the 1917 Constitution, which declared a universal right to education. At one point incorporated within the Department of Anthropology, the SEP had always had a focus on studying and shaping the masses. In 1934, the SEP took on a distinctly socialist attitude, employing Soviet educational values and “instruction for labor and corporatism in society.” (Secretaría de Educación Pública, “Guía General de los Fondos”; Becker; Alan Knight, “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?,” Journal of Latin American Studies 26, no. 1 (February 1994): 76, JSTOR.)

155 González, San José de Gracia, 151.

Peasant women were a focal point of Cardenista reform efforts because women were perceived as custodians of tradition and because peasant women specifically were believed to be “puppets” of local clerics,157 the majority of whom were men.158 By encouraging the creation of “women’s leagues” to discourage religious fanaticism while also addressing familial issues like male alcoholism, Cardenistas proposed a secularization of existing gender roles.159 Once vacated of the role of religious nurturers, women would then be available to police other morals of the “modern” household.160 The similarity of women’s leagues to Catholic organizations is evident in the comparison to the religious club of the Vela Perpetua. Developed in Michoacán during the colonial period, women allowed to participate in the club. They held shifts to maintain continuous prayer, clean the chapel, and organize annual ceremonies.161 Though religious organizations like the Vela Perpetua could give women agency and the ability to move around the community independently, Luis Enrique Murillo observers that this club reflected a sexual division of labor: in requiring women to take daytime prayer shifts, they presumed that women were “free” during the day.162 Cardenista reforms often exhibited similar assumptions.

Scholars have suggested a variety of theories on the political sensibilities of Michoacán peasants during the mid-twentieth century. What is indisputable is that their views were complex, and likely did not revolve around the Cardenista dichotomy of religion versus land.

157 Becker, Setting the Virgin on Fire, 91.
159 Olcott notes that these temperance leagues placed women in positions of power “or, at least, of state-sanctioned vigilance” over men in their communities and sometimes used these positions to influence local politics (Revolutionary Women, 72-73). However, it reinforced women’s position as the family’s moral compass and nurturer.
160 Policing of peasant households was achieved through the creation of “Cultural Missions,” charged with inspecting whether or not rural schools were “in compliance with the State’s decision to provide socialist education to the campesino” (Secretaría de Educación Pública.)
Oral histories of Bracero households, which reveal the perspectives of people who were both religious and painfully aware of the consequences of inequitable land ownership, illuminate a different struggle. Cardenistas didn’t offer a critique of rural hierarchy itself, whether in terms of gender or class, but simply proposed alternative criteria for demarcating that hierarchy. Cardenas’ belief that peasants comprised “a nation still being formed… centuries behind the times, in a state of abandonment and stagnancy”163 is challenged by the reality of their participation in transnational labor systems. On the issue of alcoholism, for example, Cardenistas attributed it to a peasant pathology, while the oral histories of Bracero families reveal that alcoholism at times resulted from men’s difficult experiences as migrant workers in the United States.

The struggle of cristeros against Cardenista secularization had a broad and deep effect on rural Michoacán. The violence and issues at stake may have felt closer to Michoacán’s peasants than even that of the Mexican Revolution. This history is relevant to the women of Bracero families because it indicates the immense presence of the Church and its ideologies in their daily life. Catholicism’s prescription of gender roles influenced their community’s notions of respectable behavior during the absence of men. However, at the same time that Catholicism was restrictive, women also used it to navigate this difficult period. The language of la purísima, self-sacrifice and suffering, allowed them to voice their struggles without making them appear to complain. Furthermore, they used these ideologies to normalize economic activities that transgressed patriarchal boundaries by narrating this work as a sacrificial endeavor on behalf of their family.

163 Quoted in Becker, Setting the Virgin on Fire, 67.


**Epilogue**

The oral histories of these ten peasant women from Michoacán emphasize that mothers and daughters dealt with immense emotional and economic difficulties during the absence of Braceros. In the insular *pueblos* and *ranchos* where they lived, the women of transnational Bracero households could access community support, but it was often limited by the stigmatization of their situation as transgressive of social norms. They understood that mitigating against the social consequences of men’s absences was crucial to their survival in communities that held strict views of respectable behavior. Thus, at the same time that women often selected to engage in work that was non-traditional for women, such as fishing or being an *inyectadora*, they mobilized patriarchal and Catholic scripts.

Consequently, it may initially seem that the Bracero Program did not have a long-term impact on social and familial structures in Michoacán. Indeed, women’s temporary movements into non-traditional spheres do not guarantee permanent shifts in gender ideologies. Throughout the interviews, there is no explicit discussion of how the experience changed women’s perceptions of themselves, their work, or their relationship to patriarchy. Yet while the definition of men and women as social figures may not have changed, the women’s narratives reveal an impact on their self-perceptions in other ways. In applying the gendered language of Catholicism to their situation, they communicate the difficulty of their experience. Evoking qualities associated with *la purísima* was a method used to vocalize their struggle and normalize their new activities without disparaging their family or community. The women’s use of this moral language reveals their comprehension of dominant ideologies, and an understanding that they were challenging them.
Suggestions of the Bracero Program’s long-term impact on these families are also seen in the testimonies of different generations. The younger women interviewed, the daughters of Braceros, often place the Bracero Program within the broader context of their family history. Luz María in particular has developed a narrative of her family, and of Mexican peasants more generally. She recalls a song written by a Bracero, in which he sings, “We left land and family, the woman stayed there alone, sad and watching the children, so sad was her suffering.” This song goes on to describe the noble sacrifice of Bracero men, but Luz María’s memories of her mother’s struggle expand the song’s meaning. While she witnessed her mother’s loneliness and suffering, Luz María also saw all that she did to ensure the family’s survival. To her, the Bracero Program is very much a story about women, and it is for this reason that she is adamant about sharing it with her own daughters: “I tell them the history, I tell them everything because that is what is going to preserve the roots, the roots we carry.”

In 1965, a year after the Bracero Program was terminated, the United States and Mexico created the Border Industrialization Program (BIP). It designated a special industrial zone along the northern Mexican border, where foreign companies could operate *maquiladoras* with low labor costs, minimal environmental regulations, and duty-free export. The Mexican government argued that the *maquiladoras* would employ former Braceros, but over the past sixty years, the factories have relied overwhelmingly on female labor. One of María C. Ayón’s ten children, Josefina, eventually moved to Tijuana to work in a *maquiladora*. The women of Bracero families continue to contend with the consequences of the Mexican state’s neoliberal vision, which makes

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164 Luz María Ayala, interview.
rural life increasingly impoverished. They move into new economic spaces, and deal with the impact on the interpersonal relationships of family and community that follow. In a study of Purépechan women in the maquiladoras of Tijuana, Areli Veloz Contreras argues that their new experiences “mark a transformation in the organization of labor, but not in the logic of women’s work.”167 This project has indicated a similar trend during the Bracero Program. At the same time that women broaden the definition of “women’s work,” the category continues to naturalize gender hierarchies.168

Women’s personal narratives of their experience during the Bracero Program speak to the unanticipated ways that women cleaved new opportunities in the face of economic hardship. Their transgressions of social boundaries and their reiteration of patriarchal and Catholic ideologies to justify such movements are of equal importance. The unexpected tools women used to navigate these transitions speak to the complexity of their role in the transnational Bracero families. They chose to encounter the challenges posed by the Bracero Program in a specific way, and these decisions reflect the women’s deep involvement in the economic, social, racial, and political realities of rural Michoacán.

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