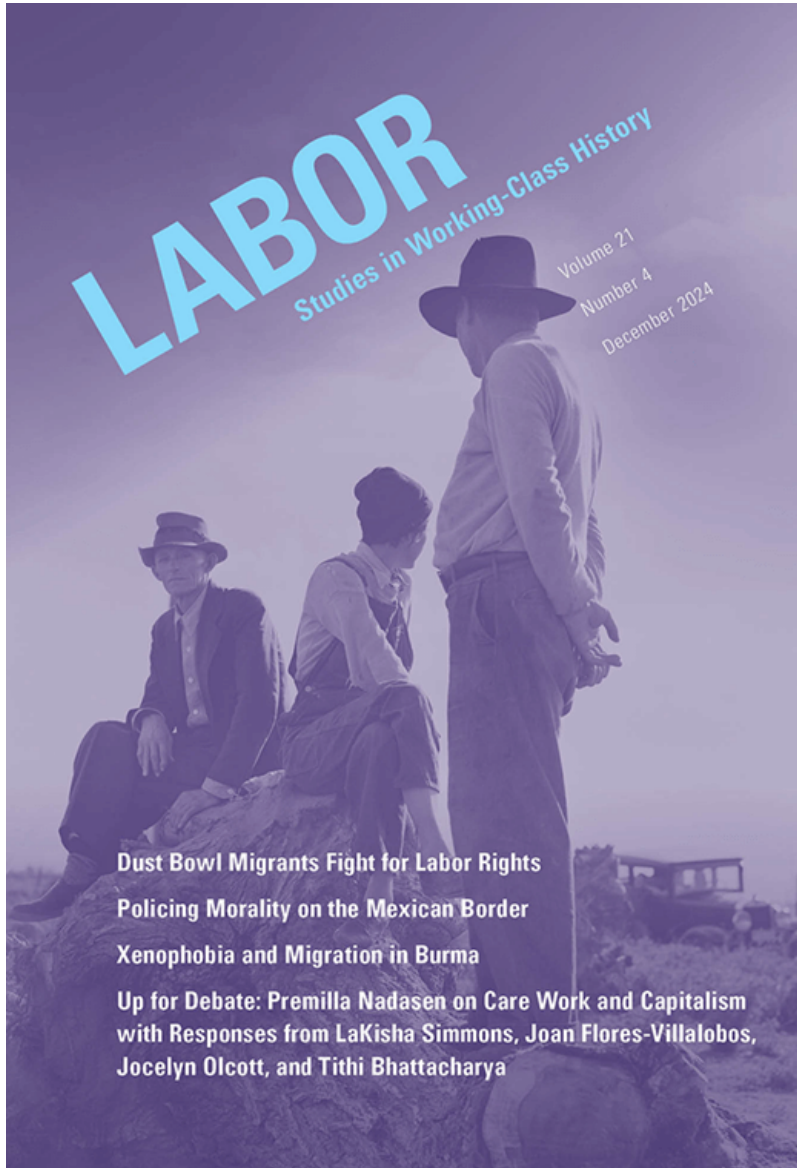


## Erik Bernardino's "Between the Homing Pigeon and the Vagrant": Free Essay available

Posted on December 28, 2024 by Erik Bernardino

Editor's Note: Erik Bernardino's compelling essay, "Between the Homing Pigeon and the Vagrant," published in the December issue of *Labor: Studies in Working Class History*, is available from behind the paywall until March 31, 2025, courtesy Duke University Press. Check it out! Below Bernardino summarizes his findings and how it relates to his other work.



The December issue of *Labor: Studies in Working Class History*

My article, “Between the Homing Pigeon and the Vagrant, ” published in the December issue of *Labor: Studies in Working Class History*, grows out of my larger book project which examines the experiences of sex and agricultural migrants at the California borderlands. In my work, I attempt to bridge the early twentieth century morals policing project that disproportionately targeted immigrant women to the experiences of Mexican contract wage laborers. Sex and contract workers are rarely considered alongside one another, yet since the late nineteenth century, US immigration policy has consistently sought to exclude both sets of workers from the nation.

My article seeks to bridge the gap between the early twentieth century morals policing project that disproportionately targeted immigrant women and the later 1920s and beyond labor policing of Mexican immigrants at the border. In the article, I demonstrate how a suggestion in 1910 by the Supervising Inspector of the Mexican Border District, FW Berkshire, proposing to expand the bureau's ability to deport not only women suspected of prostitution but also contract laborers transformed morals policing into labor policing. Berkshire's suggestion, I argue, signaled a profound transformation of the border for Mexicans who would be excluded on racial and socioeconomic grounds. Paradoxically, as the Immigration Bureau attempted to more strongly enforce its border with Mexico, US-based employers sought continued access to large pools of Mexican laborers. To solve the apparent contradiction, immigration agents and employers worked to achieve a regulated flow of Mexican agricultural workers and enacted post-entry social controls steeped in morals policing by utilizing the tropes of the Mexican "homing pigeon"—an immigrant who did not settle in the country, marking them as "good moral immigrants" who did not need to be part of immigration restrictions—and the "immoral criminal vagrants" who were deportable economic burdens.



"A Los Pioneros de Mexicali" (To the Pioneers of Mexicali)  
Statue, Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico. Photo Credit: Erik Bernardino

The article serves as the basis of the third chapter of my book project, *Labor's Morality: The Hidden Ties Between Sexual Labor, Agricultural Work, and Justice at the California Borderlands, 1875-1937*. In the larger project I argue nation-states like Mexico and the United States have historically moralized work to create boundaries between "legitimate" workers and "immoral" criminals. *Labor's Morality* defines this moralization as a set of

values, principles, and beliefs that determine what and who qualifies as acceptable work/laborers within a society—and what/who does not. In doing so, *Labor's Morality* shows how, as sex and agricultural workers crossed and recrossed the California-Mexico border, they revealed and contested the conflicting definitions of morality between Mexico and the United States. Through their crossings, workers exposed the tensions surrounding labor, morality, and citizenship, transforming the border into a site where competing ideals of work clashed, creating a space for them to redefine what it meant to work and live with dignity at the U.S.-Mexico border.

My book project, and article in *Labor*, demonstrate how the concept of labor's morality was used as a tool of exclusion, defining not only who could work but also who belonged in the nation. My work asserts that understanding the broader criminalization of Mexican migrants in the California borderlands requires a close examination of the policing and regulation of sexual laborers and I highlight the intertwined experiences of sex and agricultural workers.

## Author



[Erik Bernardino](#)

Erik Bernardino is assistant professor at Bates College, Lewiston, Maine. He focuses on United States Latinx, immigration, and borderlands histories. He is interested in the intersection of immigration policy and labor migrations at the turn of the twentieth century. His current research questions why US federal-level immigration policies relied on local-level morals policing to enforce national-level policies of border control. I am currently working on preparing a book manuscript on the California-Baja California borderlands. I focus on agricultural and sexual commerce workers at the turn of the twentieth century as they negotiated between US and Mexican state projects of labor policing.

