

## A CAMERA IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

*In an unpublished image from the 1930s, studio photographer Rafael Platero Paz embraces a white North American man near a river in El Progreso, Honduras. Both men are stark naked and cover only their genitals with leaves. They look directly into the camera.*

*This essay examines Platero Paz's self-portraits, found in a visual archive made up mostly of photos of peasants and banana laborers, new mothers and local merchants. Invoking Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology of sight, I argue that in his traditional self-portraits, Platero Paz posed for an eventual Other. He was there, waiting for the Other's recognition and approval. And insofar as the Other was posited as the destination and ideal viewer of these portraits, Platero Paz was declaring: "I am the Other." In contrast, in the Garden of Eden photo, Platero Paz incorporates the Other into his landscape and declares "I am we," establishing a homosocial, if not homoerotic, subject-subject relation in the hypermasculine space of a banana plantation.*

The man who discovers himself directly in the *Cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognise him as such.

– Jean-Paul Sartre (2001: 39)

In an unpublished image from the 1930s, the studio photographer Rafael Platero Paz embraces a white North American man near a river in El Progreso, Honduras (see figure 1). Both men are stark naked and cover only their genitals with leaves. They stand enclosed by dense foliage that opens into a clearing in the foreground, where the camera is set up. With his right hand on his hip, Platero Paz holds a couple of branches from a tree resembling a flowering dogwood, with its smooth, broadleaves that fall a bit too low to fully cover his pubic region. And the other man, whom I have not been able to identify but who was, in all likelihood, a US citizen employed by the United Fruit Company, stands with his left hand on his hip. He is holding a single, huge sheathing leaf that is tucked between his crossed legs. Their eyes look directly into the lens of the camera. With the corners of his mouth slightly raised and the beginnings of crow's-feet around his eyes, Platero Paz has a slight Duchenne smile. The North American squints a little from the brightness of the midday sun but self-assuredly holds his head back and sticks his chest out. Each man is turned toward the other at a slight angle, the vertex of which is right between them at the ribs. In their nakedness and with their arms, the two men are physically connected to each other by overlapping signs of intimacy. The homosociality, if not homoeroticism, of this image reminds us that multiple modes of cross-cultural encounter were possible in the banana-growing regions of Honduras.



**FIGURE 1** *The Garden of Eden. From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.*

What are we to make of this provocative photograph? What light might it shed on the problematic of genders and sexualities in non-metropolitan sites in Latin America, in contact zones on the periphery of the early twentieth-century US empire? Thinking through these questions, this essay examines Platero Paz's self-portraits, which I found in a visual archive made up mostly of photos of peasants and banana laborers, new mothers and local merchants. By slowing down the interior operations of seeing and being seen, this essay also explores how the viewer and the viewed mutually constitute each other through their respective gazes. Here, the phenomenological reflections of Jean-Paul Sartre will help us describe the possibilities that are opened up by the potential of being seen by another person. By interpreting the coded visual messages in Platero Paz's self-portraits, I hope to show how he relentlessly sought the approval and recognition of his implied North American viewer, only to find in a moment of national emergency that he was expelled from the Honduran community into which he had

putatively integrated. But in the photo that I am calling *The Garden of Eden*, Platero Paz and his friend from North America stood together as equals, artistically and physically challenging reigning norms of heterosexuality.

### Interpretative indeterminacy and queering the periphery

Whereas Platero Paz's traditional self-portraits are pasted in family photo albums and hang on the walls of his daughter's living room, *The Garden of Eden* appears to have circulated in neither private nor public image economies. The North American in the image most likely took a copy of it. But that raises the question of its significance, given that, before I discovered this image among other negatives in the Platero Paz archive, perhaps only two people had seen it. Its first-order significance is thus as a record of an event, which all photos are. This photo is evidence of an encounter between two people and a camera. But its greater significance, I will argue, is that it is a record of a particular kind of unexpected encounter, one of intimate equality in a site characterized by violent hierarchy.

Much of the analysis of visual culture appropriately focuses on images that circulated in public economies. The idea is that from the ways that these images were produced, marketed, and consumed, researchers can make inferences about the values and beliefs of those who made and viewed them. This hermeneutic, which moves between images and the records of the public cultures within which they circulated, is methodologically and epistemologically sound. It is the approach adopted by luminaries – such as Deborah Poole (1997), Jens Andermann (2007), Beatriz Jaguaribe (2009), and John Mraz (2009) – in the study of Latin American visual cultures.

Yet while researchers must continue to examine the images that played the most important roles in fabricating new social realities, there are vast, and often neglected, archives of pictures that circulated in private economies. Such everyday images – epitomized by an ever-deeper ocean of family snapshots – are often banal, barely artistic, and were never widely seen. In most cases, they were exchanged between families, friends, or lovers (James and Lobato 2004; Hirsch 1999; Bourdieu 2003; Batchen 2006). In other cases, they traveled through the closed circuits of a private company or an agency of the state, particularly the police (Sekula 1983; Tagg 1993). Neglected by the aesthetic and intellectual movements of their day and by art historians of today, these images continue to remain mute.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly the case for the majority of images in the archive of Rafael Platero Paz.

The value of this archive is its rare and extensive collection of photographs made by and for subalterns of the North Coast: banana plantation workers, *campesinos*, women, the indigenous, Garifuna, and immigrants from China and Palestine. However, the drawback to working in this rich archive is that nearly all of its images are separated from the context within which they were exchanged and viewed, kissed or cursed. Images from the Platero Paz archive rarely come with an accompanying text to anchor meaning. Like all uncaptioned images, these photographs can evoke but won't tell; they can suggest but won't explicate (Sandweiss 2004: 330). But these images can be situated in the following contexts: the archive itself and the position of each picture within it; the location of the studio; the time period in which any given image was produced; and the materiality of each image object (e.g., most are roughly datable by

the brand and type of film, the paper upon which they were printed, and the actual content denoted in the images themselves). Consequently, in attempting to interpret photographs from this archive, I lean heavily on the compositional elements of the images and on the social and cultural signs encoded within each one. But when the meanings of those signs are too unclear, contradictory, or unstable, then I cannot be the one to fix the floating chain of signifieds. Instead, I seek to recognize the threshold of interpretative indeterminacy and to stay on this side of it, just as one must do when approaching textual records. Approaching photographs that circulated in private economies reminds us of the limits of using pictures as primary sources. But doing so also invites us to walk up to that threshold and to ask what might be gained from examining photos that were taken for very few viewers.

With respect to the meanings of the rarely seen images that I analyze here, I aim to show that they can shed light on broader issues of gender and sexual nonconformity. Recently, scholars of queer life have shown that being rural and gay are not mutually exclusive ways of being (Howard 1999; Gray 2009).<sup>2</sup> While much of this critical work has been an attempt to excavate transgressive queer subjectivities and practices in the heart of what have previously been considered to be the most homophobic backwaters of the United States, my work challenges assumptions about the heteronormativity and hyper-masculinity that are often considered endemic to the banana-growing regions of Central America. This is not to minimize the cultural script of *machismo* that was so prevalent in and around the banana plantations. Nor do I seek to downplay the violent repercussions that resulted from protecting an exaggerated sense of male honor. Indeed, among banana workers, one man's challenge to another's masculinity was often a pretext for a machete fight or a shooting.<sup>3</sup> But rather than work within the urban-rural, metropolis-countryside binary perspective, I ask what happens when questions of queer male sexuality are posited from the periphery in relation to the metropole. Early twentieth-century El Progreso was an intermediate space, considered by many North Americans to be in need of technological ingenuity and rationalization, and thought by many Hondurans to be an economically dynamic place that represented their future. In addition, *The Garden of Eden* represents the kind of fragmentary evidence that rural queer studies might need to tap as scholars attempt to make legible the experiences of gender nonconformists in non-urban spaces. Finally, by reading this image through Sartre, I hope to offer an example of one way that we might make sense of photographic traces that suggest a degree of gender instability and fluidity in even the most unexpected places.

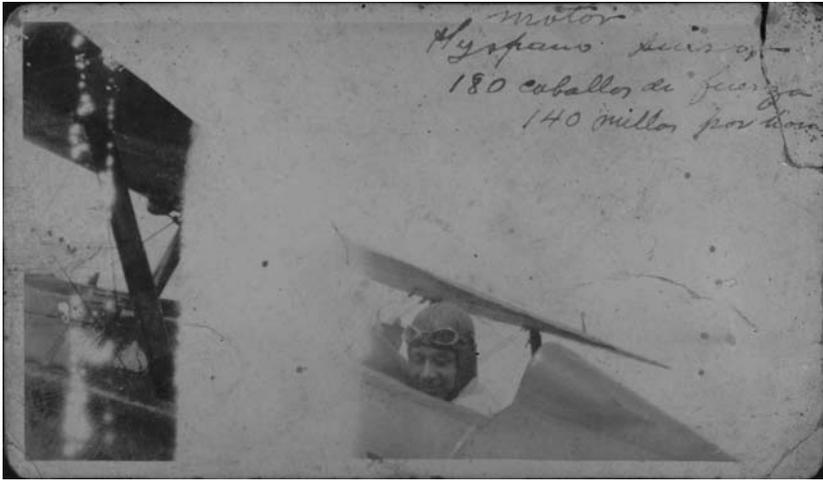
### **Part one – Rafael Platero Paz's other**

In 1898, a boy was born in the thriving coffee town of Santa Tecla, El Salvador. His parents, Florencio Platero and Andrea Paz, were small-scale coffee growers in a region of the country that was connected to the world economy by railroads, ports, and roads.<sup>4</sup> They named him Rafael Platero Paz and he was only twenty years old when he left home in search of a wider world. From his birthplace in El Salvador, Platero Paz headed north to Mexico City, where he found work in a pharmaceutical laboratory called 'El Aguila.' While there, he measured the dosages of medicine and quantities of the various chemicals that the company sold, providing him with the rudiments of the technical understanding that he would later draw on to develop film in a darkroom.

It was not long before Platero Paz made his way further north. His first job in the United States was as a salesman in New York City, where he summoned his gifts as a conversationalist and artist to sell Parker pens to the passersby whose faces he sketched as he stood on the sidewalk (López de Castillo 2000). His daughter Aída remembers, perhaps nostalgically, stories that her dad used to tell her of how the store would fill up with people watching him draw (López de Castillo 2008). As an indication that he had talent as well as desire, this memory takes us from his attraction to artistry to a first public recognition of his skill.<sup>5</sup>

By the time he was twenty-three years old, he had enlisted in the US Army, where he served as a Private Specialist Sixth Class with the medical detachment of the 41st Squadron (figure 2).<sup>6</sup> In the Army, Platero Paz worked as a pharmacist, never carried arms, never entered battle, and was never wounded. His physical condition was listed as good and his character was noted to be ‘excellent.’ On May 21, 1921, the Army paid him \$37.70 and his superiors noted that his ‘service was honest, “faithful” and that he had ‘no time lost to be made good.’<sup>7</sup>

Platero Paz’s passport was stamped on September 24, 1926 for passage through Guatemala to Honduras, where he would soon arrive at his final destination in El



**FIGURE 2** Rafael Platero Paz in an airplane. Like the railroad, the telegraph, and Platero Paz’s own chosen instrument – the still camera – the airplane was, and still is, a symbol of modernity, bestowing upon the traveler an aura of belonging to a larger, more cosmopolitan, community. Platero Paz was a man on the move and he found the whole thing exhilarating, as reflected in his handwritten note on the back of this photo sent back home to family, ‘SE-5 [a WWI fighter built by the Royal Aircraft Factory]. This photo was taken from another airplane while flying – note the expression on my face due to the terrible wind produced by the vertiginous course of the plane – 140 miles per hour.’ A photo is much more than evidence, but we can imagine the planning, effort, and resources that went into producing this memento. As if this photo spoke for itself, he literally wrote across it, making explicit in words what had already been visually encoded: He, Rafael Platero Paz, is participating in the vertiginous flight of modernity. *From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.*

Progreso, a town that lays a mere one hundred and fifty miles from where he was born.<sup>8</sup> After passing through the burgeoning industrial city of San Pedro Sula and then continuing on to Tela, another United Fruit Company port city, he stopped in a small eatery next to the Hotel Ulúa in the city of El Progreso. The woman who prepared his warm victuals that day, Adelina López Pinet, was a single mother. She was also the woman with whom Platero Paz would spend the remaining fifty years of his life, suggesting that the way to a man's heart really is through his stomach.

From the early 1930s into the 1980s, Rafael Platero Paz was the main studio photographer in the banana company town of El Progreso. As an artisan and an entrepreneur, he documented everything from children receiving their First Communion to prostitutes being monitored by public health officials. He made the negatives and, in his darkroom, he developed them into prints and postcards. With his photos, Platero Paz encouraged banana workers, peasants, and other members of the aspiring classes to dress up with their spouses and children and to inscribe themselves as honorable, respectable participants in the Honduran national imaginary.

When Rafael Platero Paz died, he left everything – around fifteen boxes of photographs and undeveloped negatives, his cameras, and equipment – to his daughter, Aída Dolores López de Castillo. As an amateur historian, Profesora Aída has published several pamphlets on the local history of El Progreso. Profesora Aída immediately took a keen interest in my research into the histories of Honduran cultures of photography. She offered me full access to her private collection, composed of approximately 40,000 negatives, out of which I digitized approximately 2,000. These photographic images captured and co-constituted the discourses of nation and race, class and gender of this vibrant Central American banana company town.<sup>9</sup>

### *Rafael Platero Paz – a portrait of the artist*

In addition to the thousands of images that he took for clients, Rafael Platero Paz left a series of remarkable self-portraits (figures 3–7). With the camera, he created images of himself. He probably made some of the self-portraits simply because, as a model, he was available on those slow days when few customers were walking through the doors of his studio. He may have also taken pictures of himself for the reason that so many of us look in the mirror – just to see what he looked like. In other images, the carefully arranged settings and the clothes that he wore suggest that the intent behind making those self-portraits was to offer images of himself as he wished to be seen by others. By contrast, in the image of himself as an old man, whose face shows signs of disease, he is not using self-portraiture as a projection of himself to raise his social status. Instead, he looks inward and feels comfortable documenting his own physical decline.

Yet, through many of his self-portraits, Platero Paz showed himself to already be who he wanted to become. In figure 3, he reenacts this logic of self-portraiture. Platero Paz depicts himself looking off into the distance. We see him as an Other would see him. The viewer's position is designed to be on his front porch and with enough distance so that his entire body can be taken in *as an object*. In making himself the subject of this photograph, Rafael Platero Paz has made himself the object of the viewer's gaze – he does not look at us, we are to look at him, to objectify him, to see him as that which he wishes to become.



**FIGURE 3** *The Thinker*, self-portrait by Rafael Platero Paz. From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.

What do we see? We see a strong, confident man, the master of the house. With his back toward that house, he looks out into the distance. Yet he is still on the porch and is thus predicated by the domestic setting. But he also hangs his leg into the space beyond the house, explicitly connecting himself to what lies beyond his front porch. His hand is on his hip, a posture denoting seriousness. The ‘fact’ that he is of this world and that he is willing to get his hands dirty is accentuated by his rolled-up sleeves. Nature, given by trees and shrubs, is his backdrop. Thus he situates himself right on the point that separates his home from the world beyond it. While he is firmly rooted in the domestic, which he literally sits inside of, he is oriented outward, toward the horizon.

He is contemplative, not active. What he is doing is sitting and we might say that sitting is *just* sitting, it is not *doing* anything at all. Or rather, he is in a stereotypically contemplative posture. As he stares off into the distance, the viewer sees him as a



**FIGURE 4** Self-portrait by Rafael Platero Paz. From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.

subject, as a being with projects and aims, as a man who looks at the horizon and thinks about what is possible. In this way, he makes himself known to us as fully human. Yet, we know that he is constructing who he wants to become and, in so doing, he has certain roles and paradigms in mind.

While Platero-Paz-as-Thinker is certainly one possible interpretation of this image, another is of the moviestar. He could be seen as the leading man, the hero on a Hollywood movie poster, another Clark Gable or James Cagney. But, in this image, he was not playing the part of the *caudillo* or a *campesino*, both of which have their own distinctive iconographies.<sup>10</sup> Here, he can be seen as a new urban type. An up-and-coming Latin American man, anchored to his home and family, but with an outlook and sense of selfmadeness that rejects restrictively local identities. And so while he sits contemplating the horizon, he does so in a posture that connotes the potential for intentional action. In modernist art, the triangle has long served as a charged symbol of generative action (think of the revolutionary posters from early Soviet Russia, including El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*). In this self-portrait, Platero Paz uses his body to form several triangles, including the two pronounced ones that are formed by his left arm, which points back toward his house, and his right leg, which points out away from his house and into nature. His gaze doubles the strength of this vector that connects



**FIGURE 5** Self-portrait by Rafael Platero Paz. From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.

him to the world beyond his house. Thus in this autorepresentation, Platero Paz offers us a combination of strong lines that depart from his gaze and that narrate his own role as a mediator between his home and the world beyond it.

Another way of putting it would be to say that in this self-portrait, Platero Paz affirms that he is shaping his own identity but that he is doing so within a particular context that positions him between the wider world and his home. Thus the identity that he fashions for himself is not that of a transcendental, decontextualized authentic and essential self, rather it is one that is rooted in a place, perched on a boundary between nature and domesticity. In this photograph, Platero Paz narrates the contingent, still unfolding story of his own becoming.

Platero Paz most often photographed himself as he wished to be seen by others. By linking himself to particular cultural artifacts (e.g., the airplane, the camera, the suit and tie) and by striking formulaic poses (e.g., those of the Thinker and the bourgeois man of studio photography, epitomized in Portrait Galleries of Illustrious Men), Platero Paz repeatedly reaffirmed his status as a modern, cosmopolitan individual. Yet these repeated iterations might also suggest that the Other to which Platero Paz addressed himself photographically may have never recognized him as being who he represented himself to be.<sup>11</sup>

### *Sartre's cogito and self-portraiture*

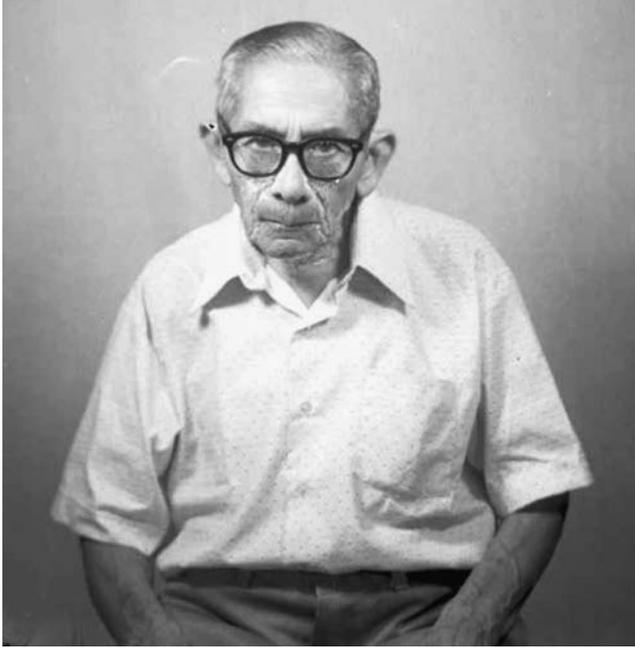
At first blush, self-portraits seem to be the most narcissistic of projects. After all, in creating a self-portrait, I, as an artist, make myself into both the subject and the object of my own work. Nevertheless, I would like to draw on the existentialist reflections of Jean-Paul Sartre to argue that it is structurally impossible for me alone to make myself into an object



**FIGURE 6** 'The Photographer.' Self-portrait by Rafael Platero Paz. From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.

and that, in order to objectify myself, I must always posit the possible presence of another being who is capable of seeing me. Rather than mere indulgences, I suggest that self-portraits always and inevitably connect us to other people, they reaffirm to us that we are beings-in-the-world and that an essential aspect of our lives is what Sartre referred to as the 'permanent possibility of being seen by the Other' (1956: 256).

I get to the presence, acknowledged or not, of the Other in self-portraiture by following Sartre's phenomenology of sight. But before turning to that argument, it is important to note that one need not accept Sartre's entire ontological project in *Being and Nothingness*, parts of which he himself rejected in his later work and other parts of which were soundly critiqued by the likes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to recover some of his insights and to apply them to photography. Indeed, while Sartre is recognized as arguably the most ambitious philosopher of the twentieth century, his work has been thoroughly critiqued, and sometimes just plain ignored, by several generations of phenomenologists, feminists, psychoanalysts, and post-structuralists.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, I hope to show that Sartre's 'personal and intellectual dialectic of attraction and



**FIGURE 7** 'An Old Man,' self-portrait by Rafael Platero Paz. *From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.*

repulsion' to vision yielded important insights into how the subject constitutes herself through the acts of seeing and being seen.<sup>13</sup>

Sartre combined Husserl's insight that consciousness is never independent of its object and that we are always conscious *of* something with Heidegger's emphasis on being-in-the-world. This allowed him to demonstrate that, contra Descartes's indubitable *cogito* which was extracted from the world and all sense perception, consciousness is always embedded in the world.

Sartre starts by having the reader imagine a world made up only of objects. This world would have a simple ontology. There would be causality and the laws of physics would still apply. But, he argues, there would be no subjectivity and thus no becoming because there would not be any intentional projects. We would have what he calls the *in-itself* structure, which we can gloss as an 'object,' but there would be no witnesses, no aims, and no *telos*.

Next he says, let's add one subject to this world. Everything now appears as if it is there *for* the subject. The subject reorganizes the entire world to refer to a particular point of view – *his* point of view – and the objects in the world present themselves to him as tools or obstacles to the projects he wishes to pursue. This is what Sartre refers to as the *for-itself* structure, or as 'the being of consciousness,' and which we can gloss as the 'subject' or 'subjectivity.'

Now, it might be tempting to try to locate self-portraiture at this second ontological level, after all we are talking about a single artist who purports to depict himself for himself. But if Sartre's description of consciousness is correct, then that is not possible. For while I may attempt to know myself 'from the outside,' to turn myself into an object, it is

structurally impossible to do so because it is a perspective on the very vantage point that I occupy but which I can never see (Spade 1995: 213). When I attempt to turn myself into an inert object, I enter into what Sartre calls 'bad faith,' or self-deception. Only the Other can succeed in seeing me as an object. Thus, within Sartre's phenomenology, self-portraiture must either be an act of bad faith, for as soon as I attempt to objectify myself, the Me slips from my grasp, or it is an example of an act carried out by an artist who posits the possibility of being seen by another. And it is the presence, and mere possible presence, of an Other that creates new ontological possibilities.

Sartre gets us to think about how we come into contact with other people by asking me, the reader, to imagine that I am sitting in a park. I see the green lawn that is so many meters long and wide, the beautiful trees are a certain distance away, and a man across the lawn is reading a book. But suddenly, the man puts his book down and looks me in the eyes. Suddenly I realize that everything in the park is not arranged around me and from my perspective. In the instant that he looks into my eyes, I am frightened by the sudden realization that the world is also arranged around him. The world as it exists *for-me* suddenly dissolves into the world as it exists *for-him*. He understands things, and me, from *his* own point of view and the values in the world are *his* values, which I can never fully see from his point of view. Furthermore, I realize that I can be seen by him and it is this new relation of being-seen-by-another that creates the ontological possibility that I can be an object. And it is this possibility, I contend, that governs self-portraiture. For even if no one else sees me painting a picture of myself, I still do it by positing the invisible presence of an other who is watching and who may, *perhaps*, see this picture of me. Whether I am aware of it or not, whether it is a reflective and self-conscious act, or a non-reflective act of consciousness done while I am 'absorbed in' the activity itself, at some level I inevitably presume the possibility that someone else may see this portrait of me. This is so because it is a relation of being, not of knowing, a move that allowed Sartre to recast the problem of other minds. As Paul Vincent Spade notes, 'For Sartre, the fundamental question is: *how do I come into contact with other people?* The question is *not: how do I know other people exist?*' (1995: 214, emphasis in original).

If Sartre is correct in his account of these most basic structures of consciousness, then we know that the problem is only compounded when we shift the discussion to how any particular signifying practice, such as photography, represents the world as it is experienced by humans. I paint myself, or take a photograph of myself, fundamentally aware that despite my ceaseless attempts to define myself, to become what I am, there are two ontological limits that I cannot cross: I can never be an object to myself and I cannot know myself as others know me.

Self-portraiture is one way that we get around this problem of self-knowledge. We start by recognizing that there are other consciousnesses in the world and that there are other points of view. We then paint, or photograph, ourselves by throwing ourselves in the direction of the Other. By projecting ourselves onto a screen that others may view, we start to become what we aim to be. In this way, we set up a situation in which the Other can catch us using our freedom to depict ourselves as we wish to be depicted. The Other can still objectify me and my goals (we can imagine the Other saying, 'He painted himself in that way because he wants to appear to be smart, or anguished, or caring'). Thus it is in the very indeterminacy of the self-portrait that I experience the Other's freedom and she experiences mine.<sup>14</sup>

To put it another way, Sartre reasoned that to see another person, what he called the Other, it has to be possible that that person can see me. In his words, “Being-seen-by-the-Other” is the *truth* of “seeing-the-Other” (Sartre 1956: 257). By extension and much more concretely, we note that a self-portrait is not merely me staring at my own reflection held in place by a *mechanico-chemical* process, yielding a result not unlike what I see as I stare into a pool of water or in what is reflected back to me from the tain of the mirror. We can even say that self-portraiture is not only considering oneself in the mind’s eye and trying to represent the imagined image. On the contrary, in an important way a self-portrait allows me to cease being the center of my world because in constructing a particular image of myself, I acknowledge the importance of the viewer that I would like to have recognize me in this image. So, in creating an image of myself, I do it knowing that another may look at it and that I, in fact, *need* another to see and recognize me in it.

Furthermore, I need the Other to accept me as I show myself to be in the picture. If the person whose acceptance I wish to obtain looks at the photo and says that I am just putting on airs, then the Other has actualized the very possibility that I most feared. For in not being recognized as being authentically the person that I portrayed myself to be, the viewer has declared that there is a disconnect between my appearance and my essence. Indeed, the gaze of the Other creates new possibilities of being – and some of them may cause us to tremble. ‘It is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a *thing*,’ Sartre writes, ‘but my nature is – over there, outside my lived freedom – as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other’ (1956: 256).

To put this issue of recognition more concretely, I may, for example, want to be seen as a professor. I may have even received my Ph.D. and be formally qualified to teach college classes, but if I don’t actually teach and if I don’t have students who recognize me as their professor, then I will not be able to call myself a professor and to recognize myself as such. That is, my identity as a professor is contingent upon my being recognized as such by others. We are who we portray ourselves to be only to the extent that others recognize us being that person.<sup>15</sup> In this way, our *self-knowledge* is in fact knowledge in reference to the Other.

In short, there are two steps in our encounters with ourselves through others. First, I can be seen and that creates the possibility that I can be the object of another’s look. But this subjective operation remains incomplete until, second, I obtain the recognition of the Other.

We have thus struck upon a formal aspect of photography. The camera lens can substitute for the ‘two ocular globes’ of another person (1956: 257). The camera is an apparatus that reminds us that the Other will see us and it allows us to mechanically reproduce the image that it captures. But eyes are *not*, Sartre reminds us, the other’s look. That person could be looking at something else. But more importantly, as I see the other’s look as an object, I miss the new ontological possibility that it creates. For Sartre, to apprehend the look is to be conscious of being-looked-at. Thus the camera stands for the look which we apprehend when we are conscious of being-looked-at or the mere possibility that we *may be* looked at *as we are right now, at this moment which will be stopped in time*. This understanding of the look is also congenial with the radically different tradition in iconography that holds that the ‘eyes are windows to the soul.’ In this tradition, gazing at some Other or our Self is understood as a window into Being, or God, or the Infinite.<sup>16</sup>

David Hume noted that he could never get a look at himself while he was looking. He was either engaged in the goal-directed behavior of looking or he was reflecting on the fact that he could look, but the two ineluctably remained separate modes of consciousness. That is also how my Sartrean recasting of self-portraiture differs from other accounts of this genre. For example, David Lomas examines the self-portraits of surrealist painter Joan Miró and usefully shows how Lacan's mirror stage can be used to interpret pictorial practices of self-fashioning. But Lomas shows us how Miró's portraits were 'of the self as other' (1997: 170). Thus in representing himself as fragmented and consumed by flames in *Self-Portrait 1*, Miró could be seen as attempting to represent, not merely himself, but all of interwar Europe. In Lomas's reading, the hyperbolic ideal of socially inflected realist portraiture was no longer a realistic depiction but the artist's self-immolation. Nevertheless, self-portraiture remains a highly complex act that may be undertaken for multiple reasons: to explore who one is and is not, who one was but is no longer, and who one wishes to be. In short, self-portraiture can certainly allow one to represent herself as the other while also allowing the artist to meditate on issues and ironies of identity, relationships, being, and technique. Importantly, self-portraiture, especially in photography, which cannot escape its own indexical nature, also allows the artist to attempt to represent himself as himself for the other. That is, through the look, the other and I mutually constitute ourselves.

This is so despite that fact that photography is always one-way viewing. The beholder of the photo sees an image of a subject. But the subject of the photo cannot see the beholder of her image and can never see herself as her beholder sees her. So the subject of the photo is 'being-seen-by-the-Other' without being able to 'see-the-Other.'

In constructing this particular image, in striking *this* pose, the artist always does so with an 'ideal' viewer in mind. Again, this is because I cannot objectify myself. I need another, or at least a potential imagined other, to objectify me.

As a relational being, only if others see me, can I be what I want to be and become what I want to become. In a curious way, then, self-portraits validate the importance of the Other, of the viewer. Self-portraiture, by my analogy, is a Sartrian *cogito*. Like the Sartrian 'I think' that necessarily happens in the presence of the other, the self-portrait not only implies a distance between subject and object but it also posits the necessary presence of an Other who *must* be there to recognize me as I wish to be seen and known by others and myself. It is this new ontological possibility that will allow me to become what I want to become. In self-portraiture, the artist cannot apprehend the look of the other but he or she is conscious of being- or potentially-being-looked-at.

The Other is necessarily outside the subject. But the Other is also inside the subject. It is when the Other recognizes the subject as he wishes to be seen that the subject is validated. The Other recognizes itself in the subject. The subject has been successfully interpolated by the ideology of the Other.

### *Rafael Platero Paz's Other and Rafael Platero Paz as the Other*

Thus far, I have argued that in posing for a photo, the subject always does so, whether she realizes it or not, with the gaze of the Other in mind. Even though a different viewer can always come along to look at the image, the sitter comports herself with tacit reference to the eyes of a potential 'ideal' viewer. By 'ideal,' I mean 'archetypal,' on the one hand, and 'imagined,' 'ideational,' and 'hypothetical,' on the other; but I do

not mean that his imagined Other is somehow ‘perfect.’ In the photographic act, a subject sits imagining a particular person, or type of person, looking at the picture of herself as she is now.

We must ask: who was Rafael Platero Paz’s implied viewer? Who was the ‘Other’ to whom he visually addressed himself? Who was this, imaginary or present, ideal viewer toward which Platero Paz directed these images of himself? Given that there are strong links between a style and an outlook, which stylistic tokens in these photographs can be used to describe the archetype that Platero Paz projected?

From the poses and the cultural trappings employed in his self-portraits, it is evident that Platero Paz’s implied viewer was fundamentally a foreigner, a North American. At the very least, in his self-portraits, he posited local viewers who would understand the more general rhetoric of US-inflected notions of progress and modernity. He visually and textually linked himself to specific technologies, like the airplane and the camera, and to the purveyors of these technologies. Thus, Platero Paz’s second persona – the Other toward which he projected images of himself – was a particular brand of social and cultural modernity, epitomized not only by his camera but also by his poses.

Honduran experiences with capitalist modernity began in the late-nineteenth century. Liberal intellectuals and political leaders – most notably, Antonio R. Vallejo, Ramón Rosa, Rómulo E. Durón, and Marco Aurelio Soto – initiated various projects of societal modernization, including increasing the bureaucratization of the state and linking Honduras to the world economy by providing generous incentives to North American mining, fruit, and railroad companies. Likewise, they sought to elaborate a cultural modernity, based on the specificity of Honduras, knowable through its history, territory, ethnology, traditions, and language.<sup>17</sup> The very name of the town where Platero Paz lived and worked is an emblem of a Honduran appropriation of a fundamental rhetoric of modernity – El Progreso (Progress) was founded in 1893.

Building on the social and cultural infrastructure created by local townspeople, the United Fruit Company enacted what Charles Taylor termed an ‘acultural’ developmentalist notion of modernity (1999: 153–74). Indeed, the company redirected streams, built bridges and railroads, and hierarchically arranged housing while also attracting thousands of people to work as wage laborers in the cultivation of bananas. Modernization, and the appropriate states of consciousness thought to be associated with the process, was seen by influential *progreseños* as a benefit to be pursued. For instance, on 15 May 1925, the municipal government of El Progreso debated a proposal by the Tela Railroad Company, the local subsidiary of the United Fruit Company (now known as Chiquita Brands). Representing the company, Mr. Rufus Thomas stated: ‘The company’s engineers are of the opinion that the proposed system, generators, motors, and other equipment, are *modern*, and of great efficiency to supply the population with an electrical light service from a *modern* system.’<sup>18</sup> The power plant was to use a sixty-horsepower internal combustion engine – Type ‘Y,’ Style ‘VA,’ with a ‘47 SKVA generator’ – made by the Fairbanks Morse Company. The streets of El Progreso would now be lighted with sixty light bulbs, each 200–300 watts, and fixed atop twenty-five foot concrete lampposts. Upon constructing the electrical generating plant, the municipal government of El Progreso agreed to pay the Tela Railroad Company \$34,747. The payments were to be made by excusing the company from paying the taxes and import duties that it owed to the municipality, at least until the latter had completely paid off its debt to the company. Wielding the instrument that mechanically reproduced

images, Platero Paz was himself a historical agent of capitalist development and cultural modernity in this dynamic region.

Yet this acultural notion of modernity was not simply North American or European. Indeed, the merchant-industrialists of Palestinian descent exercised growing economic power on the North Coast. In their stores, they sold the very goods that indexed a consumer's social status as well as their participation in the project of national progress. This is important because Arab Christian immigrants encountered a certain degree of communitarian narrowness in Honduras. They were largely excluded from the realm of *criollo* power, based in the interior of the country, and from the circles of North American power, which dominated the Caribbean lowlands (Euraque 1996: 34). Derogatively referred to as 'turcos,' merchants of Palestinian descent came to identify more with an imagined community in far-flung capitals than they did with their neighbors in El Progreso. The fact that Palestinian immigrants crafted, and were in fact pushed to craft, cosmopolitan identities meant that their gaze was cast more toward Jerusalem, Europe, and the United States than it was toward Tegucigalpa.<sup>19</sup>

It is in this complicated terrain of intersecting national and transnational discourses that Platero Paz visually inserted himself into a tacitly racialized, and strongly developmentalist, modernist project. This project was itself partly embedded in the entrepreneurs of Middle Eastern descent who negotiated their outsider status by peddling the felt hats and linen shirts, perfumes and watches that allowed banana plantation workers to demonstrate their social mobility. Furthermore, the discursive formation into which Platero Paz sought to insert himself was one that largely excluded the indigenous and black communities of Honduras. Thus, even as Platero Paz attempted to join this community of modernity on the basis of his mode of being and not his *ladino* bloodline, within the gaze of his 'ideal' viewer, particular strains of nationalism, race, and social class comingled.<sup>20</sup>

To reiterate, in each of his traditional self-portraits, Platero Paz attempts to affirm that he belongs in a place of wealth, progress, and 'refinement.' He accomplishes this by linking himself to cultural artifacts of high symbolic yield while investing in what Barthes refers to as the denotative power of photography to naturalize the connotative messages built into each image (1977: 51).

Yet Platero Paz as-he-appears-in-photos is concealing a part of himself that is stubbornly stable and that he is attempting to negate and overcome. That stable aspect of his identity is his identifiable and locatable social, cultural, and class position in the 'Third World,' on the periphery of US Empire, as a Salvadoran immigrant and artisan-entrepreneur in Honduras. Accordingly, these self-portraits are not 'lies,' but doors opening into the symbolic world of his consciousness. More modestly, these portraits reflect various aspects of his identity and the code switching necessitated by turning in multiple worlds.

So, what of the real, or what traces of Platero Paz's unsymbolized self remain, not fully excluded from this racially and geographically stratified story of progress and modernity? To put it simply, did Platero Paz ever attain the recognition that he desired from his Other?

From the photographs above, taken at various points throughout his long life, we might conclude that he never managed to be recognized as actually being who he wished to be seen as. Thus, the continual need to photographically reassert his membership in a broader community of modernity, displayed through specific items of consumption and the pursuit of his craft.

In 1969, the tranquil surface of Platero Paz's belonging was suddenly rent by the armed conflict between Honduras and El Salvador. Beginning in 1963, Platero Paz served as the Salvadoran consular officer for El Progreso. As a surrogate for the Salvadoran government, his primary duty was to submit hundreds of legal requests to the Honduran government so that Salvadoran workers and their families could remain in Honduras. And, as a commercial photographer, he put his craft in the service of the repressive apparatuses of the state. The mandatory ID card allowed the police and military to identify citizens and non-citizens, an especially important task in the 1960s, as border disputes with El Salvador became more frequent. These identity card pictures were a mainstay of Platero Paz's business, providing a steady stream of income for the duration of his career. Besides, as an upstanding citizen who organized the Colonia Salvadoreña to come to the rescue in times of local emergency, he likely felt that he was providing a valuable service to his country of residence and to his compatriots, and not providing the state with a means to repress the most vulnerable noncitizens under its jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, as the number of landless peasants multiplied, due in part to decades of migration from El Salvador to Honduras, Salvadorans who had lived and worked in Honduras for generations came to serve as the constitutive Other, in opposition to which Hondurans defined themselves most acutely during the brief 1969 conflict between the two countries.<sup>21</sup> It was then – in mid-July 1969 – that Platero Paz, a man who had served since the 1930s as the most important photographer in El Progreso and had married and raised children with a Honduran woman, had to hide in fear for his life. His daughter, Profesora Aída, recounted their experience of seeing their father hunted by a mob:

In the war with El Salvador, in 1969, they entered the houses of Salvadorans and dragged them away. [. . .] There was a neighbor who was, as they used to say, 'an ear of the D.I.N. [National Investigation Department],' a spy for the police. They came to take him [Rafael Platero Paz] out of our house! They came at midday to take him as a prisoner to the stadium in San Pedro Sula! Because it was in the stadiums that they put all the Salvadorans. But when I went to the police to find him, my sister was calling me at the school, so I went to the police. But he was on a bus. [. . .] His friends, they got him out. It was terrible. They destroyed the houses of the Salvadorans. There, a block over, there was a photographer from El Salvador; they destroyed his entire business. That man had to flee and never returned. It was horrible.<sup>22</sup>

Given his subject position, Platero Paz was alien to both the symbolic order of modernity and to the hardscrabble world of hyper-nationalist politics. So, despite the fact that in his daily life, he fit in and served as a cross-cultural bridge between Hondurans, Salvadorans, and US engineers, priests, teachers, and missionaries, something remained out of joint.

## Part two – A camera in the Garden of Eden

History, and things of this type, one cannot cover up.

– Profesora Aída, daughter of Rafael Platero Paz<sup>23</sup>

Who took *The Garden of Eden* picture? We cannot know for sure whether there was a third person present at this photographic encounter to release the shutter or whether Platero Paz

rigged his camera so that it would take the picture without him standing behind it. But we do know that from a technical standpoint, cameras could be set up with the equivalent of today's self-timing mechanism. I do not know for sure that Platero Paz used such a device to take this photograph and there might very well have been a third person there. But from examining his receipts and from seeing and touching his old cameras, I know that he was a professional photographer who had an extensive collection of cameras, lenses, tripods, and other accessories. Because the negative was found among the thousands of other negatives that he tucked away in boxes in the back of his studio, I am also confident that this image was taken with one of his own cameras. While the question of who clicked the button may seem secondary, this photo, like all photographs, is a record of an encounter. The immediate presence of others changes what happens when two people are alone. The presence of just one other person creates a dynamic different from that of the meditation-like activity of solitary self-portraiture. Given that there were at least two people present during this encounter, interesting and unanswerable questions arise: How did the idea of taking the picture emerge? Was there a campy humor to the act? Perhaps it was a daring move to a new kind of authenticity? Perhaps a show of courage? For whom was the picture taken and why?<sup>24</sup>

It is possible that this image was taken for the North American, that he who likely came to El Progreso to work for the United Fruit Company pressured Platero Paz to take an image of them mocking the Garden of Eden. After all, he had more power and could perhaps economically coerce the local bilingual commercial photographer into this situation. Moreover, the fact that he was there reshaping the landscapes and livelihoods of the tropics can itself be traced, in part, to Abrahamic discourses of what Jacques Derrida referred to as 'homo-fraternalistic phallogocentrism' that still get traction in our public cultures and which were also put forward early in the book of Genesis: '*And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.*'<sup>25</sup> Still further, the imperial gaze of the fruit company that I explore elsewhere also had its tender, libidinal scopoc drives.<sup>26</sup> Thus this photo can be read as a manifestation of the white gay male tapping into colonial stereotypes of the dark-skinned, tantalizing yet threatening, colonial male Other. This reading would be similar to Kobena Mercer's dismantling of Robert Mapplethorpe's clinically precise images of black male nudes. Platero Paz's image of the Garden of Eden would thus be understood as the North American's effort to erotically objectify racial otherness while simultaneously affirming 'his own identity as the sovereign I/eye empowered with mastery over the abject thinghood of the Other' (Mercer 1999: 438).

But for several reasons, this reading of the image, a reading in which the power of the North American totally eclipses that of the Salvadoran photographer, seems off. First, Platero Paz looks into the camera with the steady gaze and natural, voluntary smile of a person who is not under undue pressure. Second, the two men appear to be collaborating in parodying the Garden of Eden. Third, the children and grandchildren of Platero Paz often recalled how comfortable he was with North Americans, speaking to them in fluent English.<sup>27</sup> Fourth, the visual codes operative in this pictorial space reveal that neither Platero Paz nor the North American were objectified in any totalizing way. For example, in contrast to Mapplethorpe's images of the black male nudes, Platero Paz's *The Garden of Eden* includes several references to social, political, religious, and ecological contexts that allow the viewer to see the depicted subjects as playful human beings *doing* something. In this photo, Platero Paz and a North American are not decontextualized essences,

ontologically reduced to being pure sexual objects, concrete manifestations of tacit and less tangible neocolonial stereotypes. Instead, they are clearly in nature. They are not abstracted out of time and place to be made into 'fixed' signifiers of some erotic and racialized aesthetic ideal. No, they stand on stones, are enveloped by shrubbery, and the sunlight is so bright that their skin tones are nearly washed out. Further situating them is the vanishing point of the image, and thus the focus of the viewer: the 'fig leaf' as the signifier of a foundational myth of Christianity. The fig leaf repels the gaze, allowing the two subjects to maintain their dignity and to resist the viewer's attempt to turn them into mere objects. Thus the figleaf is like the diamond-studded G-string that Roland Barthes describes in 'Striptease,' only this time the nakedness remains unreal because the object that hides the sex resexualizes its subjects by placing them into the mythical world of Eden that they are in the act of remaking (1972: 85). In short, while inequalities of race, nationality, and social class certainly conditioned the relationship between the two men, it is unlikely that this image was the result of the North American coercing the Salvadoran photographer to pose with him in this manner.

A more compelling explanation is to be found in the way that they bound themselves to each other in this moment. They did so physically and mythically, playfully and photographically.

Encoded in this image is a clear allusion to the story of the pre-Fall state of humans in the Hebrew Bible. In the beginning, the story goes, God created man and he took him to the Garden of Eden to tend to it, giving him only one instruction: not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Then, taking a rib from the man, he made a woman. But soon after, a serpent sought to convince Eve to eat from that tree, saying: '*For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil*' (Gen. 3:5). Thus the ocularcentric epistemology of Western civilization is partially nourished by a mythology of competing voyeuristic impulses: God as all-seeing yet desiring that humankind wander with its eyes closed and our own human desire to see as gods see.<sup>28</sup> '*And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes,*' Adam and Eve fell into temptation (Gen. 3:6). They ate the forbidden fruit. '*And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons*' (Gen. 3:7). Their eyes were opened. But they became not as gods but ashamed humans, embarrassed at their own nakedness. They became conscious of the Other who saw them disobey. They had been caught in the act. They had been *seen*. They were not recognized as being that which they wished to be. Embarrassed, Adam and Eve sought to hide their nakedness, covering themselves with fig leaves. Thus one way of interpreting this photograph from El Progreso would be to say that the leaves are the intertextual signifier of human shame before God and each other. But, and we shall get to this soon, here that shame is feigned and merely conventional. In other words, while the leaves technically situate the allusion as post-Fall, this image, and others like it in the repertoire, evokes the pre-Fall state.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the fig leaves are a sign of an ongoing convention of sexual modesty. The encounter is clearly 'in the Garden,' the *natural*, unconstructed, pre-cultural site of blissful human experience.

*The Garden of Eden* reverberates with the religious imagery that Platero Paz strategically inserted into many of his studio portraits (see figures 8, 9, and 10). For instance, he produced hundreds of First Communion pictures. Making these images required a two-stage process. He first photographed the child looking up at his hand, as if he were holding



the Host. 'Here is where God will appear,' he would tell the child (López de Castillo 2008). He then double-exposed the film to a picture of Jesus's face, which was superimposed over the photographer's hand. The final image was of a prayerful child looking up to Jesus. The staged nature of these photographic events is evident in each of the negatives, through the juxtaposition of the boy and the hand, on which the youngster has been told to reverently train his eye. Thus these photos inadvertently depict Althusser's moment of interpolation, in which an individual is hailed by an ideology and at the moment that the person recognizes that he is being called, he becomes a subject of that ideology in the very act of recognition (1972: 127–88). In making these visual religious allegories, Platero Paz repeatedly played priest, as he produced hundreds of these pictures for young girls and boys in and around El Progreso. Aside from the business of producing religious images, photos of Platero Paz's wife, Adelina López Pinet, posing in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe in México ironically resonate with *The Garden of Eden*.<sup>30</sup>



**FIGURES 8 and 9** First Communion 1950s. *From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.*

The garden motif as a figure for the Honduran North Coast was not inherent to the region. Rather it was part of discursive representation that began to emerge in the 1880s, as the Caribbean was promoted to tourists and business people as a ‘tropical paradise.’ As Krista A. Thompson has shown in the case of Jamaica and the Bahamas, British colonial administrators hired photographers and artists to create ‘tropicalizing images’ that then circulated internationally via postcards and illustrated guides (2006). The Caribbean Coast of Central America was similarly represented to North Americans as a verdant garden of abundance. Such postcards created by J.A. Doubleday and P. Maier could be purchased in San Pedro Sula and were sent to family and friends in Arizona, Alabama, and beyond (see figure 11). Likewise, the United Fruit Company and its apologists promoted the company’s exploits in the region in more self-serving terms: ‘These tropics are productive



**FIGURE 10** Funeral notice for Rafael Platero Paz's wife, Julia Lopez Pinot de Paz. She died of uterine cancer in the United Fruit Company hospital in the neighboring town of Lima. She was fifty-four when she died; Platero Paz survived her by fifteen years. *From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.*

just about in proportion as American initiative, American capital, and American enterprise make them productive,' wrote Frederick Upham Adams (1914: 36). Yet it seems that photos often failed to give North Americans the lush landscapes that they imagined, as so many of these postcards were painted in vibrant colors with more tropical plants than the photographed scene yielded on its own. Platero Paz himself painted such a touristy landscape as the backdrop for his studio (see figure 12).

#### *A homosocial challenge to monolithic masculinity*

In *The Garden of Eden*, a photograph that was secreted away among thousands of more mundane negatives, it is *our* shame that is mocked by Platero Paz and the North American posing with him. This image happened. The two men *did* stand together naked to be photographed. This event happened sometime around 1935. It happened on the banks of the Río Ulúa or one of its tributaries. As a species of self-portrait, this image shares with the previous ones the wish to express oneself as a self-made man. Platero Paz is again showing us, as the renaissance humanist painters did, that he has the freedom to choose his own way of life. The embarrassment may not have been his – although he certainly hid this photo from his family – it may be ours.

The relationships between social nudity, nature, and eroticism are fraught with tensions that change from one historical and cultural context to another. For instance, David Bell and Ruth Holliday (2000) have traced the discourses and practices of naturist movements in the West, demonstrating that the unclothed body in nature has sometimes evoked a secret



**FIGURE 11** Postcard by J.A. Doubleday. San Pedro Sula, Honduras, 1910s. *From the Museo de Antropología e Historia de San Pedro Sula, Collection of postcards and photographs*

geography of sites for outdoor gay-male sex and, more often, reinforced the homosocial-heterosexual matrix, as in the case of English ‘nudist colonies.’ What each of these disparate movements share is a particular embodied relationship to nature, as the countryside is romantically imagined as the appropriate place for being naked outdoors, which is figured as a pre-cultural (sometimes even pre-homophobic) Edenic site. For both heterosexual and gay cultures, ‘privacy could be had in public,’ as George Chauncey described the irony of the less surveilled, less regulated spaces of contemporary Western societies (quoted in Bell and Holliday 2000: 134). I reference these disparate traditions of social nudity to suggest that although some twenty-first-century eyes may see homoeroticism, there is a strong chance that what we are looking at was, for the two subjects of this image, a Platonic friendship.<sup>31</sup> But regardless of whether the two men saw their encounter as homosocial or homoerotic, in this photograph, Platero Paz demonstrates his awareness of the accepted conventions of portraiture and he visually questions them.

Typically regarded as a Renaissance invention for articulating the rise of the individual, portraiture generally assumes, as Patricia Simons put it, ‘a particular kind of modernist, western, autonomous individualism . . . a sense of unique and publicly staged selfhood, so that masculine agency is universalised as the norm.’ Simons goes on to say that ‘these approaches also assume a universal heterosexuality for both sitters and viewers, thus repressing more complex subjectivities and illicit pleasures’ (1997: 29). Platero Paz’s *The Garden of Eden* challenges the metadiscursive constraints of such a monolithic masculinity. It does so by harnessing the realist quality of photography – this event *did* occur – to demonstrate unequivocally that men were bonding in ways that contradicted, or at the very least unsettled, the rigid definitions of masculinity that dominated early twentieth-century public and portrait cultures.



**FIGURE 12** Tropical backdrop painted by Platero Paz in his studio. *From the Rafael Platero Paz Archive of Aída López de Castillo.*

### *Defining The Garden of Eden negatively*

Another way to get at *The Garden of Eden* is to understand what it is *not*.

An unnamed staff photographer for *Life Magazine* took a photograph of the ‘fallen’ Eve covering herself with a gargantuan leaf (see figure 13). *Life* pioneered photojournalism and by 1938, it had a massive circulation of approximately 80,000 subscribers with an additional 1,000,000 in single-copy newsstand sales.<sup>32</sup> As in Platero Paz’s *The Garden of Eden*, the tropes that drive this image from *Life* are of embarrassment and of hiding the body before the eyes of the other. The vertical leaf is here a split signifier for shame and the male sex organ visually intersecting her body. Yet the ‘shame’ is partial and contrived, as the image has clearly been set up by the photographer with the apparent consent of his subject.<sup>33</sup> The scale of the banana leaf – and the woman being used to demonstrate the



**FIGURE 13** *Life Magazine*. Originally captioned: ‘Garden of Eden: A modest Honduran hides behind a giant oar-shaped leaf of a banana tree.’ Note the caption is ‘Garden of Eden’ and not ‘After the Fall.’ In this case, the leaf completely covers her body; nonetheless, the puritan American viewer sees her nakedness. Circa 1925. Property of Getty Images.

‘giant’ aspect of that leaf – accentuate US horticultural prowess, offering another example of the power of the United Fruit Company in Central America. One can imagine the reaction of some US readers: ‘A single banana leaf dwarfs this dark-skinned maiden!’

This photograph taken for *Life* was clearly not a self-portrait. It was taken for the eyes of US viewers. She was an object of their gaze and fit within the stereotypes that people in the early twentieth-century United States had of Central Americans. She is, to paraphrase Homi K. Bhabha, an appropriate object ‘of a colonialist chain of command,’ an authorized version of otherness (2007: 126). This US view of ‘paradise’ indicates that this image seeks to portray the ‘beauty’ and ‘innocence’ not of a single

person but of a (pre-Fall) place and people. And if the young woman is indeed a reflection of the entire country, then Honduras is 'exotic,' 'modest,' 'innocent,' and possibly curious about he who is looking at her. Still she is cautious and doesn't want to fully reveal herself. Thus we have a tidy allegory for US-Honduran relations, a reenactment of a dominant US gaze and the Honduras that North Americans wished to see. The 'Banana Republic' is transposed from country to text to icon.

Capitalist and neocolonial relations are not only visually encoded in this botanical and anthropological specimen, they were repeated and intensified when the photographer left with his negative. It is likely that the subject received neither money nor a copy of the image. Instead, it was sold to the magazine, where it was joined to a succession of pictures and texts that readers purchased and which can now be rented from Getty Images for \$331.<sup>34</sup> This photo became part of a larger imagescape that nourished a growing US appetite for imperial adventures.

In spite of the intended messages conveyed by the editor's choice of caption and the photographer's arrangement of the represented participants, an unintended anti-imperialist reading of this image is also plausible. While 'nature' and 'lost innocence' are intended meanings communicated textually and visually, if we look closely, these meanings are contradicted by the house or building that are intentionally blurred by the use of a large aperture setting. Even though they are blurred, the squared edges and eaves of the roof suggest the presence of 'modernity' and negate the intended interpretation of a 'Garden of Eden' or 'Natural' indigenous community. Another detail that upsets the imperialist gaze is the presence of the young woman's skirt peaking out at the bottom of the leaf: she is not the naked 'indian' – she is clothed! These details highlight the contrived nature of this photographic event, unwittingly revealing that the image was made *for* US eyes that wanted to see a particular 'tribal' Honduras. Thus what we see and what an astute viewer in 1925 could see was the very process of creating the cultural ideology that underwrote the activities of the US-owned fruit companies in Central America. From whom, then, is 'the modest Honduran hiding'? God saw Adam and Eve transgress. Then they tried to hide their nakedness. In framing and captioning this photo, who did the editors of *Life Magazine* cast in the role of God?

### *Defining The Garden of Eden positively*

To put on clothes is to hide one's object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject. That is why the Biblical symbol of the fall after the original sin is the fact that Adam and Eve 'know that they are naked.'

– Jean-Paul Sartre (1956: 289)

Platero Paz's *The Garden of Eden* speaks the same language as the one published in *Life Magazine*. It is a language of looks, of looks before the other. It does not really matter whether or not Platero Paz and his North American companion actually saw the photo published in *Life* for they had both imbibed the rhetoric of The-American-Tropics-as-Garden-of-Eden. Their command of that neocolonial discourse was what enabled them to mimic it, turning what was once the figure of a strong, 'manly' relationship between the United States and its Central American neighbors into a playfully homosocial one.

Reflecting on British imperialism in India, Bhabha identified this discursive move: ‘The menace of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority’ (2007: 126, emphasis in original).

An aggressive masculinity governed relations between itinerant workers in the banana plantations. For instance, Lara Putnam describes a distinction made by a Costa Rican working for a US rubber company during World War II, ‘The work was rough and risky,’ the worker recalled, ‘we used to say it was work for *‘machos y muy machos’*’ (2002: 201). The subversive humor comes from the worker’s play on the word ‘*macho*.’ Putnam explains: ‘The bosses might be *machos* because they were blond and light-skinned, with all the privilege their origin implied, but the workers were *muy machos* because they were true males – and did work to prove it’ (201–2). Within the framework of the United Fruit Company’s labor force, built from workers that it brought from different parts of Central America and the Caribbean, the North American appearing in *The Garden of Eden* would be considered, in his everyday interactions as an employee of the Tela Railroad Company, to be *macho*. The workers that he stood above had to show themselves to be *muy macho*, a stance that could unite them in ‘collective action and demands for the bosses’ respect’ (Putnam 201).

But where would the bilingual artisan and entrepreneur, Rafael Platero Paz, fit into this hierarchy? He was sought out in his studio by a diverse clientele, each seeking portraits to, among other things, fit their structurally molded tastes: North American engineers and managers, priests and teachers, as well as local merchants, entire families, and individual workers and *campesinos* from the surrounding communities. Platero Paz’s respected social position as neither boss nor peon allowed him to furtively transgress the dominant male honor code. In doing so, he and his North American companion made light of the prevailing rules of photographic portraiture, Christianity, and neocolonial rule.

They also offered a new allegory for political culture, one based not on traditional divides between males and females, US and Honduran citizens, but on what might be termed homosocial cosmopolitanism. The image is cosmopolitan insofar as the two men from different cultures, nations, and races came together for this photographic event to create an image of a single moral community. As such, the image was a potential menace to Christianity, heteronormativity, and hierarchical neocolonial rule. Although both originate in the *locus amoenus*, Platero Paz’s *The Garden of Eden* can be read as a direct reversal of the one published in *Life Magazine*. That is the power of being able to represent oneself as one would like to be represented.

Let us now revisit the question posed through our Sartrean reading of this image, namely: Did Platero Paz ever gain the recognition of his Other? After examining his rather conventional self-portraits and after recounting the time in 1969 when he was forced into hiding and rounded up by the police, we concluded that he had probably never been recognized as the modern cosmopolitan that he photographically represented himself to be. But *The Garden of Eden* suggests that he did in fact gain the recognition of his Other.

In this image, Platero Paz is accepted by his Other. Furthermore, he is not serving as the negative Other, against which ‘native’ Hondurans defined themselves. He photographed himself naked and with his Other, incorporated into his own landscape. The North American Other is no longer gazing at him. Instead, he is assimilated into what Platero Paz is showing us. Likewise, his North American companion leaves

behind all of the cultural artifacts that could testify to his inclusion in the dominant symbolic order. Hence this photo explicitly rejects the asymmetrical relations that underwrite photography as a philistine art, employed primarily for naturalizing inequalities. In this image, there is no hierarchical relation of master-slave, subject-object, dominant-dominated. Here, there is no silent narrative of superiority. In this image, the Other – whether manifest and embodied or symbolic and in the form of a cultural ideology – is not looming over us, watching Platero Paz like an omniscient being, silently mediating our understanding of him and his understanding of himself. What is more, the Other has also been exteriorized by this photo. Platero Paz has taken the Other out of himself, making manifest and concrete his Freudian superego, the law that he had unquestioningly accepted as his own.<sup>35</sup>

Platero Paz's *The Garden of Eden* is built around an intersubjective relation through which the 'I' becomes 'we.' In his traditional self-portraits, Platero Paz posed for an eventual Other. He was there, waiting for the Other's recognition and approval. And insofar as the Other was posited as the destination and ideal viewer of these portraits, Platero Paz was declaring: 'I am the Other.' He was there appearing before the viewer as the Other – progress, modernity, the Law incarnate. He appeared as if he didn't exist, except in the form of a wish and a desire to be the racialized modern Other. In contrast, in *The Garden of Eden*, Platero Paz declares 'I am we,' establishing a subject-subject relation in a foreign-local encounter that transgressed against reigning artistic, neocolonial, and sexual norms.

When I discovered this image in the archive, I struggled to make sense of it. Reading these images through Sartre required imposing a theoretical lens on the images; but doing so enabled me to organize and make sense of meanings that otherwise remained latent. By placing *The Garden of Eden* in the historical context in which it was produced and situating that provocative image in relation to the artist's other self-portraits, I have also sought to probe how responsive Sartre's phenomenology of the look is to these early twentieth-century Central American images.<sup>36</sup> In experiencing the look of another, Sartre suggests that we become aware of ourselves as objectified, as persons-known-by-an-Other. Yet in the look, we also become aware of the Other-as-subject, as a person who perceives, knows, and acts in this world and possibly upon us. As Platero Paz and his North American companion set up this photographic event, each of them saw each other's naked body. Each was both an object for the Other and known by the Other as a subject in his own right. Together, they created an intercultural queer space that transcended, if only for a moment, the hierarchical, heteronormative dynamics of the Honduran banana plantations. They framed a new reality with a camera, playfully citing an ancient religious text and fashioning themselves as equals.

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## Notes

- 1 Geoffrey Batchen explains how the aesthetic canon tries to coopt the ubiquitous genre of family snaps but, in doing so, closes off other potential ways of reading such images (2004: 121–42). The focus on avant-garde photographies is also a staple of social histories of photography in Latin America, see seminal work by Esther Gabara (2008) and Roberto Tejada (2009).
- 2 Pete Sigal (2009: 1353) specializes in the sexual beliefs and practices of the pre-Columbian peoples of Mesoamerica and although he does not explicitly mark his work as focusing on the countryside, inevitably that is his focus.
- 3 See, for example, 'Sumaria instruida contra Onesiforo Escobar Lazo, por disparo de arma de fuego seguido de lesiones en las personas de Victor Manuel Mendoza Galindo y Paula López, respectivamente; y contra el citado Mendoza Galindo, por disparo de arma de fuego seguido de lesiones en dicha señora López.' *El Progreso*, D.L. 7 diciembre 1941. Departamento de Yoro, Honduras. Archivo del Juzgado de Letras. 'Archivo Muerto.' For a study of gender and sexuality in a Costa Rican banana-company town, see Lara Putnam (2002).
- 4 Aída López de Castillo (2000). For the coffee economy and the Department of La Libertad in El Salvador, see Robert G. Williams (1994: 69–79).
- 5 Joby Taylor, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2010.
- 6 'Honorable Discharge from the United States Army,' RPP, box 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 For the specifics of Platero Paz's migration, see his passport, RPP, box 10.
- 9 In her biography of Platero Paz, his daughter Aída writes that he died at age eighty-six, but she does not give the exact date of his death; see Aída López de Castillo (2000: 4). I infer that he died in either 1984 or 1985, depending upon the month in which he passed away.
- 10 The most important study to date of Honduran masculinity is Rocío Tábora's *Masculinidad y violencia en la cultura política hondureña* (1995). Darío A. Euraque subsequently noted that Tábora neglects to analyze how the patriarchal masculinity that she deconstructs and which oppresses women fails to consider how this same ideology of gender also oppresses gay men (2003: 177–97).
- 11 Sebastián Carassai, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2010.
- 12 Martin Jay's (1993) incisive tome on the ubiquity of 'ocularcentric' and 'anti-ocularcentric' discourses in French intellectual history provides the most exciting account of the reception of Sartre's work by subsequent theorists. With respect to my study of early twentieth-century Honduran portraiture, Merleau-Ponty's response to Sartre's work is the most relevant. According to Jay, Merleau-Ponty refused to separate (as Sartre had) the 'derealizing' imagination from the mundane world of perceptual observation because, by his account, perception, scientific and rational intellect, and artistic imagination are intertwined. Merleau-Ponty also went against Sartre's concept of 'unreciprocal social relations' that followed from his dualist ontology of subject and object. Instead, as Jay observes, 'his insistence on mingling the

- viewer with the world on view meant an ecstatic decentering of the subject, an acknowledgment that however active perception may be, it also meant a kind of surrender of the strong ego, a willingness to let things be' (309). Finally, whereas, for Sartre, intersubjective relations were constituted by a duel of objectifying gazes, for Merleau-Ponty, intersubjective communication is 'embodied' communication that cannot be reduced to the visual component alone.
- 13 Jay (276, n. 39) notes that according to Alain Buisine (1986: 103), there are over seven thousand references to 'the look' in Sartre's work.
  - 14 Brian Morton, conversation with author, January 30, 2010.
  - 15 Sebastián Carassai, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2010.
  - 16 Joby Taylor, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2010.
  - 17 For an account of the construction of the 'liberal oligarchic state,' see Marvin Barahona (2005). In a classic essay, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (1999: 2, 13) critiqued ways of understanding the discourse of modernity, as societal modernization and as cultural modernism. He also called for site-based readings of alternative modernities, constructed through the exigencies of local histories as communities in a shrinking world negotiated the impetus to sameness and the forces that made them different.
  - 18 Archivo de Gobernación, Departamento de Yoro. 1924—*Actas reglamentos Dep. de Yoro*, 'Sesión Extraordinaria, 7 Sept 1925,' pp. 69-78. And Archivo Municipal, El Progreso. *Libro de Actas—1925*, 15 June 1925, p. 244; 1 August 1925, p. 231; 15 August 1925, p. 235, *emphasis mine*.
  - 19 For a detailed historical ethnography of this immigrant group that was often seen as 'pariah entrepreneurs,' see Nancie González (1992). For a discussion of the visual construction of ethnic identity by Palestinian Hondurans, see chapter two of my dissertation.
  - 20 Mark Anderson (2009: 8) makes a similar point in his study of the politics of race and culture among the Garifuna in Honduras. For more on the official racial discourses of Honduras, see Darío A. Euraque (2004).
  - 21 In 1934, Salvadorans made up 56 percent (1,840) of the immigrants to the Department of Yoro, *Registro especial de extranjeros residentes en Honduras: 1934* (Archivo de Gobernación, Departamento de Yoro).
  - 22 Interview with Aída López de Castillo, El Progreso, 12 August 2008. See, also, author's interview with Ricardo Arturo Platero López, El Progreso, 20 Nov 2008.
  - 23 'I agree with you on all of this. [You can interpret and publish this photo], provided that you include the circumstances, right, that supposedly the *gringo* wanted to try the waters, which were immense at that time. It's not like the [River] Ulúa of today. And he accompanied him, so that there is another explanation. And from there, you launch into what you say. I agree with you. History, things of this type, one cannot conceal them, right. One cannot say, these things no.' Interview with Aída López de Castillo, El Progreso, 22 April 2010.
  - 24 These questions were posed to me by Joby Taylor, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2010.
  - 25 The expression 'landscapes and livelihoods' is John Soluri's (1998). 'Phallogocentrism' is Jacques Derrida's (1997) name for a Western discourse of masculinity that has limited and deformed our ongoing attempts to open up the concept of democracy and to realize it, however partially, in history. The quote is from Gen. 1:28.
  - 26 For more on the United Fruit Company photographs, see chapter one of my dissertation.
  - 27 In an oral history interview with his daughter Aída, she recounted: 'He used to tell us that he would take soup and bread from one of the cars in New York. For this, he

- loved the North Americans. He adored them. He said that he was always well received and welcomed by the North Americans.’ Also, ‘All of the North Americans that came with the Tela [Railroad Company] and all of the Jesuit priests that were North Americans, everybody arrived at his shop, because he only spoke to them in English. He was very well liked by all of them.’ Interview with Aida López de Castillo, *El Progreso*, 12 August 2008.
- 28 ‘Human salvation was but a device for the self-revelation of God,’ was how Martin Jay put it (1993: 38).
- 29 Joby Taylor, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2010.
- 30 Family photo album, from The Private Collection of Aída López de Castillo, *El Progreso*, 11 August 2008.
- 31 Peter Guardino, e-mail message to author, April 26, 2010.
- 32 I take the circulation figures from ‘Life Magazine and LOOK Magazine Popularize Photojournalism in the 1930s’ from <http://www.things-and-other-stuff.com/magazines/life-magazine.html> (23 Feb 2010). As the sources for their article, they cite: Philip B. Kunhardt Jr. (1986) and John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman (1991).
- 33 Deborah Poole (1997: 85–106) interprets a similar kind of fetishization by eighteenth-century Europeans who were both captivated and disturbed by the *criolla* women of Lima who concealed their faces, except for their eyes, with shawls and roamed freely through public spaces. The *Life* photo of *The Garden of Eden* also invites the viewer to imagine what is hidden.
- 34 This is the price to use this single image inside a retail book as of 17 February 2010. <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/3070203/Hulton-Archive>.
- 35 Sebastián Carassai, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2010.
- 36 Peter Kosso (2001: 171–7) examines the hermeneutic negotiation between theory and evidence in historical arguments.

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