

Braceros on the Boundaries:
Activism, Race, Masculinity, and the Legacies of the Bracero Program

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Mireya Loza was born in Chicago, Illinois on August 14, 1978. She received her B.A. in Latina/o Studies and Anthropology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She went on study Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin where she received an M.A. She received an additional M.A. in Public Humanities at Brown University.

Loza's article "Alianza de Braceros, 1943-1964," is forthcoming in *¿Que Fronteras?: Mexican Braceros and a Re-examination of the Legacy of Migration*, an anthology edited by Paul Lopez with Kendall Hunt Publishing. In 2009 she wrote, "Putting the Names with Faces of Braceros," for National Museum of American History's *O' Say Can You See Blog*.

Loza has received numerous fellowships such as the Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship (2009-2010), the Edgar Lewis Marston Fellowship (2008-2010), Historical Society of Southern California/Haynes Research Fellowship (2008), Smithsonian Institution's Latino Studies Pre-Doctoral Fellowship (2007-2008), Mexico-North Research Network's Transnationalism Fellowship (2007) and University of Texas at Austin's Graduate Outreach Fellowship (2002-2003). While at Brown University, Loza contributed to the National Museum of American History's Bracero History Archive.

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INTRODUCTION

*Como a fines de Setiembre del '42 pasado
Se contrataron braceros para el betabel mentado
25 de Septiembre las once de la mañana
Cuando salio el primer tren repicando la campana
Adios mi padre y mi madre, mis hijos y mi mujer
Adios todos mis amigos cuando los volvere a ver*

**About the end of September of '42
They contracted braceros for the damn beet
25 of September at 11 am
Was when the first train left ringing its bell
Goodbye my father and my mother, my children and my wife
Goodbye all my friends I don't know when I will see you again
-Corrido Los Trenes Especiales**

***“Tava regalado el trabajo para los Americanos en esos años”.*
“I was giving my labor for free to the Americans in those years”
Mauro González Gómez¹**

Born in El Sitio de Maravillas, Guanajuato on the eve of the Bracero Program, Maria Concepción Loza-Gonzalez remembers braceros leaving her small town in Mexico throughout her childhood and early adulthood. As the eldest daughter of a twelve-member family, Maria vividly recalls preparing her brothers Juan and Manuel's things so that they could make their way to the United States. Unable to read or write, she stayed in constant suspense and worry over their safety. Maria's mother managed a small portion of the funds that Juan sent for the family, while Maria's father saved some of the remaining money to buy a small quantity of livestock. Maria awaited her brothers' return, which was often accompanied by small gifts. She ensured that every family member received a gift. After one of Juan's returns, Maria received a *gusano*, (a canvas

¹ Interview with Mauro González Gómez for Bracero History Archive by Myrna Parra-Mantilla on June 12, 2003 in Meoqui, Chihuahua.

bag used for cotton picking) which she converted into several pairs of pants for her younger siblings. This period of time represented an important transition in Maria's life because her parents expected her to care for her siblings and engage in heavy agricultural work, for which her brothers were previously responsible. In the years after the Bracero Program, Juan made his way back to the US as an undocumented worker, while Manuel stayed in Mexico. The entire family remembers the Bracero Program as one of the first times they experienced separation.² Maria's oral history highlights several under-explored experiences brought on by the Bracero Program. Her story highlights the gendered experiences of braceros and their families, the transnational experience of labor, and the stories of those who remained in or returned to Mexico. These stories are central to my dissertation as a result of my research methodologies, which capture the oral histories of many whose experiences are not found in traditional archives.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century the US embarked on a massive guest worker program called the Bracero Program based on an agreement that allowed Mexican workers into the US under short-term agricultural and railroad industry labor contracts. From 1942-1964, the bi-national agreement between Mexico and the US allowed Mexican male laborers, known as braceros, to enter the United States on temporary work permits. The United States initiated the program in order to alleviate a perceived labor shortage due to World War II, but extended the program after the war's end. US-based employers issued over 4.5 million work contracts. As a labor policy, the Bracero Program significantly changed the character of Mexican migration to the United States and influenced contemporary migration patterns.

² Interview and personal conversations with Maria Concepción Loza Gonzalez for the Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 30, 2007 in El Sitio de Maravillas, Guanajuato, Mexico.

Immigration policy in the United States has taken many forms and, in current debates, a proposal for large-scale guest worker programs has gained increasing attention as a compromise. This is not the first time such large-scale programs have been proposed or even implemented in the US. My in-depth historical study of the social and cultural ramifications of the Bracero Program reveals the complex issues at stake in any future use of guest worker programs and is thus relevant to contemporary immigration reform debates. I examine the history of the largest US guest worker program through oral narratives, archival research, and ethnographic fieldwork. This research is largely based on the collected archives of bracero oral histories, government documents, photographs, personal documents, and artifacts of the Public History Project, which was launched by the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to chronicle the story of Mexican guest workers. During my five-year participation with the Bracero History Project, I conducted archival research, worked closely with Bracero Justice Movement (BJM) activists, and carried out oral histories within a broadly conceptualized bracero community. The BJM has, since the late 1990s, worked towards the recuperation of 10 percent of the garnished wages of each and every paycheck braceros received. My study broadens the scholarship on guest workers to specifically include an analysis of race, ethnicity, gender, and the contemporary activist struggles of bracero communities.

Literature Review

Despite the significance of the Bracero Program, there are few monograph-length works on the topic. Jesus Topete Amaya published one of the first works on the topic in Mexico in 1949 titled *Aventura De Un Bracero: Relatos de Seis Meses en Estados*

Unidos. Topete Amaya's memoir focuses on his six-month contract in California. In it he describes the contracting process, labor, and the leisure activities of braceros. Furthermore, he keenly provides insight on gender and race relations between Mexican guest workers and receiving communities in the US.

In 1956, Ernesto Galarza provided one of the first treatments of the program in his work *Strangers in Our Fields*. This exposé brought national attention to exploitation of braceros. *Strangers in Our Fields* chronicles braceros' experience from their departure in Mexico to their work conditions in the US with a political aim of revealing the inhumane treatment of guest workers in the US. Galarza used the research conducted for *Strangers in Our Fields* in his testimony in congressional hearings that brought an end to the Bracero Program. He followed this publication with a 1963 government report titled *Tragedy at Chualar: El Crucero de las Treinta y dos Cruces*, which chronicles a vehicle accident fatally wounding 32 braceros. The following year he published his groundbreaking work, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Worker in California 1942-1960*. Written in the style of a historic novel, Galarza examines the implementation of the Bracero Program in California agriculture. He argues that domestic agricultural workers viewed the Bracero Program as a threat to their organizing efforts. As opposed to vilifying braceros, Galarza exposes their complicated position within an exploitative labor system. Galarza stirred sympathy for both domestic workers and braceros and contributed to the demise of the program.

Erasmus Gamboa broadens the regional scope of the literature on braceros, which traditionally focuses on California. Published in 1990, *Mexican Labor & World War II:*

Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947, explores how agricultural interests, combined with state and federal authorities, created the need for the Bracero Program in Oregon, Idaho, and Washington. Gamboa provides a detailed account of how the program shaped the work, leisure, and family life of braceros in this region. Moreover, he constructs the Mexican guest worker as an active agent of change by highlighting local bracero struggles against exploitation.

Fernando Saul Alanis Enciso also explores governmental implementation of Mexican-US guest worker programs by focusing on the first guest worker program created between these nations in 1917. In *El Primer Programa Bracero y el Gobierno de Mexico, 1917-1918*, Alanis Enciso highlights contradicting immigration policy during this period. He argues that the Burnett Immigration Bill, which required all immigrants over 18 years of age entering the United States to pay 18 dollars and to take a literary test, set the tone for the temporary work program introduced in 1917. He also calls attention to the earliest example of a Mexican guest worker program in the US and examines the role of guest worker programs on immigration policy.

While many works focus on the agricultural component of the Bracero Program, in *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II*, Barbara Driscoll explores coordinated efforts of the railroad industry and the state and federal government of Mexico and the United States in shaping the experiences of railroad braceros. She contrasts this experience with that of agricultural Braceros in an effort to understand the full impact of this particular portion of the Bracero Program. Like Driscoll, Kitty Calavita in her monograph *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the I.N.S* highlights the importance of the US government in instituting the bracero program.

Calavita examines the state's role in shaping immigration policy and law, which suited the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and economic interests; in this case, the railroad and agricultural industries. Calavita argues that, through this program, the INS heightened its position within the federal government. In this study, she advances theories of the state in relationship to immigration and citizenship.

While Calavita and Driscoll study the state to understand the bracero program, Maria Herrera-Sobek explores bracero expressive culture in *The Bracero Experience: Elitelore versus Folklore*. Herrera-Sobek analyzes expressive culture, in the form of song and folklore, in order to better understand the experience of braceros. Herrera-Sobek argues against the perception of braceros as simply either exploited laborers or workers who take pleasure in serving the United States' interests. Instead, she argues that expressive culture can help us make sense of these contradictory perspectives. Although Herrera-Sobek concentrates on braceros she uses the term "bracero" to signify any Mexican worker in the US and does not distinguish between workers who came through 1942-1964 bi-national agreement and other workers. She blurs the lines between Mexican guest worker, documented worker and undocumented worker. Although there are very concrete implications to each of these statuses, laborers often move between these categories and cause them to collapse in Mexican popular culture.

Alicia Camacho Schmidt also turns her focus towards the depiction of braceros in popular culture and the historical imagination through literature and photography in *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. In the chapter "Migrant Modernism: Racialized Development under the Bracero Program," she examines the representation of braceros in the work of the photojournalist collective

commonly known as Hermanos Mayo and the writings of labor activist Ernesto Galarza. She argues that the images of the Hermanos Mayo serve as a national memory of the bi-national labor agreement and examines Galarza efforts to include braceros in his hemispheric vision of union organizing.

Several equally important contributions to the scholarship related to the Bracero Program are made through articles and chapters of groundbreaking monographs. In *Impossible Subjects*, Mae Ngai argues that the period between the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 and the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 was a critical time in immigration history because both acts reconfigured perceptions of the American immigrant through constructions of the legal and illegal migrant. Ngai focuses one chapter on the Bracero Program as she argues that it substantially shaped the ways in which the Mexican illegal migrant is historically constructed as a subject. For example, undocumented, Mexican immigrants entered the United States prior to the Bracero Program and documented braceros provided an interesting foil to undocumented Mexican labor.

Manuel Garcia y Griego's article, "The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964," is the most authoritative exploration of the politics of the Bracero Program. Garcia y Griego sheds light on changes within the program through the three stages he periodizes as: 1) Wartime Cooperation 1942-1946, 2) Turbulence and Transition 1947-1954, and 3) Apogee and Demise, 1955-1964. In the first part, Garcia y Griego explores the program's inception as a wartime measure. In the second part, he looks at contradicting rhetoric between the Bracero Program and Operation Wetback. Finally, Garcia y Griego investigates the realities that led to the termination of the program.

Gilbert González, David Gutiérrez, and Stephen Pitti make major contributions to the study of braceros by examining the relationship between Mexican-Americans and braceros. In *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Gutiérrez illustrates the complicated relationship Mexican-Americans had with both undocumented Mexican immigrants and braceros. The latter were often seen as competing for the jobs of Mexican-Americans. Pitti delves into the regional specificities of this relationship in *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. He focuses on the role Mexicans and Mexican-Americans played in attempting to organize braceros in San Jose, California. Although many Mexican and Mexican-American agricultural laborer who were not guest workers felt threatened by the influx of braceros, organizers such as Ernesto Galarza, attempted to find avenues to unionize braceros alongside the Mexican community residing in San Jose. González describes examples where the mismanagement of the Bracero Program created tense and complicated relationships between Mexican-Americans and braceros. The bi-national agreement that established the program set clear regulations that did not permit braceros to be used as strike breakers and scabs. Nevertheless, on several occasions large agricultural corporations ignored the regulations and ordered braceros to work during domestic worker strikes. In *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest*, González holds the Mexican Consuls responsible for this mismanagement as they often turned a blind eye to the exploitation of braceros. The Mexican Consul held the responsibility of acting as a liaison between Mexican guest workers and the Mexican and US government, but often the served the interests of growers versus Mexican nationals.

Matthew Garcia and Ana Rosas take the analysis of the relationship between the Bracero Program and Mexican communities in the United States and Mexico one step further by investigating the impact of the program on women. Garcia discusses how the influx of braceros affected communities of Mexican American women in *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970*. Mexican American women found relative autonomy as an additional group of suitors in the local bracero community approached them. Garcia also turns the table on discussion of gender by examining masculinity, bravado, and violence during the courtship of Mexican American women in his article, "Cain contra Abel: Courtship, Masculinities, and Citizenship in Southern California, 1942-1964." Braceros faced violence at the hands of Mexican American men who felt slighted by Mexican American women who chose to date braceros. Ana Rosas challenges male-centered histories of the Bracero Program in her dissertation *Familias Flexibles: Bracero Families' Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942-1964*. She examines how the Bracero Program influenced women in Mexico and argues that throughout this period gender roles became much more flexible in light of the fact that families had truly become transnational. My work will build upon the gender analysis of Garcia and Rosas by examining bracero masculinity and sexual economies shaped by the bracero program.

Ngai, like Garcia, documents the violence and death that some braceros faced at the hands of employers and Anglo and Mexican American communities. Additionally, Rosas examines family strategies for long-term separation during the program. The oral histories I collected corroborate the findings of Garcia, Ngai, and Rosas while also

contributing to an understanding of gender and activism by examining masculinity and historical and contemporary organizing efforts of braceros.

The interviews deposited in the Bracero History Archive describe the marginalization faced by braceros as well as violence and exploitation. Furthermore, they articulate the traumatic experience in recruitment and processing centers. These men often waited in deplorable conditions for their name to be called in recruitment centers in places such as: Irapuato, Guanajato, Empalme, Sonora, and Mexico City. After being called, they faced physically invasive medical examinations that culminated in rooms of men being stripped of all of their clothing and sprayed with dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT).³ Many of the men that I have interviewed note this as the most humiliating and traumatic experience of the program.

Methodology

During my first semester as a graduate student in American Studies, I became involved in the Bracero History Consortium. This experience fundamentally influenced my research methods as it provided me the opportunity to work in the field of public history. The National Museum of American History (NMAH) created the consortium of institutions dedicated to conducting research and preserving the history of the guest worker program. Brown University played a major role in this consortium by hosting a weekend meeting of academics and institutions interested in braceros in Fall 2005. The participants formed the Bracero History Project and pushed forth several initiatives. The first project led by Brown University, the Institute for Oral History at the University of

³ For more on racialization, migration, and discourses of public health see: Shah, Nayan. *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001.

Texas at El Paso and the NMAH, was to collect the oral histories, digitize the historical documents, and preserve the material culture of braceros communities nationally and transnationally. The second project was for George Mason's Center for the Study of History and New Media create an online archive.⁴ Lastly, the NMAH focused on creating a traveling exhibit based on the materials collected for the project.

I spent 5 years working on various aspects of the Bracero History Project, from archival research to collecting oral histories. I worked closely with the NMAH as an intern, researcher, and fellow. My interdisciplinary research approach incorporates historical and anthropological methodologies. I conducted over 80 oral histories in 7 states in Mexico and 6 states in the US for the Bracero History Project. I utilize countless additional oral histories carried out by many investigators and deposited in the Bracero History Archive. All of the informants knew that their oral histories would be made public through the digital archive and many provided additional documentation to be included with their oral history, such as bracero identifications, pay check stubs, contracts, and photographs. We asked some individuals to donate objects to the permanent collection at the NMAH, but we did not require an object donation for participation. We also made individuals with objects feel comfortable with declining the invitation to donate. The Bracero History Project provided no monetary compensation for either object donations or for participation in the oral history project.

⁴ <http://braceroarchive.org/>



Braceros Communities at Townhall Meeting⁵

In the US, the National Museum of American History and local partner institutions, such as the Mexican Heritage Plaza and La Plaza de Artes y Cultura, invited local bracero communities to discuss and participate in the project through a town hall meeting format. Over the course of 5 years, these townhall meetings took place in several communities in Texas, California, Illinois, and Arizona. During the Bracero History Project's townhall meetings, Steve Velasquez of the NMAH and I explained what the project entailed and invited participants to return the next day with their objects and documents. Our presentation began by explaining the role of the NMAH in preserving and presenting American history for the public. The next segment of the presentation focused on explaining the history of the Bracero program through the photographic images from NMAH'S Leonard Nadel Collection. Leonard Nadel received funding in 1956 from the Fund for the Republic to take photographs of the bracero experience. He documented several aspects of this experience including information from families left behind, the contracting process, and work and life in the labor camps. Upon Nadel's death, his wife donated this collection to the NMAH.

⁵ Braceros Communities at Townhall Meeting in San Jose, California May 2005.

The photographs inspired braceros to make public commentaries about the ways in which they lived through the situations depicted. In cities like Chicago, bracero communities took control of microphones and gave personal public testimonials about the impact of the program on their lives. The emotional testimonies articulated the pain of family separation, traumatic medical exams and dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) sprayings,⁶ the grueling exploitation in the fields, and the recuperation of a sense of humanity and personhood. During cathartic moments, braceros shed tears while viewing the historic photographs and stood up and explained the context of images in the Leonard Nadel Collection. Braceros' daughters, sons, wives, and grandchildren often attended and accompanied their bracero family member. Steve Velasquez and I kept explanations of the program to a minimum when a large bracero audience attended because inevitably braceros felt an urgency to speak and share testimonies they had rarely shared up to that point.

Teams of undergraduate and graduate students from Brown University, the University of Texas at El Paso and the University of Southern California carried out the majority oral histories. At our first town hall meeting in the summer of 2005 at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, California, we realized we needed to conduct two meetings because of the overwhelming response. Bracero families lined the walls of our first site and patiently waited for hours for their turn to tell their story. In many small towns in California, braceros began forming lines hours before we scheduled the first interview. They looked forward to reconnect with others who recognized the program as a milestone in their lives. We promised the communities that we would interview every

⁶ This commonly used pesticide was sprayed on braceros naked body every time they crossed the border.

single person waiting and that no one would be turned away. This caused many of the interviewers to work long hours with few breaks. In many sites we shortened oral histories because of the amazing community response. In Southern California, braceros and their families traveled from as far as Mexicali and Arizona for an opportunity to tell their story.

This format made it difficult to obtain the oral histories of women. Often mothers, wives, and children of braceros felt that the oral histories of the braceros were more important than their own stories and that the true authority on the bracero program were the braceros. We began to target women by validating their experience during the town hall meeting presentations and requesting that braceros invite their wives and children to share their stories. I also began targeting indigenous bracero communities in the same manner by making public request for these communities to share their stories. Children and grandchildren of braceros played a major role in the collecting process as they often encouraged the braceros in their families to share their oral histories.

In many of the cities we traveled to, we invited the local chapters of organizations of the Bracero Justice Movement. The largest of these organizations, Bracero Pro-A, responded to our invitations and facilitated many interactions with bracero communities across the American Southwest and Mexico. In Salinas, California the local chapter invited us to present the project during their regular meeting time at a local restaurant. In this particular instance we also scheduled a public meeting at the National Steinbeck Center but braceros preferred their own meeting site. These presentations required us to be flexible because if these communities could not come to the town hall meeting hosted

by the local Smithsonian affiliate institution, we would go to sites at which they felt more comfortable.

Bracero Pro-A helped identify communities that are underrepresented in the archive and facilitated a trusting relationship with several of their chapters in Mexico. Ventura Gutierrez, the head of the organization, and other braceros called my attention to many of the indigenous communities underrepresented in the archive. By working closely with activist networks and expanding our collection goals, the project was able to include these underrepresented groups. From the beginning of the Bracero History Project everyone on the team understood that half the bracero story was located in Mexico and that it needed to be included in archive and the exhibition. While we collected in large teams in the US, in Mexico I worked with an additional oral historian on the project, Alma Carrillo. The cost of data collection in Mexico prohibited the project from using the same format used in the US. I did not have access to the same technology and instead of a Power Point presentation (which included the Nadel images), we spoke to communities directly without visuals. In these situations, the personal relationships of Bracero Pro-A leaders with local communities allowed us to gain the trust and confidence that otherwise would not be possible.

Communities both in Mexico and the US interrogated the purpose of the project, asking questions about who the “Smithsonian” was and what would be done with the oral histories. People felt hesitant to share their documents because these documents represented their claim to the back wage issue that gained widespread recognition during the collecting phase of the Bracero Project. Some had lost their documents after loaning them to unscrupulous individuals who made false promises of retrieval of back wages or

of public preservation of these documents.⁷ Other individuals felt a deep apprehension about allowing a national institution to handle personal documents. Some individuals remained in the US as undocumented laborers after the Bracero Program and worried about the repercussions of their participation in this oral history project. They imagined that participation in the Bracero History Project could cause problems with the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). The apprehensive position of many of the participants of this study heightened a general awareness of contemporary issues of immigration reform. In collections sites in Arizona, people called to inquire about the potential use of the oral histories by government entities and expressed their fears of deportation.

In order to contextualize these oral histories, I also conducted archival research at El Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, the National Archives in College Park, Maryland and San Bruno, California, Ernesto Galarza Papers in the Special Collection at Stanford University, as well as the Archivo Histórico de Guanajuato, in Mexico. Because many of my chapters rely heavily on oral history, I attempt whenever possible to corroborate the information through archival research and participants' personal documents such as contracts, bracero identifications, and photographs and the oral histories of additional informants.

One of the major challenges of this research was the transcription and translation process of the oral histories. When possible, I relied on the translation and transcription provided by the University of Texas at El Paso's Institute for Oral History through the Bracero History Archive. Many of the oral histories used in this dissertation were transcribed and translated by the Institute for Oral History. I translated interviews that

⁷ See chapter 4

had not been previously translated and selectively transcribed in cases where no transcription was available. I attempted linguistic accuracy in the transcription abiding by the standards of the Institute for Oral History; however, for the translation, I focused on the accuracy of meaning and attempted to convey the speaker's intention. Many of the informants for this project spoke in colorful colloquialisms and regional dialects and I tried to capture that in the translation of their statements. The spirit of the colloquial speech as well as their intentions would be lost in literal translations. When informants used incorrect grammar, I corrected the grammar in the translation because I believe their intentions would be lost by attempting to replicate incorrect sentence structure, conjugation, or pronunciation.

Translation presented particular difficulties with the oral histories of indigenous communities. The first language of many of the indigenous communities in this study is not Spanish and at times the structure of their Spanish follows that of their native indigenous language. This is particularly true for the Mayan and Tarascan speakers with whom I worked. I captured their speech as accurately as possible in order to retain their intentions and provided the original transcription of their statements in the footnotes. In many instances, indigenous participants wove in indigenous words into their speech and I translated those words whenever possible in English but preserved them in their original language in the footnoted transcription.

I developed the central themes of this dissertation through a dialectical process with the participants of the Bracero History Project and organizers of the Bracero Justice Movement. The first and last chapters on historic and contemporary activism echoed the most common concerns of bracero communities. When carrying out this research, the

issue of the back wages colored most of the oral histories as many families pleaded at the end of many of the recordings for assistance with this matter. Many bracero families encouraged me to write on this topic because they felt a deep sense of urgency and they wanted to bring attention to the Mexican government's attempts to silence the calls for restitution. Organizers felt the state repression of the BJM and pushed for a national recognition of braceros. The issue of the back wages represented the contemporary reverberations of injustices committed throughout the Bracero Program. Although the Bracero History Project did not set out to document this story, I feel that the goals of the project to document the concerns of these communities were met by including the oral histories of organizers and participants in the Bracero Justice Movement. These oral histories provide a record of their collective efforts and strategies to obtain these back wages. They also represent my interest in developing oral history methodologies deeply rooted in activism and creating public history projects that assist marginalized communities in their quest for social justice. This attention to transnational organizational strategies led me to develop my first chapter on the Alianza.

Chapters two and three represent my commitment to developing an oral history methodology that renders visible what traditional archives make invisible. This is most apparent when discussing the themes of race, ethnicity, masculinity, and sexuality. Oral history methods allowed me to delve deeper into areas sparsely apparent in government archives. A popular perception of braceros as racially and ethnically homogenous migrants exists in the literature. I contend that only through oral history can we see the diversity among the guest workers, including the presence of indigenous migrants. Oral history methods also allow me to discuss intimate relationships directly with bracero

communities and preserve experiences not previously record. The goal of my project was not only to produce a dissertation but also to contribute to the Bracero History Archives by working with communities who had experiences underrepresented in the archive. I sought out these communities and ensured to the best of my ability that they were included in the Bracero History Project.

Dissertation Chapters

The first chapter of my dissertation, “Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de Mexico en los Estados Unidos, 1943-1964,” describes the trajectory of a transnational labor organization called the National Alliance of Mexican Braceros in the United States. This organization, founded by braceros, initially challenged policy restrictions which prohibited braceros from organizing through unions. However, the subsequent demise of the Alianza solidified the divide between Mexican and American labor organizing efforts in the US. I describe the trajectory of the Alianza and explore the organization’s relationship with Ernesto Galarza, a prominent labor activist. Galarza’s efforts are widely recognized as the force that brought an end to the Bracero Program. However, long before the efforts to do so, Galarza worked towards incorporating the guest workers into his US unionizing efforts. Frustrated with the Mexican government’s repressive treatment of the Alianza, he changed his tactics from unionizing guest workers to working towards terminating the Bracero Program. The first chapter also examines the role of the Alianza in Mexico and how land redistribution proposals made by the Alianza impacted the lives of Braceros and their families in the context of the history of land reform in Mexico. This

aspect of the strategies of the Alianza played a significant role in including local political issues that Braceros faced upon returning to Mexico.

The second chapter, “Mexican Indigenous Communities and the Bracero Program,” examines the experience of several important indigenous communities in the program. Specifically, I focus on the experience of Mixtec, Zapotec, Purhepecha, and Mayan communities in relation to bracero inter-racial and inter-ethnic tension. Although many Americans came to view braceros as one homogenous group, the regional, racial and ethnic differences that braceros perceived shaped their social relations. Recognizing the shifting meanings of race that indigenous migrants experience in the US, this chapter explores the formation of mid-twentieth century Mexican racial constructs and the subsequent role of indigeneity in the context of state nation-building projects. The experiences of indigenous braceros differed on multiple levels. As Indigenous braceros struggled with both Spanish and English, many relied on hometown social networks more than other communities in order to work and meet their daily needs. These communities also created distinct labor practices during the program because of linguistic difficulties. Following these social patterns, mestizos reified Mexican racial hierarchies by engaging in racist practices that subjugated indigenous braceros in the US. This chapter is largely based on oral histories and expands discussions of the worker experiences under the Bracero Program to include the perspective of indigenous men and their families.

The third chapter, “Intimate Encounters: Braceros, Masculinity, and Family,” examines bracero gender formations through constructions of masculinity, the maintenance of transnational families, and complex forms of sexual desire. Deriving my data from oral histories of indigenous and mestizo braceros located in Mexico and the

US, I argue that transnational experiences expanded gendered social relationships and practices of sexuality that redefined notions of the family and masculinity. As braceros left their families for prolonged periods of time, family units became rearranged and these men built new community networks in predominately homosocial spaces in the US. Masculinity became contested through notions of sexual desire, physical violence, and bravado. The Bracero Program gave men from small towns and villages the opportunity to engage in non-normative sexual relationships.

My final chapter, “Reviving the Dead: Creating the Bracero Justice Movement, 1998-2009,” chronicles the contemporary organizing efforts of the Bracero Justice Movement (BJM) that seeks to recuperate the back wages taken from braceros in the form of a 10 percent deduction in each paycheck. The deduction was to be placed in a savings account braceros would have access to upon their return to Mexico. The Mexican Government never implemented a system by which bracero could access these savings funds in an effective manner and because of this, the vast majority of braceros were never given their savings. This struggle represents one of the largest transnational legal cases for the recovery of back wages in the Americas. In 1998, the Bracero Pro-A organization began efforts to investigate the disappearance of the bracero wages. Since then, Bracero Pro-A has led transnational efforts to regain these wages by suing Wells Fargo Bank, which managed the 10 percent deductions and turned it over to the Mexican government. By entering into litigation with the Mexican government in US courts on behalf of braceros in the US and working within the Mexican legal system, Bracero Pro-A is at the forefront of the effort to regain the back wages of braceros. Beyond the issues of back wages, the BJM has sought to provide the recognition and dignity denied to

braceros through the violent history of racial atrocities and social injustices witnessed in the Bracero Program.

Through these important bracero oral histories, my scholarship details facets of this labor history that are fertile ground for additional study and research. My research also illuminates contemporary debates concerning immigration reform in the US by focusing on guest workers' experiences, the effects of racial formations, the complex arrangements of transnational families, and the potentially ameliorative role of transnational labor organizing. Finally, my research develops methods for preserving the stories of families like that of Maria Concepción Loza-Gonzalez who provide new perspectives on the role Mexican families played in the development of the US and Mexico during three decades of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 1

Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados Unidos 1943-1964

“Ganamos la Guerra—Ganemos La Paz”

“We Won the War—Let Us Win Peace”

Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de Mexico en los Estados Unidos slogan 1946 to 1954

“Por el Triunfo de las Democracias”

“For The Triumph of Democracies”

Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados Unidos slogan 1943-1945 and again 1955

“...Es precisamente a esta gente [aspirantes/braceros] a la que debemos proteger, ayudándole a salir de ese mundo de tinieblas en que tal parece vive, cuando esto hagámos, si, -- haremos Patria”

“...Its precisely these people [aspirantes/braceros] that we need to protect, helping them leave that cloudy world in which they seem to live, when we do this, yes—we shall build a nation”⁸

Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados 1955

Thirteen years after the inception of the Bracero Program (1942-1964), the organization Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados Unidos (Alianza) expressed to the Mexican government officials, “...frankly its incredible that being that the United States is the cradle of democracy, that’s what they say in its different regions, its citizens do not practice it [democracy], because the system they use to select braceros, in the different contracting centers, is like picking cattle destined for sacrifice, we are the culpable ones because we permit it, aggrandizing their whim without realizing that we are allowing foreign citizens to discriminate [against] us in our own country.”⁹ The Alianza

⁸ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

⁹ Ibid.

“...francamente es increíble que siendo los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica la cuna de la Democracia, así se pregona por todas sus partes, sus ciudadanos no la practiquen, puesto, que, con el sistema utilizando en seleccionar a los braceros en los diferentes campos de contratación, más gien(sic) se asemeja a la

made many pleas on behalf of these guest workers for the Mexican government to intervene and protect the interests of their citizens working abroad. As an activist organization established by braceros, the Alianza pressured the Mexican government to address the needs of these contract workers. Although the Mexican government seemingly attempted to protect the men during the first negotiations of the program, they lost their grip on holding the US accountable to the standards and regulations put in place to shield braceros from gross exploitation during the programs' final decade.¹⁰ As the dynamic changed within the program, the Alianza called Mexican and American attention to the plight of the braceros in an effort to better their work conditions and quality of life in Mexico.

The Alianza's efforts to claim contract workers' rights in the US and Mexican land reform within the parameters of the Bracero Program provides an important framework for understanding transnational organizing in the twentieth-century. During the first phase of the Alianza history, the organization saw itself as a patriotic body that wanted to ensure that only the best representatives of Mexican labor participated in the program. It slowly incorporated discourses of defending braceros' rights as workers and attempted to secure the prosperity of these families through land reform projects in Mexico. The organization advocated bracero participation in the infrastructure of the Bracero Program and requested guest worker representation in governmental units that shaped the program. Although the group proposed inclusion of Alianza members into the

costumbre general, de escoger reses destinadas a los rastros para su sacrificio, de esto, somos más culpables nosotros por permitirlo, solapando su capricho sin reparar en que estamos permitiendo que ciudadanos extranjeros nos estén discriminando en nuestra propia patria."

¹⁰ Garcia y Griego, Manuel. *The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964*. in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996.

official system of bracero recruitment and contracting, Mexican officials did little to support this.

As bracero abuses increased, the organization saw itself attempting to mediate conflicts in order to resolve these injustices. By the late 1940s and 1950s, the Alianza developed a reputation for being a radical group that aligned itself with labor unions in order to address bracero exploitation, deal with undocumented labor, and raise the standard of living for braceros and ex-braceros. The Alianza and other braceros attempted to reconfigure Mexican nation-building projects and citizenship in relation to the experience of “alien citizenship”¹¹ in the US through discourses of land redistribution. Along with these shifting aims, views of the organization by Mexican officials also changed and dramatically shaped how these officials dealt with the Alianza. In the eyes of Mexican officials, the Alianza went from patriotic and benign, to criminal and communist. The Mexican government placed many of the members of the Alianza under surveillance and went as far as to legally prosecute leaders for a number of issues related to their activism.

The changing perception of the Alianza followed shifts within the Bracero Program, which scholar Manuel Garcia y Griego categorized into three distinct periods: Wartime Cooperation, 1942-1946, Turbulence and Transition, 1947-1954, and Apogee and Demise, 1955-1964.¹² The period from Wartime Cooperation to Turbulence and Transition is marked by a dramatic increase in bracero contracting, an increase of

¹¹ Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

¹² Garcia y Griego, Manuel. *The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964*. in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996.

undocumented labor in the US, and governmental disputes about Mexican migration. Throughout the final phase of the program, the Mexican government lost its handle on the program's management as guest worker exploitation increased. These three periods also mark significant changes in the trajectory of the Alianza as it moved from a patriotic philosophy to an activist organization and finally as the group saw its own demise because it could not protect its constituency.

During these historically important phases within the Bracero Program, labor organizer Ernesto Galarza, went from viewing the Alianza as an ally in transnational labor movements to representatives of problematic guest workers. Prior to the major labor movement leader Cesar Chavez, Galarza worked tirelessly to find a place for Latinos within larger US labor movements. He is widely recognized as the force that brought an end to the Bracero Program; however, long before these efforts, Galarza worked towards incorporating the guest workers into his unionizing efforts. He worked closely with the Alianza, and by 1950 he extended membership to his union *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Agrícolas* (SANTA) to any bracero in the Alianza. Frustrated with the Mexican government's repressive treatment of the Alianza, he changed his plans of unionizing braceros to working towards bringing an end to the program. From the mid 1950s until 1964, he collected data used for congressional hearings that resulted in the termination of the Bracero Program. He also swayed public opinion in favor of recognizing the negative effects of the program through his groundbreaking exposé, *Strangers in Our Fields*.¹³ Galarza's early work towards unionizing braceros is considered by historian Stephen Pitti as one of the most creative turns in ethnic Mexican

¹³ Galarza, Ernesto. *Strangers in Our Fields*. Washington, DC: 1956.

efforts to think transnationally about pressing political efforts in labor organizing.¹⁴ The Alianza provided the central avenue for Galarza's projects that focused on incorporating guest workers into American unions.

As the lead organizers of the Alianza came under surveillance and criminal prosecution, they found that the little support they enjoyed from labor unions in the early 1940s rapidly dwindled by the mid 1950s. Galarza came to believe that labor movements within Mexico were adversely affected by the repressive strategies of the Mexican government. The conservative political turn with the Mexican government recognized that Mexico gained much in the form of remittances in maintaining the status quo of the Program.¹⁵ By the mid-1950s, Alianza felt slighted by labor organizations in Mexico and in the U.S. because neither could decide where to place these guest workers among their rank and file. The Alianza came to represent a "fire" that large labor organizations did not want to touch.¹⁶ Ultimately, the organization assisted in its own demise by working in the early 1950s with Ernesto Galarza to conduct the research to bring an end to the Bracero Program.¹⁷ They continued organizing until the termination of the program, but during the last years, their functions were very limited and they seemed to have little access to forms of power that drastically affected the lives of their members.¹⁸

¹⁴ Pitti, Stephen J. *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2003.p. 144

¹⁵ González, Gibert G. *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest*. Austin: University of Texas, 1999.p.212

Pitti, Stephen J. *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2003.p. 139

¹⁶ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Informally through my research with the Bracero History Project I have not found braceros stating that their experience was fundamentally shaped by the Alianza in these later years.

The Patriotic Alianza

Recruited with the guarantee of a decent wage and the promise of serving the greater good during a time of war, many braceros left Mexico City in 1942. False rumors spread that the U.S. government made plans to send braceros off to war; however, many men decided to enroll in the program despite feelings of hesitation and skepticism.¹⁹ The U.S. quelled these rumors by evoking Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy and insisting that it was the patriotic duty of Mexicans to assist the U.S. in war efforts. Braceros internalized the "good neighbor" spirit as they eventually decided to take part in the Bracero Program.²⁰ Many guest workers who came during these first years tell positive stories of cheerful welcoming committees and decent treatment despite the difficulty of the work. Early propaganda about the Bracero Program highlighted its patriotic efforts, encouraging American communities to understand the role of these workers as essential to securing the prosperity of the home front. Many braceros reinforce such interpretation by stating: "We fed America during the war."²¹ The Alianza worked within these parameters of patriotic duty to address concerns raised by *aspirantes*²² who knew little about the program. These patriotic discourses served to make sense of the status of these guest workers in the U.S., and in this context, their rights as workers were made to seem less important.

Braceros, such as Luis Barocio Ceja, paint a picture of neighborly aid and conduct that contributed to their sense of patriotism during those first years of the Bracero

¹⁹ Personal Conversation and Interview with Luis Barocio Ceja for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 28, 2008 in Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

²⁰ For more on the Good Neighbor Policy see: Pike, Fredrick B. *FDR's Good Neighbor Policy: 60 Years of Generally Gentle Chaos*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995.

²¹ Personal Conversation and Interview with Luis Barocio Ceja for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 28, 2008 in Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

²² Individual who aspired to become a bracero.

Program. According to Barocio Ceja, who started the contracting process on March 31, 1943, many braceros feared that they were going to be sent to war and got off of the train headed towards the border.²³ Mexican media addressed this rumor by printing articles assuring the general public that braceros were not going to the American armed forces.²⁴ He recalled arriving in Corona, California, and encountering a welcoming party organized by a special greeting committee and a band that played “Que Viva Mexico.” Barocio Ceja went on to obtain several contracts until the end of the program and argued that in the early years he received the best treatment. He said that during his first contract, if a bracero wanted to return to Mexico, they were asked if they were content with the food and accommodations. They told the braceros that if they were unsatisfied with the food, the cook could be changed. Employers and supervisors attempted to make these braceros feel comfortable. Two teachers, assigned to work with braceros, taught Barocio Ceja his first lessons in English. He also recalled the social incorporation of braceros, as local girls invited them to their homes and dances.²⁵ Individuals in receiving communities, like Corona, saw braceros as a vital component for victory during the war and braceros embraced these patriotic discourses that served to elevate the purpose of their migration.

²³ Personal conversation and interview with Luis Barocio Ceja for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 28, 2008 in Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

²⁴ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) Vol. 807 Exp. 2 “Que los Braceros no han Sido Enrolados Para la Guerra” El Universal, March 6, 1951.

“Ni un Bracero fué Enrolado Rumbo a Corea” La Prensa, March 6, 1951.

“Los Braceros no van al Ejército de EE. UU.” Excelsior, March 6, 1951.

²⁵ For more on Bracero/Mexican-American social relations see:

Garcia, Matt. *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970, Studies in Rural Culture*. Chapel Hill, NC.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Although scholars have claimed that Alianza started in Mexico City during the late 1940s, the organization has a slightly longer transnational history.²⁶ One year after the first braceros set foot in Stockton, California, the Alianza held its first meeting in Fullerton, California. At 10 AM on Saturday, October 2, 1943, over three-dozen men constituted this group under the lead of bracero José Lara Jimenez. During their first meeting, Lara Jimenez said, "...the meeting's objective is to form an organization, that is considered necessary in light of the fact that many braceros do not understand the responsibility we have here in the United States of North America, in these transcendental global moments, in which all countries fight for liberty...."²⁷ He believed that many braceros did comprehend their role in global politics and made it more difficult for the authorities of the Farm Security Administration.²⁸ He went on to point out that many braceros did not want to work and became a source of national embarrassment and shame for those who were hard working.

During this brief one-hour meeting, they created and filled seven positions within the organization. Leadership emerged and the members filled the seven positions by unanimous votes. By October 18, 1943, they mailed off a letter on their newly acquired letterhead to the President of Mexico, Manuel Avila Camacho, to inform him of the organization's creation. The head of the Alianza expressed that the goal of the organization was to provide an orientation for their members, ensuring that these

²⁶ Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2004.p.162

Pitti, Stephen J. *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2003.

²⁷ Archivo General de la Nación, Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol. 598 exp. 546.6/418

"...dicha reunión tenía el objetivo de formar una organización, que se consideraba necesaria en vista que muchos compañeros braceros, no comprendían las responsabilidades que traíamos aquí en los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica, en esto momentos de transcendencia mundial, en que todos los países luchaban por la libertad..."

²⁸ Ibid.

representatives of Mexico honored their mother country.²⁹ The early slogan articulated the perceived role of the bracero in the U.S.: “For the Triumph of the Democracies.”³⁰ Inspired by Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, their labor would aid American efforts in the war and the worldwide effort for democracy. According to the Alianza, the braceros were not merely stoop labor. Additionally, the Alianza saw itself as an organization that stood vigilant to patriotic principals. They wanted to make sure that the violent, drunk, and lazy men of Mexico did not secure contracts and thus disgrace Mexico abroad.³¹

The Alianza wanted to accomplish these goals by becoming part of the Mexican contracting processes. Leaders of the organization proposed that its members could work to orient braceros, so that braceros knew what to expect. Thus, they could potentially decrease the number of braceros that “skip out” on their contracts. They argued that the braceros that did not complete their work requirements and skipped out on their contracts brought shame to Mexico.³² For a bracero to “skip out” meant that they abandoned their work to seek new job opportunities outside the parameters of their contract, thus breaking their contract as a guest worker. Braceros who skipped out on their contracts became a major problem for employers who sometimes quickly lost their workforce. The Alianza viewed this as a shameful consequence of contracting unreliable men and felt the organization could work towards improving this embarrassing situation nationwide.³³ During this transition, the U.S. government went from recognizing a bracero as a documented laborer legally entitled to work in the U.S. to an undocumented laborer not authorized to work in the U.S.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

³² Archivo General de la Nacion, Miguel Alemán Valdez (MAV) Vol. 598 Exp. 546.6/418.

³³ Ibid.

The Alianza also wanted contract preference given to braceros that completed the terms of their previous contract because men with experience as guest workers in the U.S. knew what the work entailed and were less likely to skip out on their new contract. As these first groups of men returned home they dispelled the myth that braceros were sent to the frontlines of the war. They also spoke about their experiences and wages in the U.S., thus interest in the program grew. Soon thousands of *aspirantes* lined up in areas around the national stadium in Mexico City. Bracero Jesús Topete described this area as a “Bracerópolis” as hungry men who were far away from their hometowns slept on streets.³⁴ Potential guest workers accrued debts to get to Mexico City, and furthermore, many were continuously taken advantage of by those who made empty promises to get these *aspirantes* on bracero lists for small bribes commonly known as *mordidas*. The local and national government turned a blind eye away from addressing atrocities committed against guest workers because braceros were viewed as easily exploitable subjects. This unjust treatment of braceros became the basis of much of the Alianza’s further activism.

The Criminalized Alianza

After the war ended, the organization recognized that the crimes against braceros extended beyond the Mexican border. As the exploitative practices of U.S. growers increased, the Alianza placed more energy on calling national and international attention to this exploitation. Although they previously mediated guest worker conflicts within the contracting system and with U.S. growers, the level of attention placed on these exploitative practices grew dramatically. No longer centrally concerned with sending the

³⁴ Topete, Jesús. *Aventuras de un Bracero*. México: Gráfica Moderna, 1961.

best workers of Mexico to represent the nation abroad, they focused on protecting the men against both American and Mexican exploitation. The Alianza believed one of the major hurdles put before them was the rising numbers of undocumented workers. This made it particularly difficult to advocate for bracero worker rights because some employers could easily replace guest workers with undocumented labor. The leadership of the Alianza grew concerned with finding a place for braceros within larger labor movements. Although the braceros were clearly viewed as workers, their rights were limited within the Bracero Program. While organizing to meet their new aims, the Alianza faced heavy surveillance and the leaders of the organization suffered state repression in Mexico in the form of legal prosecution, blacklisting, and even imprisonment.³⁵

By the mid 1940s, the Alianza saw itself as a bracero advocacy and social service organization. Activists in the organization moved the headquarters to Mexico City. In an investigation of the organization, Manuel Rio Thivol, a government agent reported:

Upon their return to their home country, they were in agreement to reorganize because here too in this country they are victims of the same economic exploitations that because of evident poverty they cannot solve...³⁶

Leadership of the organization recognized that the long road of exploitation of braceros began as they left their hometowns in hopes of acquiring a contract. During the long road of acquiring a bracero contract, many *aspirantes* got into debt and experienced swindling at the hands of unscrupulous individuals with false promises of work in the U.S. The

³⁵Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

³⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 84 exp. 2.

“Al retornar sus miembros a su Patria natal, convinieron en reorganizarla en virtud de que aquí también en el país se les hacían víctimas de las mismas explotaciones económicas que por circunstancias de manifiesta pobreza no podían solventar...”

Alianza argued that *aspirantes* could easily fall into slavery through the work of contractors that aimed at creating undocumented workers with few rights and recourses.³⁷ They opened an office in Mexico City in order to more effectively work on decreasing *aspirante* abuses and to create politicized groups of braceros who could work towards calling attention to guest worker abuses as well.

The organization also created new positions to reflect these aims. The board of the Alianza created and appointed a Commission of Justice and Honor, and Legal Advisors. They constructed additional positions, such as Secretary of Education and Athletics, Secretary for Conflicts, and Secretary Aids, that focused on enhancing the quality of life of braceros in the fields. From 1943 to 1945, the Alianza began to speak on behalf of braceros and their families to try to resolve contracting, transportation, salary and domestic conflict. In 1944, they wrote to the Mexican Consul in an attempt to mediate salary disputes between braceros of Chula Vista and their employer. In 1945, they supported Mrs. Concepción Bejarán de Muñoz's claim that she had a right to receive remittances from her bracero husband. They worked with the Mexican Consul in order to put pressure on Mr. Muñoz Barrera to address his wife's concerns.³⁸ These mediations represented efforts to protect braceros as workers and to address the needs of the bracero family in Mexico.

Interventions of this kind came to a drastic halt in 1946 when the state placed the executive board of the Alianza on trial. Mexican officials argued that the organization attempted to function as a union. Although the stipulations within the bi-national agreement allowed braceros to choose a representative from their own group to represent

³⁷ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 84 exp. 2.

³⁸ Ibid.

their interest in the fields, it prohibited them from joining unions and striking. For the next two years, the organization remained relatively inactive until September 22, 1948, when it was ruled that the Alianza did not commit any crimes and that the organization acted within the legal boundaries of a civic association and not a union. It was found that the executive board did not act criminally or exhibit inappropriate behavior.³⁹ Because of this the Alianza board worked towards clearing their name with members of various regional chapters of the organization. José Hernández Serrano, head of the organization, stated that after the trial he needed to clear the air and do away with suspicion and inaccurate portrayals of the Alianza.⁴⁰ Despite the trial's outcome, the federal government continued to carry out investigations on the Alianza.⁴¹

While leaders of the Alianza embraced their identity as a civic association to avoid detention, they were still eager to find a place within larger unions. Galarza argued that it was a Mexican constitutional right to unionize and no international agreement could abrogate it.⁴² The organization agreed with Galarza but found it difficult to negotiate their stance in the face of imprisonment in Mexico. In order to protect the organization, they shifted the language used in many of the flyers printed and circulated. A flyer, obtained by government agent Manuel Rios Tivoli, stated: "The Alianza, totally integrated by aspirantes, and ex-braceros..."⁴³ demonstrating that they failed to include current braceros in this document because they did not want to be perceived as an entity that organized workers in the U.S.

³⁹ El Archivo General de la Nación, Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol.587 Exp. 545.3/98.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 84 exp. 2.

⁴² Pitti, Stephen J. *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2003. p.144

⁴³ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 84 exp. 2. "*La Alianza, integrada totalment de aspirantes y ex-braceros...*"

Although the Alianza asked *aspirantes*, braceros, and ex-braceros to pay a registration fee and dues, there is no substantive proof that they effectively collected. The Alianza suggested that aspirantes and ex-braceros residing in Mexico pay a three-peso registration fee and a one peso monthly due and that braceros working in the U.S. pay a one-dollar registration fee and a fifty-cent monthly due. According to Rios Tivoli:

I became aware that the founding members of this organization in the United States of America are those that are part of the Executive Committee, having C. José Hernández Serrano as the General Secretary[.] They are committed to pay the expenditures that originate from supporting the organization, for example in respect to managing, paper, ink, and other desk supplies that every office needs in order to avoid additional costs to their members, the majority of whom find themselves in lamentable economic conditions...⁴⁴

Aware that many of its members found themselves in deplorable economic conditions, the leadership found ways to cut back on the expenses of the organization. Although the leadership paid for office supplies, they secured a rent-free office space by sharing an office with the Fraternity of Waiters of Mexico City.

The Alianza felt slighted by the administration of Mexican President Miguel Alemán because they supported his presidential campaign believing he in turn would support labor organizations. In a letter to President Alemán, Hernández Serrano protested, "...Our organization is not unknown to you and it is impossible for you to continue to act like that[.]"⁴⁵ President Alemán ignored the Alianza's pleas and the

⁴⁴ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 84 exp. 2. *"Tuve conocimiento que los miembros fundadores de esa organización en los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica y que son los que figuran en el Comité Ejecutivo, teniendo como Secretario General al C. José Hernández Serrano, se comprometieron a solventar los gastos que origina el sostenimiento de su agrupación, por lo que respeta gestiones, papel, tinta y otros útiles de escritorio que toda oficina necesita para evitar cobros indebidos a sus agremiados que en su mayoría se encuentran en condiciones pecunarias lamentables..."*

⁴⁵ El Archivo General de la Nación, Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol.587 Exp. 545.3/98.

organization felt a deep betrayal as they faced repressive actions by the government. Like several other labor organizations, the Alianza believed that Alemán would push for the same labor rights that he worked towards as a young lawyer. They became disillusioned with his presidency, however, because he did not do more to address the exploitation of braceros. Although publicly the Alianza projected itself as a civic organization, it was clear that they were still searching for a place within labor movements as they signed letters “Always staying within the Mexican National Labor and Campesino Movement.”⁴⁶

During the next year, the Alianza returned to their public alignment within labor movements. They participated in the *Confederación Proletaria Nacional* (CPN) convention. Established in 1942, the CPN was considered a moderate union.⁴⁷ After the convention, the Alianza became part of the CPN and by 1950 developed a formal relationship with Galarza’s *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Agrícolas* (SANTA), which later became the National Agricultural Workers Union, part of the American Farm Labor Union (AFL).⁴⁸ Galarza and the Alianza charted strategies that benefited both braceros and American labor. The Alianza agreed with the CPN and SANTA that one of the major challenges to organizing braceros was the increasing numbers of undocumented Mexican labor in U.S. fields; however, they disagreed on the solution to this problem. SANTA supported legalizing undocumented Mexican workers in the U.S., while the Alianza believed that the legalization of undocumented workers exacerbated

“*Nuestra organización, que para ud. no es desconocida y la que fuera imposibilidad para seguir actuando con tal character;*”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Niblo, Stephen. *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2000.

⁴⁸ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

the problem in the U.S. All the while, many U.S. unions identified the Bracero Program as the problem because undocumented laborer followed in the shadows of bracero. On December 19, 1949, in a letter to L.H Mitchell of the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU) José Hernández Serrano, head of the Alianza, wrote that if the NFLU stood against the continued contracting of braceros, the ultimate effect would be an increase of undocumented Mexican workers in the U.S. Hernández Serrano argued that braceros could find undocumented labor in the fields better than the Mexican or American officials. Hernández Serrano believed that 30,000 to 40,000 bracero contracts would greatly remedy their common interest in addressing the problems that undocumented labor posed to their organizing efforts.⁴⁹ These men could fill the need of agricultural workers while also reporting undocumented workers to U.S. authorities.

The Alianza made suggestions to the CPN and the Mexican government on ways to decrease undocumented migration to the U.S. The organization suggested that the contracting sites should be moved back to Mexico City or Guanajuato. Throughout the first phases of the program, the Mexican Government placed the major contracting stations in its central states. They eventually moved these stations closer to the border. The proximity of the contracting sites made *aspirantes* fall prey to the *coyotes*⁵⁰ in cities, such as Hermosillo and Monterrey. The move of these sites provided temptation for Mexican to cross as undocumented workers. As Hernández Serrano commented the site change "...fomenta their [*aspirantes*] irresponsibility and lack of patriotism."⁵¹ In December 1949, Hernández Serrano told Manuel Garcia from the CPN that it is easy to

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ A *coyote* is person who brings undocumented workers to the US for large payments from the undocumented workers.

⁵¹ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.
"...fomentandoles asi su irresponsabilidad y falta de patriotismo."

cross the border since security was only there between 8 AM and 9 PM, beyond these hours *enganchadores*⁵² delivered men and their families by van to the U.S. The Mexicans paid 10 pesos per person and U.S. growers gave these contractors an additional 2 dollars.⁵³ A large majority of these *enganchadores* worked with growers in Texas. Crossing the border as undocumented labor was one of the few ways Mexican families could remain united in the shadows of the Bracero Program. The Alianza tried to call the President's attention to the fraudulent pay stubs growers provided to their undocumented laborers in order to work them into the Bracero Program.

The Alianza felt that Texas growers represented one of the biggest threats to their organizing efforts. In places like Crystal City and Harlingen, growers targeted undocumented workers for employment.⁵⁴ From 1943 to 1947, the Mexican Government barred Texas growers from participating in the Bracero Program because of the intense racial discrimination against Mexicans in the state.⁵⁵ Texas growers circumvented this by working with *engachadores* to secure undocumented Mexican labor. The move of contracting centers from central states of Mexico to the border made it much easier, even after Texas started receiving braceros in 1948.⁵⁶ With these issues in mind, the Alianza expressed that it was unfair that growers had avenues to legalize their undocumented labor because they said that it rewarded lack of discipline and fomented unruliness.⁵⁷ In

⁵² *Engachadores* are illegal work contractors in the US.

⁵³ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ González, Gibert G. *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest*. Austin: University of Texas, 1999. p. 210

⁵⁶ Garcia y Griego, Manuel. *The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964*. in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996.

Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

⁵⁷ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

this way, the undocumented became criminalized and then were absolved of crimes at the mercy of growers. This further marginalized both U.S. labor and bracero workers, as it placed more power in the hands of growers.

The Alianza believed that if the Mexican government did not step in to regulate Mexican immigration to the U.S., the numbers of undocumented workers would undoubtedly double within one year.⁵⁸ The Mexican government attempted to regulate immigration internally by allowing residents of some Mexican states to participate in larger numbers than others. But the Alianza argued that as some states were favored over others, undocumented Mexican labor increased in unfavored states. Hernández Serrano suggested that the Mexican government work more diligently to determine who was in real need of bracero contracts. He also suggested that the government should work with industries and conduct research on the background of *aspirantes* in order to exclude those who had other avenues of work. He also wanted the government to give preference to agricultural workers who possessed no land in Mexico. Ultimately, Hernández Serrano argued that both industry and agriculture in Mexico were negatively affected by the flight of Mexican workers to the U.S.⁵⁹

In 1950, the Alianza began a national campaign against *aspirantes* moving towards the border and crossing as undocumented labor. They made tangible gains as the Mexican government agreed that they would authorize 2,000 members of the Alianza to receive bracero contracts.⁶⁰ In order to prepare these 2,000 Alianza members for their temporary work contracts, they looked towards Galarza and SANTA for information on the going wage for various agricultural jobs. In addition, they requested that Galarza send

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

them a sample contract used by growers to employ American-born labor. Galarza responded that the wages fluctuated and that there was no set standard that growers paid. Furthermore, unlike braceros, U.S.-born agricultural workers had no contracts, as growers were not forced to sign individual contracts with these laborers.⁶¹

Galarza felt that the system for making growers accountable often failed, as neither the U.S. nor Mexican government forced growers to abide by all of the standards and regulations set forth through the bi-national agreement that established the program. He was convinced that the only way to establish accountability was to allow braceros to join SANTA and thus collectively bargain in such a way that both U.S.-born workers and braceros would be treated equally. The Alianza proceeded to formalize their relationship with Galarza's NFLU. They decided that when braceros joined the NFLU or the Alianza, they automatically became members of both. However, Galarza remained frustrated with this arrangement because the organization often took months to respond to his letters. Ultimately, Galarza recognized that the Alianza did not wield much influence in Mexico.⁶² The Alianza continued their work to decrease the numbers of undocumented laborers in the U.S. by giving bracero orientations.

Through these orientations, they encouraged the men to complete the terms of their contracts, be vigilant about protecting their rights as workers, and understand the system in order to report injustices committed against them. The Alianza also urged *aspirantes* to denounce undocumented laborers and in this way be good allies to U.S. labor unions.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Pitti, Stephen J. *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2003.p. 144

⁶³ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

The effectiveness of these orientations is unclear since the gains were often accompanied by setbacks. In the recruitment and contracting process of April 21, 1950, the Alianza provided an orientation for braceros in Monterrey Nuevo Leon. They also created a Regional Committee Pro-Bracero of Monterrey, which was in charge of future orientations. Economic limitations prohibited members of the Alianza to travel to the contracting centers of Sonora or Chihuahua and organize those braceros. It seemed that at least the men in Monterrey would go to the U.S. organized and aware that they had a concrete relationship with SANTA. With great disappointment, the Alianza informed SANTA that the men who were given the orientation in Monterrey were meant to travel to California and work picking oranges but contracting was suspended because the growers did not need more workers. Additional financial hardships compounded these problems. During the next contracting period, the Alianza reported to SANTA on September 6, 1950, that they were unable to give men an orientation because they lacked the funds. They could not send a committee to the border to carry out this work. They repeatedly tried to assure Ernesto Galarza that they were strong allies and that the Bracero Program was the only solution to combating the rising numbers of “*espaldas mojadas*” or wetbacks.⁶⁴

Despite these problems Galarza continued to work with the Alianza in an effort to integrate braceros into SANTA. On October 21, 1950, Galarza explained to the Alianza that the main problem was, “...the contracts written and ratified by the governments are not complied with because the bracero lacks the collective power to make them comply.”⁶⁵ He went on to state, “I continue to think that the only way to protect both the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

contracted bracero and the U.S. farm worker is the integration of braceros to the rank and file of the Union...”⁶⁶ He explained that this was the only means to achieve the collective bargaining needs to ensure that every worker received adequate salary and work conditions.⁶⁷ In May 1950, Galarza mailed materials to the Alianza and immediately Hernández Serrano sent them to various chapters; however, there were not enough materials and Hernández Serrano asked Galarza for more. These materials were meant to deter *aspirantes* from becoming undocumented workers in the U.S. and expose them to the reality of the exploitation awaiting them if they chose to do so. By November 28, 1950, the Alianza used their resources to translate pamphlets and materials sent by SANTA. Because the cost of travel prevented the Alianza to meet with each individual chapter, they hoped that through these pamphlets, members would understand their new role in the U.S. and their relationship with SANTA.⁶⁸

The Alianza went a step further in attempting to advocate for a place for SANTA within the Bracero Program. Hernández Serrano urged the Labor Commission to invite representatives from SANTA to the next discussion of the Bracero Program. He argued that SANTA could offer up their opinion on controlling the numbers of braceros needed in the U.S. and thus braceros would cause less strife to the American farm labor. Due to the Alianza’s public alignment with labor movements, government attitudes about them changed as they were suspected of communism. Hernández Serrano deflected criticism of the Alianza by stating that it was other braceros outside of the organization that supported

“...-los contratos escritos y ratificados por los gobiernos no se cumplen, porque el bracero carece de la fuerza colectiva para hacerlos cumplir.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

“Sigo pensando que la única manera de proteger tanto al bracero contratado como al campesino de áca es la integración del bracero a las filas de la Unión...”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

communism and anti-Americanism. Serrano Hernández also wanted to convince the Labor Commission that the Alianza could serve another necessary role in the Bracero Program: weeding out communist cells that attempted to infiltrate the U.S. as braceros.⁶⁹ The Alianza argued that individuals often have “anti-yanqui” sentiments that are harmful once in the U.S. Hernández Serrano wrote that these measures were necessary in order to avoid situations, such as the assassination attempt by Puerto Rican nationalists Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola of U.S. President Harry Truman.⁷⁰

Key organizers of the Alianza received additional threats during the next year. Galarza came to the defense of the Alianza as he believed that these threats detracted attention from the atrocities committed within the program. By December 18, 1950, the organization found itself in desperate economic need and asked for SANTA’s assistance.⁷¹ The Alianza faced these economic hardships alongside increasing public accusations of communism. Hernández Serrano sent an urgent telegram to Galarza on February 25, 1951, asking why Mexican and American newspapers printed articles associating communist infiltration with the Alianza.⁷² The Mexican presses also printed articles on communist presence in the Bracero Program. *Novedades*, printed an article titled, “They Insist that Communist are Leaving as Braceros.”⁷³ The article describes a statement made by H.R. Landon, the Director of Immigration and Naturalization for the Los Angeles district, that they deported countless numbers of braceros with communist

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Archivo General de la Nación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 807 exp. 2.

literature.⁷⁴ *Excélsior* article “They Infiltrate as Braceros” cites rising numbers of communist Mexican workers attempting to work in the U.S.⁷⁵

In a press release on March 14, 1951, Galarza wrote, “The Mexican Government is preparing legal action to make it a crime for Mexican workers to cooperate with the American Federation of Labor in the struggle to maintain and raise the living standards in this hemisphere.” He went on to say, “The immediate target of this move to intimidate the friends of United States labor is the Alianza Nacional de Braceros de Mexico (sic)...”⁷⁶ During the January negotiations concerning the Bracero Program, the Alianza supported the AFL and the Railway Brotherhood in opposing the use of braceros to bring down working standards. Galarza explained:

Now the Ministry of the Interior of the Mexican Government has announced that it will file criminal charges against officials of the Alianza because they are allegedly running an international headhunting racket, and because they are working closely with United States labor.⁷⁷

Galarza believed that these charges were an attempt to cover up what was happening within the program and the fact that many stipulations in bracero contracts were not being met.

Galarza knew that the Mexican government’s Ministry of the Interior planned to harass and jail the executive board of the Alianza and he wanted to rally American union support for the Alianza. Galarza stated:

I want to recall that it was the Alianza that stood up and was counted when I was down there. The Alianza was the only labor organization in Mexico City that had the guts to organize a public meeting with the American and Mexican flags side by side. The

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

commies threatened to break it up and we sent word back that they could try.⁷⁸

He explained, “Without the support of the Alianza we could not have broadened out our support and eventually broken the censorship on the press which the Mexican and American delegations set up.”⁷⁹ He wanted U.S. labor organization to step in and defend the Alianza as their allies. He felt that the Mexican government would decrease their persecution of these activists if other organizations rallied around the Alianza.

New forms of government repression and continued economic problems severely affected Hernández Serrano’s morale. On June 8, 1951, the Alianza asked SANTA for a loan of 200 dollars. Hernández Serrano was in a dire situation and felt that many of the gains made by the Alianza were being lost. Many of his colleagues were unable to secure bracero contracts and rumors of assassination attempts against his life circulated. Rumors spread that the price on his head was five thousand pesos.⁸⁰ Pedro Cerón González, the Internal Secretary of the Alianza, informed Galarza on June 30, 1951, that some of the Alianza organizers found it difficult to secure guest worker contracts. Hernández Serrano was able to secure a contract but Cerón González was not. In attempting to secure a contract, Cerón González got as far as crossing the Nogales border but was detained by U.S. immigration authorities because he was blacklisted as a communist agitator. He believed that individuals who were protecting and compelling *aspirantes* to cross over as undocumented workers were behind his detention because they wanted to scare those in the movement to organize braceros. Two other men who were working with Cerón

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

González were also rejected for bracero contracts in Nogales.⁸¹ The head of immigration asked Cerón González to denounce his participation in the Alianza and to promise in writing that he would never participate in any labor organization. Cerón González needed the income, which he earned from his work as a bracero, so he asked Galarza to step in and assist him in securing a contract with a grower that Cerón González previously worked for in Salinas, California.⁸²

During the next years, the Mexican government continued to aggressively target the head organizers of the Alianza. On March 2, 1953, Hernández Serrano was detained in Guadalajara. Hernández Serrano asked a friend to inform SANTA about his detainment. The next month Hernández Serrano explained to Galarza that in March he went to visit a member of the organization who was held on charges of fraud by municipal police in the town of Tula, Jalisco. The local government targeted and detained Hernández Serrano because the Alianza spoke out against municipal authorities that took advantage of braceros in that area. Members sent a total of 3,168 pesos for legal costs but this was not enough and he asked Galarza for monetary support.⁸³ Hernández Serrano believed that this episode could set back his work even further and members might be fearful about potential detainment. He and the other members of the Alianza were incarcerated for three months and charged a total of four thousand pesos. Hernández Serrano was eventually released on bail and ordered to report to authorities in Tula every eight days. His members could no longer help him economically because they feared

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

detention in doing so. He was heavily in debt and knew that every day he was away from home his debt grew.⁸⁴

The Broken Alliance

Hernández Serrano feared that Mexican labor organizations would not build lasting relationships of mutual support with the Alianza. They aligned for a brief period with the CPN and dropped that relationship because leaders of the Alianza felt that the CPN did not address their concerns and did not offer them protection within the union. Invited to join the *Confederación General de Trabajadores de México* (CGT), their faith in the Mexican labor movement was renewed and leaders of the Alianza felt they could find a place within the movement through the CGT.⁸⁵ During the next decade they attempted to work closely with labor organizations and made countless gestures towards the Mexican federal government in an effort to address the rising reports of exploitation.

At a conference in May 1953, Fidel Velasquez, head of the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM), spoke about the possibilities of organizing braceros well enough so that they had the ability to protect their own interests. In this manner, they would not allow themselves to be used against other labor organizations. In front of Mexican President Adolfo Ruíz Cortínez, Velasquez supported the initiatives of the Alianza and argued that braceros needed to be represented by their own in the U.S. The CTM was in an awkward position because they were the government-backed labor federation. However, upon the inception of the Bracero Program, the Mexican

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

government greatly limited CTM's work with Mexican labor in the U.S.⁸⁶ The Mexican government planned on delivering Mexican labor to the U.S. without the right to union representation.⁸⁷

By late 1953, Hernández Serrano believed the Alianza was falling out of favor with labor organizations, such as the CGT, because braceros were controversial figures among members of labor unions.⁸⁸ Many of these Mexican unions did not know what to do with braceros as they worked outside of Mexico and thus outside of the legal frameworks that protected Mexican workers in Mexico. In addition, they fell outside of organizing strategies used by popular labor unions in Mexico. The Alianza recognized that braceros were often used as scapegoats within larger labor issues. Defending braceros as workers was seen as condoning the use of guest workers and many labor organizations did not want to support the use of Mexican guest workers in the U.S. These attitudes made Hernández Serrano fear that the Alianza would soon find itself alone.⁸⁹

While on parole, Hernández Serrano reached out to Galarza and asked why Galarza did not answer his letters from jail. He wrote, "Your distance is odd *compañero* Galarza, I don't know if you are thinking of retiring from the fight, or you might see that our relationship is too insignificant to help reach your goal; but if it is this I am sure that you will not find another *compañero*, that on principle alone will constantly step in the dungeons of a prison."⁹⁰ Hernández Serrano also explained that there were individuals interested in distancing them from each other.

⁸⁶ González, Gibert G. *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest*. Austin, TX.: University of Texas, 1999. p. 205

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

In an effort to fortify the bonds between the Alianza and labor organizations, in 1954, the Alianza suggested that they work together to pressure the U.S. and Mexican governments to create a *Comisión Mixta*. Through a Mixed Bracero Commission, the parties involved could represent their interests. Hernández Serrano pointed out that official Bracero Program commissions were made up of individuals that did not have much experience with the program. He suggested that the *Comisión Mixta* be made up of a representative from the AFL, CIO, CGT, and the Alianza and two representatives from growers associations, who preferably resided in Los Angeles.⁹¹ Hernández Serrano believed that this committee could address several issues. They could work out ways to prevent contract skipping and thus alleviate undocumented worker issues. They would also be vigilant about the use of Mexican labor to bring down salaries of domestic labor. Finally, they could solve disputes between growers and braceros.⁹² During this same year, U.S. President Eisenhower appointed a Migratory Labor Committee to investigate problems within the Bracero Program and advise on legislation. Again, the Alianza saw itself outside of official conversations about the future of the Bracero Program.⁹³

The next year, the Alianza contributed legislative suggestions to the Mexican government for altering the Bracero Program to protect workers rights. They urged the government to establish “pro-bracero defense offices” in the U.S. in areas with large concentrations of bracero workforces.⁹⁴ These pro-bracero defense offices would work

“Me extraña su distancia compañero Galarza, no sé si piensa retirase de la lucha, o vea que los nexos con nuestra organización le sean pequeños para llegar a la meta; pero si es así estoy seguro que no se encontrará otro compañero que por un simple principio esté pisando constantemente las masmorras de la cárcel.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

“oficinas de defensa pro-bracero”

independently from the consulate bureaucracy because the consul system was deemed by the Alianza as an inadequate system unable to enforce the rules and regulations of the Bracero Program. They also asked the Mexican government for approval of the building of one contracting center in a central state. This contracting center would have the medical capabilities to examine *aspirantes* before they crossed over to the U.S. The aim was to reduce the numbers of *aspirantes* rejected in American territory. The Alianza requested that this contracting center have dormitories, bathrooms, kitchens, and recreation facilities. These facilities would also reduce the abuses against *aspirantes* and the rampant vice and alcoholism associated with the *aspirantes*' long waiting periods in contracting centers. They did not ask the government for funding. Instead, they asked for approval because they anticipated that this structure could be built with mandatory bracero contributions within three years time. Although they acknowledged that the Bracero Program facilities would not be as permanent as a new contracting building, they believed that this building could be used as a school, hospital or government offices once the Bracero Program was terminated. They argued that the current system was like a cattle call, where the cattle that are chosen are destined for the slaughterhouse and the only ones to blame are those that allow this to continue.⁹⁵ These demands for alterations in the program were not addressed, but the Alianza continued to propose solutions to the problems of the Bracero Program.

In 1952, Galarza worked with the Alianza to gather information on corruption, abuses and scandals within the Bracero Program. Three years later, he pressured the Alianza to gather more information. In May 1955, Galarza requested that Hernández Serrano ask his members to submit any evidence of corruption and wrong doing to

⁹⁵ Ibid.

SANTA.⁹⁶ By October 1955, Galarza began collecting survey information from braceros working in the U.S. and Mexico.⁹⁷ He received a grant to study problems related to the Bracero Program in California. Galarza researched issues facing guest workers from the perspective of those working in U.S. fields, but he felt it valuable to include the experience of ex-braceros residing in Mexico and asked Hernández Serrano for assistance with survey information. He included 50 dollars for any cost incurred while assisting in the survey and finally added that perhaps they could continue this type of cooperation.⁹⁸ The next year, Galarza published *Strangers in Our Fields*, his exposé concerning the exploitation of braceros, and national eyes in Mexico and U.S. focused on the Bracero Program.

As Galarza distanced himself from the Alianza, representatives of the AFL investigated the Alianza affiliation with the AFL.⁹⁹ Due to agreements with Galarza and SANTA, the Alianza came to believe that they were affiliated with the AFL since 1951. In fact, they had been using a circular emblem with the American and Mexican flag at the center and AFL printed at the top. The Alianza proceeded to ask if it was against American laws to print AFL on their emblem. Although it is not clear if this issue was resolved, they continued to use the same emblem.¹⁰⁰ After the publication of *Strangers in Our Fields*, Galarza corresponded with the Alianza less frequently and the communication dwindled considerably in the early 1960s.¹⁰¹ The already strained relationship between the Alianza and labor organizations seemed weakened despite the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The investigation took place in 1957. Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

¹⁰⁰ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

¹⁰¹ There is no correspondence between the Alianza and Galarza in the 1960s in the Galarza Papers in the Special Collections at Stanford University.

Alianza's efforts to find a place for guest workers within the labor movements of the time. They continued to organize until the end of the program but in this final phase they made very limited impact on the lives of braceros. Galarza's optimism concerning the potential of organizing braceros also dissipated. Throughout the late 1950s until 1964, Galarza became increasingly convinced that the Bracero Program must end.

Agricultural Land for Ex-Braceros

As guest workers, braceros shared a complicated relationship with the U.S. and as ex-braceros, they struggled to find their place within Mexican nation-building projects. Their experience in the U.S. as "alien citizens" with limited rights stood in deep contrast to their need to reclaim the promises of the Mexican Revolution "*tierra y libertad*," land and liberty. Academics, journalists and the general public asked how braceros would be reincorporated upon their return to Mexico.¹⁰² Towards the end of the Bracero Program the Mexican government made concessions to outside investors for industrialization projects as a means to reincorporate these men.¹⁰³ On the other hand, Alianza and other braceros worked towards finding a place in the Mexican economy through agriculture in the form of land reform projects. Although many efforts did not lead to land redistribution, specifically favoring braceros, these lofty aims revealed much about the position of these guest workers in Mexico.

¹⁰² Garcia y Griego, Manuel. *The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964*. in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996.

¹⁰³ Examples of industrialization projects were maquiladoras on the border. Garcia y Griego, Manuel. *The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964*. in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996.

The Alianza wanted to see the promises of the Mexican Revolution become a reality for braceros and proposed a large-scale land redistribution project favoring ex-guest workers. They recognized that many braceros left Mexico because they were agricultural workers who did not own their own land, while others left because they did not have the capital to develop their land. After WWII, the organization considered it an unpatriotic duty for a bracero to leave his land unattended while working in the U.S. There was a national fear that the loss of braceros adversely affected the Mexican agricultural economy.¹⁰⁴ Simultaneously, across the border, Americans feared that the leftist communist agitators looking for agrarian reform in their own country sought to come to the U.S. through the program. Historian Gilbert G. González points out that in Mexico, the Bracero Program was seen as a valve to release and break up pent up oppositional political pressure among the landless and those with small parcels.¹⁰⁵ In January 1954, a journalist in Mexico City wrote that the failure of the Mexican government's land reform policies had not caused a revolution in large part because of the emigration of braceros to the U.S.¹⁰⁶

Twentieth century Mexican land reform policy deeply shaped the reality of many braceros and the goals of the Alianza. Many landless peasants could not go back to the *campesino/hacendado*¹⁰⁷ relationship or poverty as a recent *ejidatarios*¹⁰⁸ because the experience as a bracero changed their perspective on their role in the agricultural

¹⁰⁴ Archivo General de la Nación, Adolfo López Mateos (ALM), vol. 587 Exp. 545.3/98. Carr, Barr. *Maxism and Communism in Twentieth Century Mexico*. Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

¹⁰⁵ González, Gibert G. *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest*. Austin, TX.: University of Texas, 1999. p. 208

¹⁰⁶ Garcia y Griego 67 citing Gonzalez Navarro, *Poblacion and Sociedad*, p. 177

¹⁰⁷ A *campesino* is a rural peasant and a *hacendado* is a owner of a large private estate.

¹⁰⁸ An *ejido* is a communal parcel of land and an *ejidartario* is an individual assigned temporary ownership of a community parcel of land.

economy of Mexico. They imagined new relationships with Mexican nationhood and the promises of the Mexican Revolution. Since its early years, the Alianza suggested that the Mexican government needed to implement an agrarian reform project that favored braceros. Hernández Serrano asked the Mexican President to assign the Secretary of Agriculture and Livestock to the *Comisión Intersecretarial*.¹⁰⁹ He argued that this government agency was one of the most effected by the departure of braceros.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, the Alianza was unable to organize the program for *Granjas Agrícolas para ex-Braceros* but the debates around the project shed light on land reform politics that shaped families' relationship to the Bracero Program.

The Alianza proposed *Granjas Agrícolas para ex-Braceros* to give braceros the opportunity to purchase their own private land, which Hernández Serrano believed was one of the key components of regulated migration to the U.S. The proposed project relied on the savings that braceros brought back from the U.S. as the principal capital to invest in the project. Furthermore, it was to be obligatory to all braceros, thus ensuring that the men would not become a burden on the state as they returned. The project also addressed major concerns of how the braceros would be reincorporated into the Mexican economy. It stood in stark contrast to proponents of industrialization programs as a means to reabsorb returning laborers.¹¹¹

Hernández Serrano explained that it was the patriotic duty of braceros to reinvest in Mexico and fortify the national economy by working as independent farmers. The Alianza asked to meet with the Secretary of Agriculture and Livestock in order to begin

¹⁰⁹ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

¹¹⁰ Archivo General de la Nación ALM vol. 587 Exp. 545.3/98.

¹¹¹ Carr, Barr. *Maxism and Communism in Twentieth Century Mexico*. Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

working towards finding national land that could be bought by braceros. They preferred that land be set up and sold as private property rather than as an *ejido*, because of the restrictive limitation on the use and sale of *ejidos*. Hernández Serrano argued that many braceros who were owners of *ejidos* were often taken advantage of by those who wanted to take possession of their land. Serrano believed that municipal presidents and *comisariados ejidales*¹¹² in their bracero recommendation lists rid themselves of men whose lands they wanted to possess. Some men might also willingly give their land up for a possibility of working in the U.S. as braceros. Hernández Serrano believed preference should be given to unemployed landless men. Moreover, he felt that many *ejidatarios* sought bracero contracts because they did not have the capital to invest in their land. Without this investment to expand production, the product of the labor was very minimal and drove families of *ejidatarios* into poverty. Consequently, the failed land policies of the Mexican state were at the heart of the Alianza's analysis of the Bracero Program.

Cayetano Loza, father of several braceros in the small *ejido* community of *El Sitio de Maravillas* in the state of Guanajuato, corroborates Hernández Serrano's information. Loza pointed out that many members of the community left as braceros, because they did not have the capital necessary for proper development of their *ejido*. The land of *El Sitio de Maravillas* rested on part of *La Hacienda de Maravillas*. Loza, along with his family, had worked for the owner of the hacienda most of his life. His first three children were born on the hacienda and had little hope of owning their own property. Opponents of land reform violently killed his uncle for circulating land redistribution petitions among campesinos in the 1930s. Loza felt convinced to continue his uncle's work and finally in 1938, some families of the hacienda received the *ejidos*, which would constitute *El Sitio*

¹¹² *Comisariados ejidales* are heads of *ejido* communities.

de Maravillas. Many families continued to fight for land rights in the area and by 1942, Loza recalls the heavy recruitment of men from this area. He thought men left for two reasons: either they did not own land because they feared joining those who petitioned for land, or they owned land but no capital.¹¹³ In his eyes, violence faced by land reformers and the Bracero Program recruitment represented two popular methods of dissuading individuals from pushing for land reform.

Although the Alianza thought that majority of *ejidatarios* fell into poverty and marginalization, they warned the federal government that a few *ejidatarios* used land reform policy to become small *latifundistas* as they amassed land and decreased the possibilities of *campesinos* becoming land owners in the home states.¹¹⁴ Hernández Serrano believed this was especially prevalent in areas with rich agricultural land. He pointed out “... they do not have means of irrigation, agricultural machinery, economic capital, and orientation on the subject matter.”¹¹⁵ The lack of agricultural development forced many to seek out bracero contracts.

By 1958, the Alianza organized Regional Bracero Committees in several states including: Guanajuato, Puebla, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Tlaxcala, Jalisco and towns, such as Chilacachapa, Guerrero. In a letter to the Mexican President, the organization based in Chilacachapa argued that they formed the organization to ensure that they would receive “the fruit of the revolution.”¹¹⁶ In the organization’s constitution, over 100 members of the regional organization expressed that they had no land, no work and needed to support

¹¹³ Personal Conversations and interview with Cayetano Loza for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 30, 2007 in El Sitio de Maravillas, Guanajuato.

¹¹⁴ For more on *ejidos* and *latifundistas* see:

Vasquez Castillo, Maria Teresa. *Land Privatization in Mexico: Urbanization, Formation of Regions and Globalization in Ejidos*. New York, NY.: Routledge, 2004.

¹¹⁵ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

¹¹⁶ El Archivo General de la Nación, Adolfo López Mateos (ALM) vol. 715 Exp. 546.6/8. “...los frutos de la revolución...”

their wives and children. Its secondary objective was to ensure that the Bracero Program would end with the acquisition of land by braceros. The Regional Committee of Chilacachapa Guerrero believed that the program *Ganjas Agricolas para ex-Braceros* was a real means by which to end their participation in the Bracero Program and furthermore, “. . . it is the only way to liberate ourselves and to stop being eternal immigrant slaves...”¹¹⁷ Sixteen years after the initiation of the program, *aspirantes* and braceros rejected the Bracero Program as the best long-term solution to their economic hardship.

Braceros, like Tiburcio Delgado Garfia, never believed that the program would end but wanted to break the cycle of continual migration to the U.S. Delgado Garfia worked as a *campesino* for most of his childhood and youth around Huaniqueo, Michoacán. In his home community, many *campesinos* that worked for *hacendados* returned from contracts reluctant to continue working in the same dire situations. He recalls braceros from different areas in Mexico talking about their situations with local *hacendados* in the fields. Many braceros in these situations would send money back to their wives and ask that their wives contribute sums to local leaders of land reform movements. In the U.S., they heard stories of many local leaders who found themselves in situations that were publicly recognized as accidents and privately recognized as murders by local *hacendados*. In his specific community, *hacendados* did not use the program to rid themselves of local land reform leaders because the *hacendados* did not see these men as a threat. They controlled many in the community through fear tactics and by keeping them in such desperate poverty that they needed the *hacendados* as

¹¹⁷ Ibid

“...ya que es la única forma de liberarnos y dejar de ser eternos esclavos inmigrantes...”

employers. Delgado Garfia remembers the abject poverty of some who only earned barely enough to eat and could not afford any shoes or sandals for their feet.¹¹⁸

Many of the poorest of Huaniqueo found it especially difficult to seek out contracts as they had very little collateral to seek out loans for the local bribes that municipal presidents required in order to ensure top placement in bracero contracting lists. Municipal presidents often placed the poorest men at the end of the list so that those who paid the bribes had better chances of receiving contracts. Municipal presidents sent taxicabs for those who paid for the bribes while Delgado Garfia and his cohort walked for several kilometers to Morelia, Michoacán.¹¹⁹

As a bracero, Delgado Garfia sent money from the U.S. to support the local struggles for land redistribution and then upon his return to Mexico, he worked as a head organizer for agrarian reform. In Mexico, the local government managed to jail him several times. He says that it was so frequent that it became biweekly. They would take him to a jail in Morelia and by the next day they would let him go and a couple of days later the scenario would repeat itself. He experienced threats against his life but he continued to organize. Finally after more than 20 years of struggle, he and others in his community received small parcels of land and became *ejidatarios*. The struggles were part of long-time efforts for land reform, but for some in his community the bracero program was an awakening. Many ex-braceros could not see themselves as landless *campesinos* at the mercy of *hacendados*. They drew parallels with their experience as exploitable subjects in the U.S. and found themselves tracing repeated patterns of

¹¹⁸ Personal Conversations and interview with Tiburcio Delgado Garfia for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 27, 2008 in Patzcuaro, Michoacán.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

marginalization. They evoked the long forgotten promises of the Mexican Revolution and believed that through land reform they could break these patterns.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to assess the lasting gains of the Alianza, their existence points towards Mexican efforts to construct transnational labor movements in the U.S. despite the inability to claim U.S. citizenship. The relationship between the leadership of the Alianza and Galarza also creates a depiction of Galarza that is distinct from popular perception of the man who fought vigorously to terminate the Bracero Program. In the 1940s, Galarza felt optimistic about finding a place for braceros with his labor organizing efforts. He had a commitment to organizing these men into his vision of a hemispheric transnational union. By the mid 1950s, this vision dissipated because of the Mexican governments criminalization of the Alianza. He spoke against the persecution of the Alianza and rallied efforts to protect activists within the organization. Despite his hard work, he was unable to defend his allies and his relationship with the Alianza became severely strained. As representative of guest workers, the Alianza struggled to find a place within Galarza's labor organizing efforts and within labor movements in Mexico. Labor organizations on both sides of the border could not find a significant place for braceros within their movement and the Alianza realized their precarious position. Even within this marginal position, they persistently worked towards addressing the concerns of bracero families and attempted to secure these families' prosperity in Mexico.

Leaders of the Alianza organized within the confines of the Bracero Program to improve the quality of life for guest workers and their families. Through the reiteration of

the promises of the Mexican Revolution in their proposed land redistribution project, the Alianza along with other braceros felt that they could be economically reincorporated in Mexico. They viewed the participation of men in the Bracero Program as having a deep effect on Mexican families' position within local land reform struggles. Furthermore, they addressed this relationship and recognized that many braceros did not want to return to the harsh economic realities waiting for them in their hometowns. This study of the Alianza is not a study of failure, but rather a study of those who faced their complicated relationship with the imperial forces of the U.S. and repressive strategies of the Mexican government, with a resolution to build a better tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2

Mexican Indigenous Communities and the Bracero Program

“Dice mi esposa, ‘cuando te vayas, tu espíritu va ir allá [U.S.],’...dicen en la hora de la muerte, dicen que tu espíritu va a donde estuviste.”

“My wife says, ‘when you leave, your spirit it will go over there [U.S.],’...they say when you die, they say your spirit goes where you have been.”

– Julio Valentin May-May, Ex-Bracero¹²⁰

Published seven years after the initiation of the Bracero Program, *Aventura De Un Bracero: Relatos de Seis Meses en Estados Unidos*, remains one of the few published bracero memoirs depicting the conditions experienced by Mexican workers in the United States.¹²¹ While Jesús Topete focuses on his six-month experience in the U.S. as a bracero, his narrative not only reveals details about the bracero experience but also popular Mexican notions of race. For example, while working in a potato field in California, Topete heard that women would come in and help the braceros with the harvesting. The men felt excited about working alongside tall beautiful “gringas,” as they spent so much time solely in the company of men. Topete expressed great disappointment when the women with faces of “chichimecas”¹²² “speaking English” arrived. He developed a tense relationship with these Mexican-American women because they made fun of the braceros often asking them if cars and telephones existed in Mexico. Topete saw himself as a cosmopolitan man from Guadalajara and argued that there were men in the camp more attractive than this group of women. One of the

¹²⁰ Interview with Julio Valentin May-May for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

¹²¹ Topete, Jesus Amaya. *Aventura De Un Bracero: Relatos de Seis Meses en Estados Unidos*. Editorial AmeXica, 1949.

¹²² A generic term for indigenous people.

women asked him why he did not speak to them. He told her that he did not like to be made fun of, and furthermore, they liked to speak English boastfully in front of the braceros claiming they were gringas, and Spanish in front of the gringos claiming they were Mexican. He told this Mexican-American woman that her Spanish was not even that good because it was clear that she used terms from the most remote mountains in Mexico. He went on to say that he did not confuse them for gringas because you could see that they had “totonaca”¹²³ faces from three kilometers away. He referenced an indigenous population in Mexico as a way to insult them and emphasize the unattractiveness of indigenous women. By relating this interaction, Topete describes the racial relationship of indigenous communities to cosmopolitan modernity, in which the latter is given a higher value. Although these women strive for a cosmopolitan identity, it is their status as real “indians” that Topete is able to decipher. Further, he points to racist ideas of idealized Mexican beauty in which these women who appear indigenous are less attractive than his bracero male co-workers. Although they migrated to new lands in which these notions of racialized appearance are understood in a different context, these women continued to be racially inferior in Topete’s eyes (p.52).

The description of this scene reveals popular perceptions about the place of indigenous communities in Mexican racial hierarchies and defines how race is an important construct that defines social boundaries in the transnational communities of Mexico and the U.S. Although the braceros were in the process of inhabiting new geographic areas, their understandings of race relations were deeply rooted in their experience of social hierarchies and racial projects in Mexico.

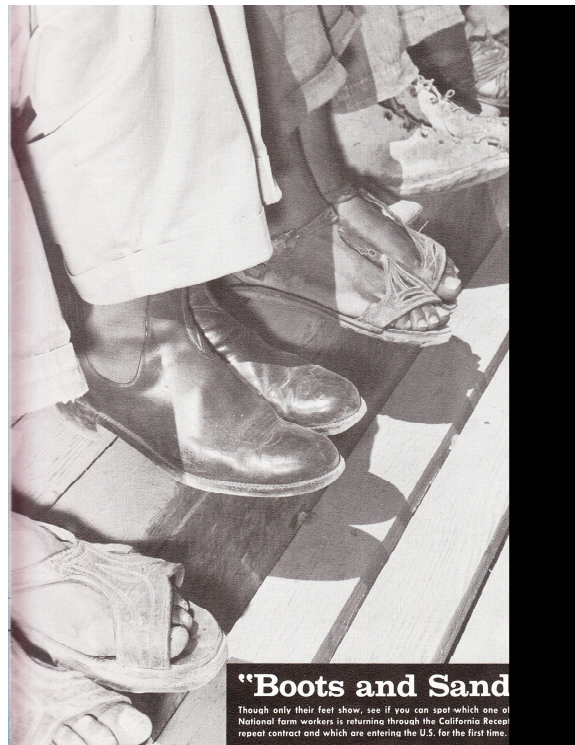
¹²³ This term references an indigenous population of Mexico but it is used to broadly mean indian.

The Bracero Program served as a social and technological project of modernization for rural peasants of Mexico. Mexican officials harbored the hope that participants would learn contemporary work skills in the U.S. that they would then bring back to Mexico. In this state-to-state project, braceros were essentially socialized into modernity in an effort to push Mexico technologically forward in the area of agriculture and industry.¹²⁴ In learning the framework of modernity, bracero communities increasingly used the discourses of modernization and civilization to explain the changes happening in their families, towns, and rural villages. In the example of Topete's memoirs, discourses of modernization were intrinsically tied to constructions of race in both Mexico and the U.S.

¹²⁴ Garcia y Griego, Manuel. *The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964*. in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996.

Rosas, Ana. Dissertation: *Familias Flexibles: Bracero Families' Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942-1964*. History Department. Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 2006.

Camacho Schmidt, Alicia. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. NY: New York University Press, 2008.



Boots and Sandals featured in Agricultural Life¹²⁵

To the vast majority of Americans, the men that came through the Bracero Program were indistinguishable from one another, solidifying a racialized identity placed on them. In addition to physical appearance, Americans gawked at these men's clothes, sandals, and hats.¹²⁶ Modernization was embodied by a change in these men's attire as they came in with sandals and returned to Mexico with shoes and boots.¹²⁷ Although many Americans came to view these men as one homogenous group, those who worked closely with these men and fellow braceros noted stark differences in terms of their regional, racial, and ethnic identities. Braceros from larger cities and towns such as Topete might assert their cosmopolitan experiences in order to deflect the racism that

¹²⁵ Agricultural Life. Spring 1957, Vol. 1-No.1.

¹²⁶ Topete, Jesus Amaya. *Aventura De Un Bracero: Relatos de Seis Meses en Estados Unidos*. Editorial AmeXica, 1949.

¹²⁷ Agricultural Life. Spring 1957, Vol. 1-No.1.

accompanied Anglo perceptions of Mexican *campesinos* and indigenous communities¹²⁸ as backwards.

Scholars charted the racism in the discourses evoked by Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho and other government officials, as they envisioned these guest workers to be racially undesirable, and in desperate need of modernization. The research of Ana Rosas demonstrates that the Mexican government viewed these men as an “intellectually, culturally, and socially inferior race.”¹²⁹ This racism was based on the Mexican history of colonization, the oppression of indigenous communities, and efforts to incorporate mestizos into national-building projects. If the mestizo rural peasantry was racially marginalized because of their indigenous heritage, where did that leave populations that identified only as indigenous and did not have the same claims to “whiteness”?

After the Mexican Revolution, government officials and intellectuals made various efforts to incorporate indigenous experiences into national narratives of Mexican history. The historical discourses created worked as myths of national unity and integration.¹³⁰ At the turn of the 20th century, intellectuals such as José Vasconcelos argued that Spanish and Indigenous miscegenation in Mexico created the racially idealized mestizo. These national discourses of *mestizaje* served to obfuscate the realities of marginalization faced by Mexican indigenous communities.¹³¹ Vanconcelos’ ideas of

¹²⁸ These categories are not mutually exclusive see Frye, David L. *Indians into Mexicans: History and Identity in a Mexican Town*. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1996.

¹²⁹ Rosas, Ana. Dissertation: *Familias Flexibles: Bracero Families' Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942-1964*. History Department. Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 2006. Page 52.

¹³⁰ Gutiérrez, Natividad. *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

¹³¹ For more on mestizaje see:

miscegenation became whitening projects whereby indigenous populations could be incorporated into the nation. By 1945, Mexican intellectuals and artists attempted to recover Mexican indigenous histories in celebratory fashion; however, racism and inequality faced by these communities existed as part of their everyday lives.¹³² Braceros, such as Topete, made claims to modernization and “whiteness” in order to distance themselves from associations with Mexican indigenous communities.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of indigenous braceros and sheds light on intra-ethnic tensions and moments of collaboration. Additionally, this research disputes assumptions that braceros were racially and ethnically homogenous. The individual racial and ethnic identity of distinct bracero populations shaped the sense of place in the racialized landscape of the United States and the interpersonal relationships with others in the Bracero Program. Some indigenous communities yearned to secure bracero contracts but were informally barred from the program by American officials simply because of their inability to speak Spanish proficiently, and thus were more likely to enter the U.S. as undocumented workers.¹³³ Many indigenous braceros struggled with both Spanish and English. Discriminatory practices often placed this population in dangerous jobs and many indigenous braceros relied on hometown social networks more than other immigrant communities. For example, while many braceros from mestizo communities in Jalisco had prior experience working in the U.S., many of the indigenous communities from the Central and Southern states of Mexico did not share this advantage.¹³⁴ Some

Vasconcelos, José. *The Cosmic Race/ La Raza Cósmica*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

¹³² Urias Horcasitas, Beatriz. *La Historia Secreta del Racismo en Mexico (1920-1950)*. Mexico, DF: Tusquets, 2007.

¹³³ Archivo General de la Nación, Manuel Alemán Valdez, vol. 598 exp. 546.6/418.

¹³⁴ Indigenous bracero communities from Mexican border states experienced longer histories with border crossings.

men from these geographic areas were the first of their communities to enter U.S. territory.

The migration routes of these original migrants shaped contemporary immigration patterns as several scholars have traced present day Mixtec, Zapotec, and Mayan immigration to regions of the Pacific Northwest, Southern California, New York and then South to the Bracero Program.¹³⁵ In her ethnography, Rocio Gil Martinez de Escobar followed contemporary Mixtec families from Santa Maria Tindu Oaxaca to towns in Oregon and Southern California. She argued that these families stepped into the same transnational employment circuits that their parents and grandparents forged during the Bracero Program.¹³⁶ In some cases, such as migration to New York, the children and grandchildren of braceros did not follow the same route of migration to a particular destination but their descendents claim connections to the U.S. through their families' experience with the Bracero Program. Activists within the Bracero Justice Movement argue that children of braceros are following in the footsteps of their parents and are reclaiming this experience as an explanation for their own migration and claims of belonging.¹³⁷

Although organizers in the Bracero Justice Movement have identified indigenous communities affected by the Bracero Program in almost every geographic region of Mexico, from the Northern border to Southern states such as the Yucatán, this study does

¹³⁵ Gil Martinez de Escobar, R. *Fronteras de Pertenencia: Hacia la Construcción del Bienestar y el Desarrollo Comunitario Transnacional de Santa Maria Tindu*, Oaxaca. Distrito Federal: Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, 2006.

Smith, Robert C. *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006.

¹³⁶ Gil Martinez de Escobar, R. *Fronteras de Pertenencia: Hacia la Construcción del Bienestar y el Desarrollo Comunitario Transnacional de Santa Maria Tindu*, Oaxaca. Distrito Federal: Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, 2006.

¹³⁷ Personal conversation with Ventura Gutierrez, on June 21, 2008, in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon.

not encompass all indigenous communities that participated in the Bracero Program and includes some who settled permanently in the U.S. The communities included in my study are the Purhepecha residing in Michoacán, Mayans residing in the Yucatán, and Mixtecs, Nahuas, and Zapotecs residing in Southern California. These groups avidly participate in the Bracero Justice Movement and participated in the National Museum of American History's Bracero History Archive. After the bracero experience, some of the populations, such as the Purhepecha, decided to return to Mexico in large numbers, while other members of other populations remained in the U.S. in significant numbers. All of the individuals in this chapter identify themselves as indigenous.

There is no single complete narrative of the indigenous bracero; however, when they are combined, these communities paint complex and at times, contradictory histories of migration and racialization within the Bracero Program. Each indigenous community is unique as each is located in a different climate, has different means of subsistence, different customs and speaks different languages. Though all experiences in the Bracero Program are not homogenous, there are points of commonality. Like mestizo braceros, indigenous braceros experienced the difficulties of the contracting process, exploitative labor practices in the U.S., and the challenges of family separation. They felt similar emotions of family longing and hoped that the Bracero Program held the promise of a better future. Their points of difference are the intra-ethnic and racial tensions among Mexicans, additional difficulties with language and its repercussions, and the interpretations of the effects of the Bracero Program in relation to Mexican indigenous communities.

Indigenous braceros express conflicting narratives about racial discrimination. Many say they did not experience racial discrimination when asked directly but continue by recounting stories of unfair treatment because of racial and ethnic identity. Discrimination in Mexico and the U.S. caused many indigenous men who spoke Spanish to deny that they were from these communities while in the Bracero Program; however, indigenous braceros who did not speak Spanish did not have the same options. The level of Spanish language abilities of the indigenous bracer families in this study ranged from basic to advanced. Facility with the Spanish language provided these indigenous braceros avenues of social incorporation within the program and allowed some to build friendships with mestizo braceros and people in Mexican-American communities.

The Bracero Program also altered the consumption patterns of these communities. Many indigenous braceros argue that it fundamentally changed the dress styles of some communities as braceros that left to the US with “*pantalones de manta*,” (typically simple white cloth pants) but often returned in the newest U.S. apparel. These “*pantalones de manta*” were similar to those popularly worn by many mestizo communities but were considered part of their enduring indigenous heritage. These shifts took on different forms across gender lines as many indigenous braceros preferred that their wives continue to wear traditional attire, and often did not bring gifts of clothing to their spouses and mothers. Other indigenous braceros’ wives independently chose to continue wearing traditional attire.¹³⁸ Although the change from “sandals to shoes” affected all poor braceros, the meanings ascribed to this change became particularly complex for indigenous communities, as many did not see this change as a natural progression of modernization and attributed ethnic and racial meaning to their traditional attire.

¹³⁸ This is more common in Mexico than in the US.

The Bracero Program also altered family relationships as wives of these Braceros argue that their husbands were forever changed by the experience. Like the gender shifts within non-indigenous Mexican families, many indigenous women came to exert a new control over their household while their husbands were away. Some wives of indigenous braceros explained these changes in racially charged discourses of civilization. Indigenous women, such as Orfa Noemi Soberanis, argued that her husband became more “civilized and modern” because of the program.¹³⁹

Many of the experiences of these communities overlap with dominant mestizo narratives of the program, as almost all braceros went through dehumanizing medical physical examinations at the border, experienced exploitative labor practices in the fields, and longed to be with their families. The common points of reference are important as many of the indigenous bracero families claim a place in the Bracero Justice Movement on these grounds. The points of difference between these populations are equally important, as they shed light on Mexican ethnic and race relations during critical moments of migration.

Purhepecha Communities from Janitzio Experience the Bracero Program

Much of the literature concerning the Bracero Program recognizes the large-scale participation of men from the states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán. These states are also home to many indigenous populations that became part of this guest worker program. Indigenous communities, such as the Purhepecha, offer an alternate view of the Bracero Program and its legacy. Although this indigenous community’s presence in

¹³⁹ Interview with Orfa Noemi Soberanis for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Michoacán is found in various geographic areas of the state, the focus of my research is the Purhepecha community in Janitzio. The early part of the 1900s signified an era of turmoil and change in the state of Michoacán as the repercussions of the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Wars were felt by its residents.¹⁴⁰ By 1933, indigenous communities, such as the Purhepecha, found a place in the progressive presidential campaign vision of Lázaro Cárdenas.¹⁴¹ As president of Mexico, Cárdenas (1934-40) pushed for agricultural and educational reform favoring marginalized communities, including the Purhepecha. His presidency is commonly recognized for the largest redistribution of land in Mexican land reform policy.¹⁴² During the dramatic political turn of Manuel Ávila Camacho's presidency (1940-46), many indigenous communities fell out of favor and slowly saw the advances carried out by Cárdenas erode. Many Purhepecha communities became aware of the Bracero Program during Ávila Camacho's presidency, but sought out contracts during the mid 1950s and early 1960s.

The Purhepecha from Janitzio lived on a small picturesque island on Lake Patzcuaro in the western state of Michoacán. A majority of families living on the island relied on fishing for their subsistence. Braceros, such as Pedro Domínguez and Felix Flores, recalled the recruitment efforts and the departure of braceros in the mid 1950s. During the last years of the program, it was common for many able bodied men from Janitzio to leave the island in search of a bracero contract. While contracted as guest workers, Domínguez and Flores experienced racial discrimination and developed means

¹⁴⁰ For more on the Cristero Wars see: Meyer, Jean A. *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State 1926-1929*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹⁴¹ Boyer, Christopher R. *Becoming Campesino: Politics Identity and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacan, 1920-1935*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Press, 2003.

¹⁴² Ibid.

to deal with marginalization. Upon his return to Janitzio, Flores enumerated the ways he felt the migration of men to the U.S. during the Bracero Program changed his community. Audelia Bentura Cortez also related the personal ways the Bracero Program affected her family. These are not representative of all Purhepecha experiences but shed light on the ways in which indigenous bracero families from Michoacán dealt with the bracero experience.

Pedro Domínguez was born on October 19, 1926, in a Purhepecha community in Janitzio, Michoacán. He was from a fishing family made up of his parents, four brothers and three sisters. Domínguez received little schooling because his family needed help with fishing. He described his parent's attitudes by saying "The fish were more urgent than education."¹⁴³ His parents only spoke Tarasco but Domínguez managed to learn Spanish through his few years of formal education. In 1957, as a married young man with one daughter, he decided to seek out a bracero contract. Domínguez left with about 15 men from his community in hopes of obtaining a contract. He described his feelings during the departure: "...it was like I was scared and then I would worry about the family on the island...but I always endured..."¹⁴⁴ To his dismay during this first contract there was only one other Tarascan speaker from his community at his worksite. He worked as a guest worker in the U.S. for three consecutive years for approximately 6 months per year.

¹⁴³ Interview with Pedro Domínguez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 27, 2008 in Patzcuaro, Michoacán.

Pedro Domínguez: "*Más les urgía el pescado que el estudio.*"

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Pedro Domínguez: "*Si, como que me daba miedo y luego como que me apuraba pues por la familia de la isla...pero siempre me la aguante...*"

Braceros from other indigenous communities in Oaxaca attempted to communicate in their native language with Domínguez and his friend, but they were unable to understand each other. He said, “There were the Oaxacans as well and they spoke to us, but we could not understand them because they speak in another way and we could not understand them, and well they could not understand us either. I think they could not understand us.”¹⁴⁵ They made efforts to speak to each other and build broader social networks, but could not linguistically understand each other. He and his friend from Janitzio spoke in Tarascan and other braceros listened with curiosity about what they were saying. Domínguez said, “They (monolingual Spanish speakers) were very interested in learning Tarasco.”¹⁴⁶ Domínguez describes his relationship with other Tarascan speakers, “We looked for each other, it was like we were unhappy...”¹⁴⁷ In an attempt to feel less isolated and help each other, they built community networks and support groups based on their language group.

At one point, the *patrón*¹⁴⁸ asked Domínguez not to work and took him to the local theater to watch the Mexican movie *Maclovía*, which was set in Janitzio. The *patrón* was surprised that the beautiful site of the movie was in fact Domínguez’s home, since the *patrón* did not know Domínguez was Purhepecha. “That *patrón* did not believe I was from there. ‘You’re not from there, only rich people should live there because it is so beautiful in the movie’...I am from there...I felt really proud.”¹⁴⁹ The movie was

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Pedro Domínguez: “*Estaban los de Oaxaca también pero ellos nos platicaban, pero no les entendíamos por que ellos hablan de otra forma y uno no puede entenderles, pues a ellos también. Yo creo ni ellos también nos entendían a nosotros.*”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Pedro Domínguez: “*Tenían mucho interés ellos de que se enseñaran eso, Tarasco.*”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, Pedro Domínguez: “*Si nos buscábamos, como que no estábamos contentos...*”

¹⁴⁸ The Patrón is a boss or landowner.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

based on a legendary love story between Maclovia and José Maria, an indigenous couple in Janitzio. The film explores race relations between the indigenous community and outsiders as the central conflict focuses on military occupation of Janitzio and the abuse of power by a self-identified “white with blue eyes” sergeant who is in love with Maclovia. Although this movie was released in 1948 in Mexico, it was a popular frame of reference for Domínguez’s *patrón* and bracero co-workers for understanding Purhepecha communities.

Pedro Domínguez recognized that his *patrón* and others did not know he was Purhepecha and that language was one of the key markers for recognition of his racial and ethnic identity. He explained, “No one knew I was indigenous,” until they heard him speak Tarascan.¹⁵⁰ He pointed out that many men from indigenous communities were embarrassed and hid their indigenous identity by not speaking indigenous languages. Domínguez did not hide it and said, “Why am I going to be embarrassed? Why would I say that I am Spanish if I am indigenous?”¹⁵¹ Although Domínguez states that he felt very little discrimination based on his indigeneity, he in fact points towards the complicated way racism functions in that many other indigenous braceros spoke Spanish to pass as mestizo. Although many other indigenous towns established long lasting transnational ties through the Bracero Program, Domínguez argued that many from his island communities returned permanently after the program, “No one from the island has

Pedro Domínguez: “*Ese patrón no creía que yo era de allí. ‘No, tú no eres de allí, pues allí a de vivir pura gente rica porque se ve pues muy bonito en la película...Yo soy de allí...Yo me sentía muy orgulloso.’*”

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

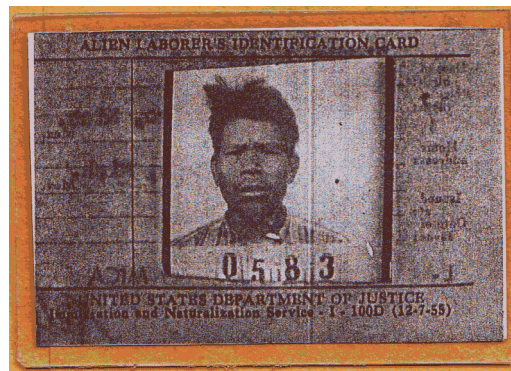
Pedro Domínguez: “*Nadien sabía que yo era indígena.*”

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Pedro Domínguez: “*Yo, por que me va dar pena, Yo pa’que voy a decir que soy español, pues yo soy indígena.*”

stayed over there, everyone has come back.”¹⁵² After 1964, many of the returning braceros felt reincorporated into their family life and the economic system strongly based on fishing.¹⁵³

Felix Flores was born in December 1921 in Janitzio, Michoacán.¹⁵⁴ Like Domínguez, his family also dedicated themselves to fishing. Much of his memory is marked by the eruptions of the Parícutin volcano, which started on February 20, 1943, and officially ended in 1952. He remembers his departure as he left on a boat from the island of Janitzio to Patzcuaro and on to a large contracting station in Empalme, Sonora. He obtained his first contract on October 3, 1956, and worked two contracts of 45 days in Texas.



Felix Flores's Bracero Identification front side¹⁵⁵

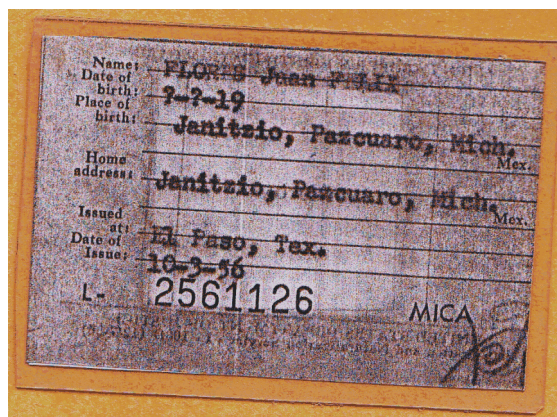
¹⁵² Ibid.

Pedro Domínguez: *“De la isla no se ha quedado uno haya, todos se han venido.”*

¹⁵³ Currently, many bracero families on the island argue that the ecosystem is altered, and they can no longer make ends meet with fishing. Many bracero families have opened restaurants and shops catering to the tourist market.

¹⁵⁴ Felix Flores's bracero identification states he is named Juan Felix Flores, but he preferred to be called Felix Flores.

¹⁵⁵ Felix Flores' bracero identification front side from Bracero History Archive.



Felix Flores's Bracero Identification backside¹⁵⁶

Flores explained that men noticed that he and his friends from Janitzio spoke Tarascan and said, “Hey *paisano* what are you speaking. Well, this one says tortilla and *chuscuta* (tarascan word for tortilla).”¹⁵⁷ As bilingual speakers, the braceros traveling with Flores easily interchanged the Spanish and Tarascan word for tortilla. Men listened in on Flores’ conversations and said, “And the *paisanos*, ‘Let’s hear what they are speaking.’”¹⁵⁸ With curiosity and fascination they asked Flores how to say things in Tarascan.

In order to deal with the racial and ethnic discrimination that could potentially arise, one of the men that brought Flores to a field in Texas gave a speech about equality as he dropped off the new braceros. Flores explains, “In the barrack he would tell them... ‘Guys, *paisanos*, here are the other *paisanos*. You’re going to treat each other like people. You’re going to treat each other like brothers. You’re going to treat each other like nephews. You’re not going to fight. And they speak another language, and others speak

¹⁵⁶ Felix Flores’ bracero identification backside from Bracero History Archive.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Felix Flores for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 26, 2008 in Janitzio, Michoacán.

Felix Flores: “*Oiga mi paisano que es lo que estas platicando. Órale, este dice tortilla y chuscuta.*”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Felix Flores: “*Y los paisanos, ‘vamos a oírles que es lo que están platicando.’*”

other languages, and others speak other languages.’¹⁵⁹ This particular camp employed braceros from various Mexican indigenous communities and the contractor knew that the indigenous braceros were susceptible to intra-ethnic and racial discriminatory practices. The contractor attempted to circumvent these issues early on by addressing mestizo braceros directly. Some Tarascan braceros avoided speaking in front of other braceros because they did not want to call attention to themselves and become stigmatized as indigenous through their language. Many Mexicans recognized the relationship the Purhepecha community forged with Lazaro Cardenas and viewed the Purhepecha as leftists and a communist community. Flores recalled that non-Tarascan speakers would at times say to them “That we were Bolsheviks,” because they were speaking Tarascan.¹⁶⁰

Flores recalled experiences where indigenous braceros felt discrimination and social marginalization by mestizos. He tells stories of men with large sombreros who were called *venados*, deer. They were tall and had a deer on their blankets while the indigenous braceros were referred to as *enanitos*, or dwarfs. These taller men intimidated the indigenous braceros. When the *venados* teased them, the men from Janitzio said, “Relax don’t pay attention, if we pay attention they will throw us over there.”¹⁶¹ He thought they could be tossed aside by the *venados*. Flores explained, “They are tall and we are short.”¹⁶² They felt their stature prohibited them from defending themselves

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Felix Flores: “*El le decía en la baracka... ‘ira muchachos, paisanos, aquí están otros los paisanos, se van a tratar como gente, se van a tratar como hermanos, se van a tratar como sobrinos. No se van a pelear. Y ellos hablan otro idioma y otros otro idioma y otros otro idioma.’*”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Felix Flores: “*Que nosotros éramos Bolshevikes.*”

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Felix Flores: “*Cálmense no hagan caso, que sí hacemos caso nos avientan hasta ya.*”

¹⁶² Ibid.

physically, but they found the support and advice they needed to face the situation within their community.¹⁶³ They created networks of solidarity as they noticed the unfair treatment and often came to joke about their position within this circumstance.

Although they formed support networks men like Felix felt wary about placing too much trust in their fellow indigenous braceros. Felix Flores explained that the return was just as dangerous if not more than the departure because many men were assaulted for the savings they might be carrying. Flores felt deeply disturbed by the reality that many of the assaults were carried out by men from the same hometown, as they often knew how much their friends saved. Unlike Domínguez' experience, this was particularly disconcerting for the group with which he traveled because many did not believe their wives understood how to cash money orders. He points out that since his contracts were only 45 days, he did not write his family. He also explained that even if he had written them, they did not know how to read. Their lack of Spanish literacy led Domínguez to believe that his effort to communicate with his family through letters was in vain.

Although other illiterate mestizo braceros experienced the same hurdles in communication, Domínguez' problem was compounded by his family's lack of Spanish language proficiency. This uncertainty with the process of communicating the instructions his wife needed to cash money orders led him, along with other braceros, to carry large sums of their earnings back to Janitzio.

When Flores returned to Janitzio, one of the most visible changes he noted was that of peoples' attire. He said, "They would only dress in white pants and when they returned the people here would say, '*ay carajo* look at how they came, now they are like

Felix Flores: "*Ellos son altos y nosotros chaparros.*"

¹⁶³ Not all indigenous braceros responded to racial discrimination in this way.

the United States, ... and we have a white shirt, white pants and no shoes.’ Then they started to say, ‘*Orale*, Lets go to Patzcuaro, to buy you sandals, or me some shoes so that the people from the north don’t say we don’t know how to work...’¹⁶⁴ Those left behind in Janitzio took a small boat through Lake Patzcuaro to the larger town by the same name and bought the pants and shoes they desired. They wore their ‘American’ style clothing for the major festivities in the community. At first, Flores relates that the women did not initially want to change their style of dress; however, after time, some women also changed their style of clothing. He cited the Bracero Program as the catalyst for garment change in Janitzio.

Flores also believed his experience in the program changed his attitude regarding domestic work. During his two 45 day contracts, he washed, cooked, and cleaned for himself. Some men had a hard time with that adjustment, but Flores felt that every man had to learn how to do it to understand the “*friega*” (“troubles”) that their wives went through. After his wife passed away in the 1990s, he said she is not there to say, “...I will run an errand, I will make the food, I will wash your clothes, I will do the cleaning here, to clean with a broom.”¹⁶⁵ The Bracero Program dramatically changed Flores’ relationship to domestic work and changed his perception of gender roles.

Audelia Bentura Cortez led a fairly typical childhood and early adult life in Michoacán. She was also born in the Purhepecha community of Janitzio and her family worked in fishing. From a young age, Cortez worked at home cooking, cleaning and

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Felix Flores: “*Vestían en puro calzón blanco y ya cuando se regresaron la gente de aquí decía, ‘ay carajo mira como vinieron, ya son como los estados unidos’...Y nosotros pues con camisa blanca, calzón blanco, sin zapatos. Entonces empezaron, ‘Órale, vamos a Patzcuaro. Comprate un huarache, o a mi compras un zapato pa’ que no vayan a decir los norteros que nosotros no sabemos a trabajar...*”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Felix Flores: “*...yo voy hacer un mandado, yo voy hacer la comida, yo te voy a lavar la ropa, yo voy hacer la limpieza aquí, con la escoba a limpiar.*”

making fishing nets for her large family. She never had a chance to go to school. Cortez met her husband as a young girl and was happy to accept his proposal when she came of age to marry. She says proudly, “*No me robó,*” meaning she freely consented to the union. He asked for her hand in marriage formally and they were married in the church.¹⁶⁶ She believed that the fact she was married formally was a testament to her character as it was common for young women in her community not to marry. Unions outside of marriage existed when young women ran off with their boyfriends, when young women were taken by men who knew either the young women or her parents would not accept his proposal, or if the groom could not afford a wedding. After the wedding, she was incorporated into her husband’s family and went to live with them.



Audelia Cortez Bentura¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Audelia Bentura Cortez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 26, 2008 in Janitzio, Michoacán.

¹⁶⁷ Photograph taken by Keisha Banks on June 26, 2008 in Janitzio, Michoacán.

Cortez believed that the Bracero Program changed their marriage. She does not recall exactly when her husband left but she counted the children they had at the time and estimates it was after 8 years of marriage. While he worked in the U.S., she carried out much more work because her family employed help and she cooked for everyone. Her household duties increased dramatically as she tended to more individuals. She explains, "...It's always sad to stay alone with the children, it's a lot of work for a single person."¹⁶⁸ She felt that she alone dealt with family issues and the weight of caring for her family was greater. It changed the family dynamic as her eldest son took over much of the work of her husband and helped support the family.

Bentura Cortez lamented that in the U.S. her husband became an alcoholic, even though he previously "never drank."¹⁶⁹ Bentura Cortez argued that prior to the Bracero Program, the community networks kept problems of alcoholism in her family at bay. The alcoholism led him to return with much less money than she expected. With the small sums he brought back, they bought a new canoe to continue fishing. After his first contract in the U.S. ended, he decided to return a second time as an undocumented worker. When he returned from the U.S., his problem with alcohol continued as he worked two days and drank an average of four days a week. He spent most of his day intoxicated and died at 55 after being struck by a car in Michoacán.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

Audelia Bentura Cortez: "*Siempre es triste para quedar solito con la familia, es muy trabajoso para quedar solito.*" She used the term "familia" throughout the interview to refer to children.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Audelia Bentura Cortez: "*..mas antes que el caso el nunca tomaba...*"

Mayans from Cansahcab Experience the Bracero Program

Cansahcab is located 50 kilometers southeast of Merida in the Southern state of the Yucatán. During the period of the Bracero Program, many families of Mayan descent in the Yucatán participated locally in agricultural work for their subsistence. A significant portion of bracero families worked within the hacienda system and longed for private land. Alonso Ayala, Julio Valentine May-May, and Orfa Noemi Soberanis explain the complicated relationships that this Mayan community forged with migration and land reform. Moreover, they also shed light on how these issues affected the wives of these guest workers. Together their experiences point towards historically significant patterns of migration that predate contemporary Mayan migration to the U.S.

For Alonso Ayala, a Mayan born in Cansahcab on October 2, 1936, issues concerning speaking an indigenous language began very early in his life, as his father did not want the children of the family to learn to speak Mayan. Despite the opposition of his father, Mayan was the dominant family language. Ayala explained: “My father didn’t like us to speak Mayan, and my mom spoke Mayan.”¹⁷⁰ He heard about the Bracero Program when he was a teenager and by the time he was 19 he made the decision that he would seek out a bracero contract.¹⁷¹ He decided to leave because “Well because things were difficult here. We worked hard and we earned very little.”¹⁷² He was tired of laboring 8 to 10 hours a day for a mere 8 pesos at local haciendas. Many had workers

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Alonso Ayala for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Ayala: “*A mi papá no le gustaba que hablemos Maya, y mi mamá hablaba Maya. El nos hablaba así, en Castellano y ella en Maya.*”

¹⁷¹ Officially braceros had to be 18 years old but some young men who had not reached the age of 18 received bracero contracts.

¹⁷² Interview with Alonso Ayala for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Alonso Ayala: “*Pues por que aquí estaba dura la cosa...Ta’duro el trabajo de aquí y se ganaba poco.*”

living on hacienda lands and working on the property. He describes it by saying, “It was like slavery.”¹⁷³ Many of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution were based on the redistribution of hacienda and church lands into campesino community property in the form of *ejidos*.¹⁷⁴ Although the Mexican government made some efforts to redistribute land, it was not until the presidency of Lazaro Cardenas that major land reform policies were passed and implemented. After this period, much of the gains of major land reform dwindled as landless masses increased and many could not find other work alternatives in Mexico. These pressures forced many Mayans to seek work within the Bracero Program.¹⁷⁵

A sense of desperation led Ayala to decide to embark on the long trip to the recruitment center in Mexico City. He thought, “How can I go if I don’t have money to go.”¹⁷⁶ Many *aspirantes*¹⁷⁷ needed capital for transportation to a recruitment site, and once at the site they needed money for food and accommodation while they waited to be called. Men did not have many avenues to amass small savings in Cansahcab and few people in town engaged in lending practices. He chose to slowly save enough for the long journey that would eventually lead him to the Ciudad Juarez contracting station in the border state of Chihuahua, over 2,000 kilometers from his hometown.

During the first journey, 6 or 7 men from Cansahcab left with Ayala. During his young adulthood, he obtained three contracts and married in Cansahcab after his first

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Boyer, Christopher R. *Becoming Campesino: Politics Identity and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacan, 1920-1935*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Press, 2003.

¹⁷⁵ Galarza, Ernesto. *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Worker in California 1942-1960*. San Jose: Rosicrucian Press, 1964.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Alonso Ayala for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Alonso Ayala: “*Como me voy, si no hay la lana para irme.*”

¹⁷⁷ An *aspirante* is man who aspired to be contracted as a bracero.

contract. It was difficult to save enough money to get married on his salary working in haciendas, so he looked forward to returning to his hometown with enough for a wedding. The nuptial festivities symbolized a new status he obtained as a man with enough disposable income to invite others to celebrate his marriage. The first contract seemed worthwhile because it brought with it new possibilities that his previous work on the hacienda had not.

Although Ayala wanted to celebrate his wedding with family and friends from his community, he quickly learned through his first contract that he did not want to travel with men from his Mayan community again. He realized that he did not like traveling and working alongside men from his community because they did not just function as support groups but also a tight system of surveillance. He stated, “I didn’t like to be with those from here. Because someone would follow whatever you would do...and when I was married and everything, [his wife would say] ‘you got drunk such a day, that you left in such and that...’ How is it possible that my wife knows such things?”¹⁷⁸ His wife called his attention to these issues through letters, and he found it amusing because it took so long for the letters concerning rumors to be delivered. By the time he responded he told her that his contract was almost finished and he was going home. Both he and his wife were literate in Spanish and these skills provided an important avenue of communication in their relationship.

He recalled that other braceros made fun of Mayans and caused some Mayans so much discomfort that they would not speak their language. Ayala states, “Many...were

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Alonso Ayala for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Alonso Ayala: “*A mi no me gustaba con los de acá. Por que lo que haga uno seguía...cuando ya que me case y todo, [his wife would say] ‘que te emborrachaste tal día, que te fuiste en tal cosa y que...’ Como es posible que esta señora sepa tanta cosa.*”

embarrassed to speak Mayan.”¹⁷⁹ Despite the harassment, Mayans from several communities came together and spoke Mayan on the road to obtain contracts. When a large enough group of Mayans met, they spoke Mayan and Ayala noticed that other indigenous braceros stared at them. Ayala points towards a larger sense of camaraderie among indigenous braceros.

Before his departure from the U.S., Ayala managed to purchase clothing for himself and his son. While he and his son began to dress in American clothes, Ayala did not buy U.S. attire for his wife because he believed she did not want American clothing and felt happiest in her *huipil*. The *huipil* consists of a blouse adorned by intricately woven patterns that is paired with a traditional long, heavy skirt. Many other braceros argued that their wives would not have been content with clothing from the U.S. because of their deep attachment to traditional Mayan clothing.¹⁸⁰

After his third contract, Ayala made the decision to return to Cansahcab, Mexico because he could not imagine living permanently in the U.S. He thought that his hometown of Cansahcab was more comfortable and despite the possibility of staying, obtaining more contracts, or attempting to come to the U.S. after the program, he explained, “My *pueblo* calls me.”¹⁸¹ His use of *pueblo* can be read as simply village or his people call him, meaning this is where he felt called to live by either his people or his village. He felt most comfortable in his *pueblo*.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

Alonso Ayala: “*A muchos... les da pena hablar la Maya.*”

¹⁸⁰ From an informal conversation with Ayala and his neighbors on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Alonso Ayala for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Alonso Ayala: “*Me llama mi pueblo.*”

Julio Valentin May-May's life paralleled Ayala's, as they were both born in Cansahcab, Yucatán in the same year. May-May's parents, like Ayala's, possessed little land located on an *ejido*, which Ayala describes as, "It's everyone's but it's no ones," because it could not be legally bought or sold as private property.¹⁸² May-May was the second oldest in a family of eleven. As children, they helped his father work the small parcel of land in their possession; consequently May-May was only able to obtain a second grade education.

At the age of 26, May-May decided to follow in the footsteps of his older brother and pursue a *bracero* contract. When May-May decided to seek out a contract, his brother helped him prepare and teach him what he needed to know. Right before they left on their journey, his brother told him, " '...you need to make some underwear...that has a pocket here [at the hip]...' and I did it."¹⁸³ Theft and assault ran rampant in contracting stations and this special piece of clothing concealed May-May's money. In May 1962, they anxiously waited to see the list of men from the town approved to leave Cansahcab in the local newspaper. When they saw their names on the list, they left their hometown and went to Merida to take a train to Guadalajara and finally arrived at a contracting station in Empalme, Sonora, a town located close to the Mexico/US border. They borrowed money to get to Empalme, and while waiting the two of them shared a *petate*, a woven bedroll, in a private home that charged them a small fee. Many *braceros* paid these small fees in order to avoid sleeping on the streets during the night where their

¹⁸² Ibid,

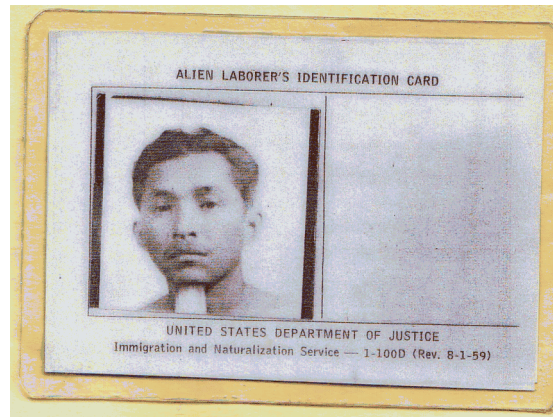
Alonso Ayala: "*Es de todo pero no es de nadien.*"

Christopher R. Boyer explains, "*An ejido is a land reform parcel. Also the term applied to the community of beneficiaries living on a land reform parcel.*"

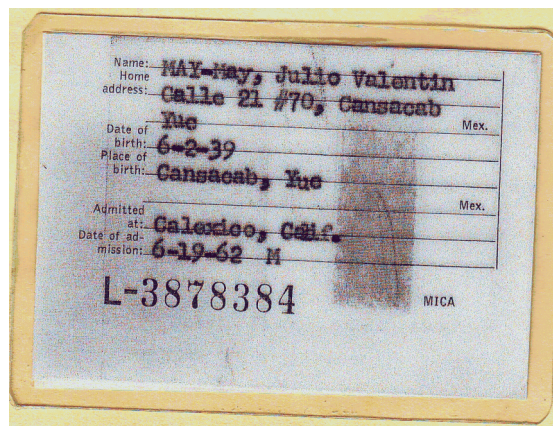
¹⁸³ Interview with Julio Valentin May-May for *Bracero History Archive* by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Julio Valentin May-May: "'...tienes que hacer un calzoncillo...que tenga su bolsita aquí...' y lo hice."

safety was in jeopardy. When they finally ran out of money waiting for their name to be called in Empalme, May-May sent a letter to his wife asking her to pawn her jewelry and send him some money. He felt a deep desperation because, “There is nothing to pay for food...there is nothing to pay for a place to sleep.”¹⁸⁴ Until the money arrived, they ate stale tortillas and food given to them by strangers.



Julio Valentin May-May's Bracero Identification front side¹⁸⁵



Julio Valentin May-May's Bracero Identification backside¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Ibid,

Julio Valentin May-May: “No hay para comer...No hay para dormir.”

¹⁸⁵ Julio Valentin May-May's bracero identification backside front side in Bracero History Archive.

¹⁸⁶ Julio Valentin May-May's bracero identification backside in Bracero History Archive.

When he was finally issued a contract, May-May entered the U.S. through Calexico, California, and officials of the Bracero Program sent him to work in Blythe, California, located in the Sonoran desert near the Arizona state border. The grueling work and incredibly hot climate caused situations where, "...eight people died" during May-May's contract.¹⁸⁷ It was common for the temperature to climb into the high 90 to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in May and June. Many men of his town decided to return to Mexico rather than work in these harsh conditions. When the contract ended in November, May-May willingly returned to Cansahcab. He argued that his experience with the program was that they treated the indigenous communities from the Yucatán the same as everyone else: "poorly."

Despite this, there is a contrasting narrative in May-May's oral history as he relates the experiences in which he did experience racism. During his time in the U.S., it was clear to May-May that some people did not like him because he was Mayan. In the fields one bracero stole May-May's boxes of produce and May-May thought "...he hates me..."¹⁸⁸ May-May explained that just because people spoke Mayan, "He [the bracero] disliked them."¹⁸⁹ This bracero felt a prejudice against indigenous Mexicans and thought he had the right to exploit their labor by stealing their boxes of produce and receiving payment for them.

In the face of this blatant racism, May-May could have chosen to cease speaking Mayan, but instead May-May explained that when he found another Mayan speaker he

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Julio Valentin May-May for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Julio Valentin May-May: "...murieron como unos ocho personas."

¹⁸⁸ Ibid

Julio Valentin May-May: "...por que me tenia odio..."

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

Julio Valentin May-May: "Ya le cai mal."

would speak Mayan, "...so that others could not listen..."¹⁹⁰ He found many advantages to speaking Mayan and creating linguistic social circles. Many of the large-scale farms in Blythe used barracks lined with bunk beds to house braceros. The housing was sparsely furnished and personal space was very limited and privacy was almost non-existent. Very little space for personal items existed and many men struggled with the inability to find privacy. Under these dehumanizing conditions, Mayans found ways of creating private social space through the Mayan language. Non-Mayan speakers could not eavesdrop or join the conversation and Mayans shared information and advice in this private sphere. They connected with each other through conversations in indigenous languages and fought to create confidential and intimate spaces.

Like Ayala, May-May was able to buy US clothing and bring back items to the Yucatán. He brought his wife only a few pieces of apparel in the U.S. as she customarily wore traditional *huipiles*. He preferred buying her new *huipiles* and shoes in the Yucatán. He only managed to obtain two contracts because of the termination of the program in 1964. As a bracero, he sent his wife money and letters but she could not read them and sought out individuals to read these letters for her. After that, he never saw lists of *aspirantes* printed in the local newspaper again.

Born seven years before May-May and Ayala, Orfa Noemi Soberanis remembered how her life was shaped by her families' hacienda experience and her husband's departure as a guest worker. Her father worked in haciendas while her mother cared for their eleven children. She describes her life as "*ambulante*," as her family moved from haciendas and towns for her father's employment. She, like May-May and

¹⁹⁰ Ibid
Julio Valentin May-May: "...por que no oigan los otros..."

Ayala, only managed to obtain a second grade education. Soberanis remembers spending her childhood and young adult life, “*tortillando*,” making tortillas, cleaning, and washing. In 1948, she met her husband at a local dance chaperoned by her parents. He was four years older than her and a bricklayer. Her husband asked for her hand in marriage and her father asked that they wait one full year. Her husband convinced her father to shorten the courting period to six months. She had a full wedding with a party, a white dress with a train, and shoes with heels. It was an all day affair as they offered the guests, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. After the wedding, she moved into a house next door to her in-laws.

Due to economic difficulties, her husband decided to obtain a bracero contract after their fourth child. He left because, “He was tired that he never had enough [money]...There was bracero contracting. They were contracted and he left.”¹⁹¹ She explains, “We had to borrow money so that he could go.”¹⁹² She asked her father’s employer, a local *hacendado*,¹⁹³ for a loan that enabled her husband to travel to a contracting station and await a contract. Her parents agreed with her husband’s decision because “They didn’t say that it was bad...there was not enough work.”¹⁹⁴ The second time he left, her father had passed away and she had no means of asking her father’s employer for a loan. As a result, they had to take out a mortgage on their home for the capital necessary for his second trip as a bracero. This second time she told him, “You shouldn’t have done that, what if all of a sudden you don’t return, what will I do...thank

¹⁹¹ Interview with Orfa Noemi Soberanis for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*Se fastidio de que no le alcanza...Hubo contratación de bracero. Los contrataron, y se fue.*”

¹⁹² Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*Tuvimos que prestar dinero para que se vaya.*”

¹⁹³ Owner of a large, private estate.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*No dijeron que era mal...No habia trabajo suficiente.*”

God he came back.”¹⁹⁵ She continued, “When he was gone, oh my, oh my...it was tough. Because he was gone and we didn’t have money...so my sister gave me some [money] because we had three kids. And to top it all off, my daughter’s foot broke.”¹⁹⁶ Her plan was, “First the house, even if we are left without anything to eat...but the house had to be saved.”¹⁹⁷ He sent her money when he started getting paid and she began to pay off their debts. They ate with whatever money was left and her family always helped make ends meet. She also became resourceful with what her husband sent. When she could, she bought chicks and raised them in order to supplement their income and their diet. The first time he returned he brought back gifts for his children; however, the second time he returned, he was robbed. When her husband worked in the U.S., she recounts that the children “Would get sick.”¹⁹⁸ She explained that her children missed their father so much that they became physically ill.¹⁹⁹

Soberanis felt that the Bracero Program fundamentally altered her relationship with her husband. She describes the changes brought on by his experiences as a bracero:

More understanding, here he was a rebel. But then afterward, he changed, he changed a bit. I think he became civilized over there...Because he wasn’t so...how do I say it, so ignorant, well is that how it is said, well that’s how we say it here. He was very

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*Eso no lo hubieras hecho, de repente si no vuelves, yo que voy hacer...bendito sea dios que volvió.*”

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*Durante el estaba ido, madre, madre...pasamos necesidad. Por que se fue y no teníamos dinero...así que me regala mi hermana, como eran tres chiquitos. Y pa’ colmo, se le rompió...quebró el pie de mi hija.*”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*Pero primero la casa, aunque nos quedemos sin comer....pero que la casa se salve.*”

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: “*Se me enfermaban.*”

¹⁹⁹ Informal conversation with Orfa Noemi Soberanis by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

quick tempered, when he came back he wasn't like that so much.
He became better over there.²⁰⁰

In her eyes, her husband came back a better husband. She explains, "It was like his ideas were better, he got to know more, he had experiments over there, experience, I don't know how to say it."²⁰¹ In other words, his experience in the U.S. made him more understanding and patient with his family in Cansahcab. The Bracero Program gave him the opportunity to live in a different country and in Soberanis' eyes he returned to Mexico more cultured.

Indigenous Braceros in Southern California

Many indigenous Mexican communities forged long lasting transnational ties to areas in Southern California. As an agricultural region, Southern California is very diverse as some indigenous braceros worked in desert environments tending to date palms, while others worked in more mild climates picking produce, such as citrus and a variety of vegetables. Many of the indigenous ex-braceros currently residing in Southern California are Nahuas, Mixtec, and Zapotec from the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Puebla.²⁰² Some families within these communities experienced migration prior to the Bracero Program as many engaged in seasonal labor in the sugar industry in Veracruz. Nemecio Meza and Isaias Sánchez illuminate racial and ethnic tension within Mexican

²⁰⁰ Interview with Orfa Noemi Soberanis for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: "*Y era más comprensivo, que acá era muy así, rebelde. Pero después cambio, cambio un poco. Creo que se civilizo allá...Por que ya no era tan... como le diré, tan, tan ignorante, pues así se dice, así lo decimos por acá. Era muy rápido de carácter, después ya cuando vino ya no era tanto. Se compuso allá.*"

²⁰¹ Ibid.

Orfa Noemi Soberanis: "*Como que mejoro sus ideas, conoció un poco, tuvo experimento allá, experiencia no se como se dice.*"

²⁰² Activist of the Bracero Justice Movement claim that these are the largest populations of indigenous ex-braceros in Southern California.

communities in Mexico and in the U.S. They also explain the place of indigenous communities in racialized discourses of labor.

Nemecio Meza was born on October 31, 1931, in a small town in the state of Puebla. He was raised speaking Nahuatl and learned Spanish at the age of 15, when he went off to work as an apprentice to bricklayer. It was through work and other “adventures” that he learned Spanish. It was during this time that he also left his “*pantalones de manta*,” white cloth pants, and began wearing mainstream pants. His father spoke Spanish because he was the only child and his parents could afford to send him to school. As a traveling musician, Meza’s father became very fluent in Spanish, even though Meza’s mother and grandmother never learned Spanish. Meza’s paternal grandfather spoke a bit of Spanish because he managed much of the paperwork for the local agrarian reform movement. As a result, Meza’s grandfather traveled to Mexico City often and learned enough Spanish to help others in his community with legal and formal disputes.²⁰³

At the age of 20, Meza found himself traveling with his father to Empalme, Sonora, in an effort to obtain a bracero contract. This was familiar terrain for Meza’s father because he had obtained several contracts previously. They waited for a contract together in Empalme but officials in the contracting center sent them to two different employers. Meza ended up working in a very large farm in Cucamonga, California and later obtained two additional contracts to work in King City, California and Lorenzo, Texas. Meza encountered many contracting and work difficulties but lamented that his greatest struggles were with language. He had only been practicing Spanish for 5 years

²⁰³ Interview with Nemecio Meza for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on May 12, 2006 in Los Angeles, CA.

by the time he arrived in the U.S. as a bracero. After his experience in the program, Meza moved his family to the border and eventually they settled permanently in Los Angeles, California.²⁰⁴

During his tenure as a guest worker in the U.S., Meza noticed that the date palm industry heavily employed Zapotecs. This industry was one of the most dangerous occupations since a work accident could mean death or severe disability.²⁰⁵ Many date workers feared falling off trees that often grew over three stories tall. Growers believed that Zapotecs and Mixtecs feared heights less and were better equipped to physically carry out this work.²⁰⁶ Meza points out, “There were a lot of people from Oaxaca. Lots of people who didn’t speak...they didn’t understand Spanish. Then someone...someone came from the contracting centers. Since Oaxaca is home to substantial Zapotec and Mixtec populations, the Oaxacans were specifically contracted for the date harvest. They wanted them a lot because they could handle high temperature in the sun.”²⁰⁷ Distinct systems of managing indigenous communities emerged. Meza explained that, “For every ten people they looked for a Oaxacan who spoke Zapotec and Spanish to serve as a translator for his people. And then the boss would ask the translator of the group of ten

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

Nemicio Meza: “*Hay mucha gente que viene de Oaxaca, mucha gente que no hablaba...no entendian el Espanol. Entonces alguna...Venia alguen desde los campos de contrataciones. Porque a los Oaxaquenos los contrataban especialmente para la cosecha de datil. Los querian mucho porque ellos aguantaban temperaturas muy altas de sol. Llegaban todos los contrataban y como no era alta era mucha gente chaparita aguantaban much la temperatura porque la tierra de ellos es bastante caliente Pero en diez personas buscaban un Oaxaqueno de hablaba su idioma el Zapoteco y el espanol para que podria interpretar a su gente.*”

Oaxacan...he would tell them what they needed to do or how to work. Everything their boss wanted he would tell the translator. That's how they did it at that time."²⁰⁸

According to Meza, some in his community did not need these systems of translation because they had a basic understanding of Spanish, while others relied on this translation system heavily. The men of his generation in his community learned at least a bit of Spanish in school. Educators in his community pushed students to forget Nahuatl and prohibited the students from speaking their native language. He argued that the Nahuatl speakers were never discriminated against because many of the men that came through the Bracero Program spoke indigenous dialects. The basic Spanish that Meza's community knew also allowed them to circumvent some discrimination while working in the U.S. as braceros.

Former bracero Isaias Sánchez illuminates the role of indigenous communities in Southern California's date industry. Sánchez was born in San Pedro Apostol, Oaxaca, on July 6, 1934. At the age of seven, he helped his father with agriculture work and by the age of thirteen he became a servant to a wealthy family. He eventually moved on to become an assistant to a bricklayer working on a local school in Mexico. Sánchez lamented the fact that he helped build the school and saw children his age enjoying a privilege he could not. When he was 15, he decided he wanted to go the U.S. because, "...the first ones that came [back] in 1945, the first men that came here, they were some that went over there and said that the U.S. is, 'its cool, there is a lot of work, and you

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Nemecio Meza: "*Pero en 10 personas buscaban a un oaxaqueno que hablara su idioma el zapoteco y espanol para que podria interpretar a sus gente. Y ya el mayordomo le preguntaba al interprete del gupo de 10 personas, Oaxaquenos, les decia que lo que tenia que hacer o como se trabajaba. Bueno todo lo que queria en Mayordomo de aquel. Le decia al interprete de ellos. Haci se entendian en ese tiempo.*"

make a lot of money.”²⁰⁹ He told himself that he would seek out a bracero contract as soon as he fulfilled his military service, since all braceros were required to show their military identification at the time of contracting as proof that they had fulfilled their obligatory military service.

Sánchez’s decision caused family tension because they wanted him to stay in Mexico. His father did not want him to go and told Isaias, “You don’t know how to read, you don’t know how to write.”²¹⁰ But Sánchez was convinced that he had the courage to figure it out. By the time Sánchez was eighteen, his father was already in the U.S. on what Sánchez called an “adventure.” When his father came back, Sánchez told him he had obtained the paperwork he needed to seek out a bracero contract. His father did not believe him and one day when his father was at work, Sánchez left to Irapuato. It was October, 1954, and no contracting was taking place when Sánchez got there. He went on to Mexico City for two months to work and then returned to his hometown. In April of 1955, Sánchez made his way to the border for a contract. Since his efforts to obtain a contract in Irapuato failed, Sánchez believed he could find success in border contracting stations. After his first contract, Sánchez returned to his hometown and married in February, 1956. After a short period of time, he sought out another bracero contract and continued to go back and forth from his hometown to the U.S. through the Bracero Program until 1964. He did not know how to read and write well and in 1959 a maternal great uncle, Bruno, taught him how to write his name. Prior to 1959, Sánchez used his

²⁰⁹ Interview with Isaias Sánchez for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrello on May 20, 2006 in Coachella, California.

Isaias Sánchez: “...*los primeros que vinieron en 1945, los primeros hombres que vinieron aquí, fueron unos que llegaron allá y dijeron o que Estados Unidos ‘ta bien suave, hay mucho trabajo y gana mucho dinero.*”

²¹⁰ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*No sabes leer, no sabes escribir.*”

fingerprint in place of his signature. Bruno approached him and said, “Look Shorty, you have a chance to at least learn to sign your name. I am going to show you.”²¹¹ Sánchez accepted and said, “That man taught me. He went to the store and brought me back a chalkboard, the Coca-Cola kind. And on it he started writing letters and all of that.”²¹² Bruno told Sánchez, “Let’s renew our contract and you will not use your fingerprint,”²¹³ meaning he would not use his fingerprint in lieu of a signature. He learned enough to write his wife a letter but then stopped the lessons when he became stricken with grief by her death on April 14, 1961. His father died exactly one month later. He returned to Mexico and was unsure that he wanted to return to the U.S., but eventually found himself working as a bracero again.

He stayed for a while in his town, which he describes as being composed of “descendants of Benito Juarez.”²¹⁴ Born Zapotec, Benito Juarez was the first indigenous president of Mexico. Sánchez explained that what his grandparents and mother spoke was an indigenous dialect and many of the neighboring towns spoke other indigenous dialects. He believed the indigenous language of his family was Zapotec. Although he cannot speak the indigenous language, he argued that he could understand it and identified as indigenous. As a bracero, he became angry with friends who would make fun of the indigenous braceros. Sánchez adds, “They humiliated them, they said things to

²¹¹ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Mira chaparrito, tu tienes chansa de aprender aunque sea a firmar. Yo te voy a enseñar.*”

²¹² Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Ese hombre me enseñó. Fue a la tienda me trajo un pizarrón, de esos de la coca-cola. Y ahí empezó a poner, las letras y todo eso.*”

²¹³ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Vamos a renovar contrato y no vas a poner el dedo.*”

²¹⁴ Ibid.

them.”²¹⁵ Sánchez got angry with his friends. He recalled “I said to them, ‘don’t say anything to them. What they are speaking, they speak it because they understand each other that way. And why do you get involved, you have no right to offend them.’ ‘And who are you’ ‘I am part of them!’ We got into it.”²¹⁶ He explained, “Well they would insult them, they would say bad words to them, and that’s not fair, that’s not fair.”²¹⁷ Sánchez pointed out to his friend “They don’t even understand you if you insult them, because they know how to speak very little Spanish.”²¹⁸ He took the treatment of other indigenous braceros very personally and felt compelled to stand up to the injustices committed against them.

Sánchez explained that although some indigenous braceros spoke little Spanish they had children or friends who were well educated and spoke Spanish. This support network helped them gather the paperwork to obtain a guest worker contract and they continued through the contracting process with indigenous bracero support networks, which functioned through language groups. When Sánchez worked in Arkansas, he was approached by a group of indigenous men from Oaxaca and someone in the group asked him, “Paisano don’t leave us, if you are going to leave, we will leave with you. You can tell us when we will change money, when we will leave to Oaxaca. You can help us.”²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Los humillaban, les decían cosas.*”

²¹⁶ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Yo les decía ‘no les digan nada. Lo que están hablando ellos, ellos lo que hablan por que ellos así se entienden. Y tu porque te metes, tu no tienes ningún derecho de ofenderlos.’ ‘Y tu quien eres.’ ‘Por que yo soy parte de ellos.’ Nos hagaramos a fregasos.*”

²¹⁷ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Pues los insultaban, les decían malas palabras, y eso no se vale, no se vale.*”

²¹⁸ Ibid.

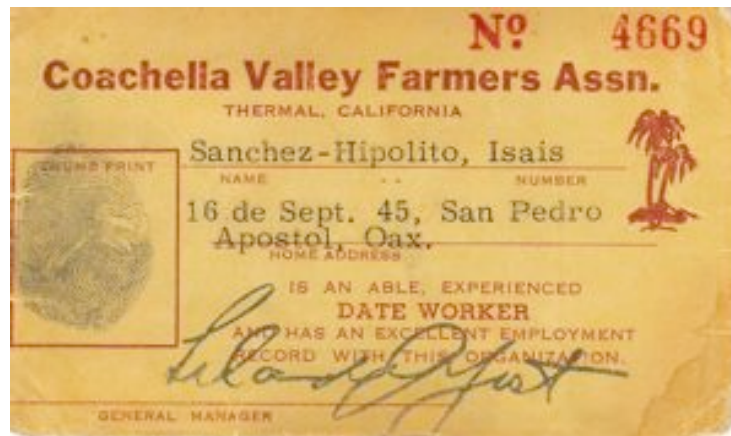
Isaias Sánchez: “*Si los insultan ni te entienden, por saben ellos saben hablar poco castellano pero poco.*”

²¹⁹ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Paisano no nos dejes, si tu te vas a ir, nos vamos contigo. Tu nos vas a decir cuando vamos a cambiar el dinero, cuando nos vamos ir a Oaxaca. Tu nos ayudas.*”

Sánchez responded, “Of course.”²²⁰ There were about 18 in the group that Sánchez led back to Oaxaca. Once in the state they knew how to get back to their hometown. During his many contracts, Sánchez filled various roles within indigenous communities including guide, translator, and barber.

On another occasion, the boss approached Sánchez because a group of braceros asked for permission to beat Sánchez. The boss was concerned and asked Sánchez why they would want to do that. Sánchez responded, “Because I don’t let them offend my *paisanos*.”²²¹ Sánchez responded, “...I don’t like to fight but if they look for me, I want them one at a time. I don’t care if they hit me, let them hit me.”²²² The fight never took place because the boss told the other braceros to leave Sánchez alone.



Isaias Sánchez’s identification as an experienced Date Worker²²³

²²⁰ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Seguro que si.*”

²²¹ Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*Por que yo no deajo que los ofendan a mis paisanos.*”

²²² Ibid.

Isaias Sánchez: “*...no me gusta pelear pero si me buscan, de a uno por uno los quiero. No le hace si me pegan, que me peguen.*”

²²³ Isaias Sánchez’s identification as an experienced date worker from Bracero History Archive. The Coachella Valley Farmers Association misspelled his name as Isais Sánchez-Hipolito.

On one of his trips, Sánchez made his way to the contracting center to find that there was a slight shortage of braceros. He was approached by a center worker and asked if he could bring back thirty workers. Sánchez went back to his hometown and recruited friends.

When Sánchez finally gathered enough experience as a date worker, he was given an identification card that helped him obtain bracero contracts in date work more quickly. During one call for date workers, only five men had an identification card. After the Bracero Program was terminated, Sánchez continued to work in the date industry as an undocumented worker in 1966 to 1967. He was deported approximately four times before he obtained residency. At the time of the interview in May, 2006, Sánchez had accumulated over thirty years experience in the date industry and had planted his own date palm in his home in Coachella, California.

Conclusion

The memories of Mexican indigenous communities affected by the Bracero Program demonstrate Mexican racial and ethnic relations and offer up a distinct perspective of the program. The racial discrimination, threats of violence, experiences of marginalization and solidarity felt by indigenous communities draws out the conflicting place of indigenous communities within Mexico and historic transnational circuits. These oral histories are not meant to represent experiences of all Mexican indigenous communities within the program; however, they do challenge mestizo-centered histories of the Bracero Program and narratives that solely focus on Anglo-Mexican racial tension.

They exhibit how shifts in consumption, gender relations, language, and migration brought on by the program shaped the lives of indigenous bracero families. Although these communities have much in common with mestizo communities in terms of the economic situations that drove families to participate in the program, the uncertainties of the contracting process, labor exploitation in the U.S. and the difficulties of family separation, these oral histories shed light on the ways indigenous bracero families dealt with these specific issues.

These narratives also explain shifts in immigration patterns where Mexican indigenous families also create transnational community networks. Although many current indigenous immigrants from Michoacán, Yucatán, Puebla, and Oaxaca did not participate in the program, a significant portion of their grandfathers, fathers, and extended family did. This family history helps many in these communities claim a place in the U.S. workforces and helps these families make sense of these patterns of migration.

CHAPTER 3

Intimate Encounters: Braceros, Masculinity, and Family

“No me voy a ofender porque digan que jui [fui] yo bracero, si lo fui, bracero. Por que vuelvo a decirle, el de bracero, el trabajo es sagrado y yo lo respeto, es lo único que le puedo informar.”

“I am not going to be offended because they say I was a bracero, I was, a bracero. Because I will say to you again, about being a bracero, work is sacred and I respect it, that is the only thing I can say to you”²²⁴

–Severiano Villareal

“We sort of became substitutes for that minute for a mother, a girlfriend, a daughter, depending on their age.”

--Ysabel Durán

While traveling in the U.S., Professor Salvador Mendoza wrote to then Mexican President, Miguel Alemán Valdés, on January 10, 1948 to report on the inappropriate conduct of braceros. He wrote:

I lament the circumstances of the Mexican braceros in respect to their poor preparation and conduct. Embarrassed, I have seen the way in which they come to degrade our beloved Mexico because the majority of those individuals are men without culture and full of vice wasting their few earnings and [they] squander [their earnings] in bars and they are not only happy about that but they also speak poorly of our beloved Mexico to the U.S.²²⁵

Mendoza’s perception of these workers, as men who traveled to the US to enjoy a life of vice and irresponsibility, was common among residents of receiving communities in the US. In Mendoza’s view, these men ran away from their family commitments and

²²⁴ Interview with Severiano Villareal for Bracero History Archive by Verónica Cortez on May 22, 2006 in Blythe, California.

²²⁵ Archivo General de la Nación (MAV) vol. 587 exp. 545.3/98
“...lamento las circunstancias de los braseros [sic] mexicanos con respecto a su mala preparacion y conducta, he visto con pena la manera en que vienen a degradar a nuestro querido México porque la mayoria [sic] de estos individuos son hombres sin cultura y viciosos defraudando los pocos sueldos que ganan, y derochandolos [sic] en cantinas y no solo se contentan de eso si no que ban [sic] hablando de nuestro querido México a los Estados Unidos...”

represented Mexico abroad poorly.²²⁶ He identified them as a source of national embarrassment and hoped that the president could do something to change this.

Daniel Martínez presented a similar perspective in his 1958 thesis on the impact of the Bracero Program on Mexican American communities. He believed that along with diseases, braceros brought about a fracturing of Mexican American families. He articulates popular perceptions that braceros came to the U.S. as philanderers and men in search of adventure and vice.²²⁷ Both Mendoza and Martínez felt that the Bracero Program needed to end because the men created problems in the U.S. and tainted images of Mexico abroad.²²⁸

This chapter focuses on these accounts connecting labor, sexuality, and pleasure. I bridge the gap between narratives of braceros as sexually illicit and the positioning of braceros as heroes and family men. My goal in this chapter is to provide a nuanced, complex view of braceros' intimate relationships as they entered into the multifaceted world of transnational labor. Historic apprehensions about the role of Mexican guest workers in the U.S. provide a context for understanding present day efforts depicting these workers as family-centered hardworking responsible men. The goals of many contemporary projects work to reclaim and valorize a place for the bracero, creating a heroic image of masculine labor that stands in contrast to the perception advanced by Mendoza and Martínez. In this schema narratives are interpreted through a dichotomy and narratives that fall outside of this villain or hero binary are often silenced. Many present day efforts paint these men as ideal fathers, brothers, and sons, standing in stark

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ Martínez, Daniel. Thesis: *The Impact of the Bracero Program on a Southern California Mexican-American Community*. Claremont, The Claremont Graduate School, 1958.

²²⁸ Unlike Mendoza and Martínez, Ernesto Galarza worked towards the termination of the Bracero Program without vilifying braceros.

contrast to historical perceptions of these men as villainous, deviant womanizers. Both of these present particular perspectives center on visions of masculinity and family. In the contemporary narrative, the sexual experiences of braceros are assumed to exist only through heteronormative relations in the context of formal marriage, preferably to women residing in Mexico. Their motives for entering the program are usually articulated through discourses of family need and it is assumed that the program provides little pleasure with no access to vice. These directives are illustrated in two commonly circulated images from the Leonard Nadel and the Hermanos Mayo collection. Several projects have utilized historic imagery as a means to exemplify this process of remasculinization and romanticized labor.



Hermanos Mayo photograph of braceros departing ²²⁹

The lionization of braceros as family men happens across these most popular photographic collections of the Hermanos Mayo and Leonard Nadel. Leonard Nadel collection and the Hermanos Mayo collection presented braceros as a noble workforce or caring family men. The photographic collective of Spanish emigrants to Mexico, known as the Hermanos Mayo, created one of the largest pictorial collections of the bracero experience. Despite the large number of images available, the most popular images

²²⁹ Hermanos Mayo Collection, Archivo General de la Nación.

highlight the movement of these men towards the border and document the transformation from *aspirantes* to *braceros*.²³⁰ The Hermanos Mayo image featuring *braceros* departing on a train while reaching out and holding hands with the women in their lives is widely circulated as an image that valorizes the position of these men within heteronormative family structures.²³¹



Leonard Nadel photograph of a Bracero²³²

The National Museum of American History also visually valorizes the role of the *bracero*, though with a different emphasis. They selected Leonard Nadel's image of a *bracero* holding a short handle hoe to the iconic image of the exhibition "Bittersweet

²³⁰ Alicia Schmidt Camacho. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. NY: New York University Press, 2008.

²³¹ Mraz, John and Jaime Velez Storey. *Uprooted: Braceros in the Hermanos Mayo's Lens*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 1996.

²³² Leonard Nadel Collection at The National Museum of American History

Harvest: The Bracero History 1942-1964.” The bracero in this portrait stares straight at the lens and with half a smile looking content and proud of his work as an agricultural laborer. Through these journalistic and documentary style photographs an audience fulfills a contemporary yearning to humanize these men through a re-masculinization centered on heroic visions of family and labor. It is through these discourses that a space is claimed within U.S. and Mexican historical narratives that work towards recognizing their contribution. Directly drawing from the Bracero History Archive, the exhibition provided mainstream America with a historical narrative of the Bracero Program at a moment when guest worker programs were hotly debated as a potential solution to dilemmas of immigration reform.



*Los Desnudos*²³³

These two projects stand in contradistinction to the images used within the Bracero Justice Movement. Bracero Pro-A often circulates a photograph of nude

²³³ Organizers of Bracero Pro-A have not been able to identify the photographer but continue to circulate this image on websites, t-shirts, and calendars.
<http://alianzabraceroproa.blogspot.es/1152723000/>

braceros enduring a medical exam. The men hold a sheet of paper to cover their genitals, and only those closest to the lens noticeably stare directly into the camera. Bracero Pro-A utilized this image to illustrate one of the most emasculating moments during the contracting process. Men were asked to stand naked shoulder to shoulder, some braceros believed that in this moment they were treated less than human and more like cattle.²³⁴ It is through depicting a scene of alienation that they can reclaim the resilience of their own humanity and reveal aspects of the program that institutionalized bracero marginalization. In bracero communities this photograph is popularly called, “*Los Desnudos*,” meaning the nudes. Bracero Pro-A circulates this image on calendars and T-shirts. Ex-braceros proudly wear this T-shirt as proof that they in fact lived through the experience depicted in the photograph. Pro-A’s choice demonstrates their rejection of a more mainstream and socially acceptable narrative for one that communicates the social injustice committed during the program.

The photographs of the Hermanos Mayo often depict braceros as men connected to families and not as the arms detached from bodies that the program’s title signals.²³⁵ In the photo included above, the train places these men in a moment of departure, saying goodbye to their loved ones and stretching their arms out to hold family and friends’ hands one last time. The NMAH uses the Nadel photograph of a bracero with a short handle hoe to valorize the contribution of braceros to U.S. history. Finally, Bracero Pro-A circulation of the bracero being medically examined is used to organize towards recuperating the back wages of these laborers and exemplifying the horrific dehumanizing events these men endured in order to work as laborers in the U.S. As

²³⁴ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

²³⁵ Alicia Schmidt Camacho. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. NY: New York University Press, 2008.

opposed to the Leonard Nadel and the Hermanos Mayo photographs, it demonstrates the degrading process of the program, and it shows that an official was there to verify their “legal” passage into the U.S., unlike the undocumented. Several braceros I interviewed wore t-shirts with this image because it stood as a testament to what they endured and to call attention to the way in which the Mexican government contributed to their exploitation by not stepping in. Mexican authorities are not featured in this image and the naked unprotected bodies of these braceros stand across from American authorities. The use of this photograph illustrates guest worker’s desire to depict a more complicated, less idealized narrative of migration during this period.

This chapter examines how the Bracero Program shaped the intimate encounters of guest workers by focusing on gender formations through constructions of masculinity, the maintenance of transnational families, and complex forms of sexual desire. Using oral histories of bracero communities collected in Mexico and the U.S., I argue that transnational experiences expanded gendered social relationships and practices of sexuality that redefined notions of the family and masculinity. As braceros left their families for prolonged periods of time, family units became rearranged and these men built new community networks in a predominately homosocial space in the U.S. Masculinity became contested through notions of sexual desire, physical violence, and bravado. The Bracero Program also gave men from small towns and villages the additional opportunities to engage in non-normative sexual relationships. This experience also provided certain degrees of anonymity as some men chose to find work separate from the hometown groups. In addition, it opened the opportunity to enjoy vices, such as prostitution, gambling and drinking without the pressures of friends and

family calling attention to the behavior. They could detach themselves from disapproving social networks and enjoy distractions from the difficulty of everyday heavy labor in the U.S.

While some men distanced themselves from their social networks, other men strengthened them by moving their families to border towns.²³⁶ Relocation facilitated more frequent visits during and between labor contracts for men working near the U.S.-Mexico border in contracting hubs such as Empalme, Sonora, Mexicali, Baja California, and Juarez, Chihuahua . Other families faced long term separation with very little hope that their bracero family members would send remittance and return home. For these families, the Bracero Program brought about undeniable fracturing of familial bonds and relations.

Wives and other women who maintained residence in Mexico were far from passive within the bracero family. Despite all the attention paid to men as actors, women also played vital and active roles within the bracero economy. Many women, for example, fought to keep their families intact and to meet the needs of their kin while men were away. They worked to keep underaged sons from joining the program and called attention to the lack of remittances being sent to them. They made efforts to decrease prostitution on the border and to make braceros accountable to their families. Despite the fact that the government did not implement public policies to protect best interest of the families affected by the Bracero Program, many women attempted to claim alimony and child support. Through oral histories, guest workers' acknowledged their not-so-ideal

²³⁶ Rosas, Ana. Dissertation: *Familias Flexibles: Bracero Families' Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942-1964*. History Department. Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 2006.

comportment in the U.S. and shared information not found in traditional archives about their intimate experiences during the program.

Family, Work, and Vice during the Bracero Program

During the Bracero Program many men and women followed the routes of braceros and made their way to border towns. For *aspirantes*²³⁷ residency in border towns could potentially ease their transition to the U.S. Women, on the other hand, moved towards the border to stay closer to their bracero relatives or for better work opportunities. Proximity to their family members work sites strengthened family bonds as braceros could make short visits across the border. This is particularly true for families living in Mexicali with braceros working in Southern California. Other women moved to these border towns with the aim to eventually move and work in the U.S. This movement is indicative of women's active roles within the bracero economies of labor, family, and sexuality. While much of the historical focus has been on whether or not men paid remittances or truly intended to return to their families in Mexico, my research indicates that women were not passively waiting at home. Instead, women also migrated toward the United States and exerted their influence over the men who had traveled abroad.

Across Mexico, many women wanted the same work opportunities given to their male counterparts. They too sought new economic opportunities and the ability to contribute to the family income. On January 26, 1959, Isidora Botello from Matamoros, Tamaulipas, wrote to then-President Adolfo López Mateos, explaining:

²³⁷ *Aspirantes* are men who aspired to obtain a bracero contract.

[P]ermit me to inform you about my necessities[.] Although you do not know me I want you to see me worthy of a favor, perhaps you can give me permission to work in the United States because I have a lot of family and what I earn here is not enough to support my children.²³⁸

She wrote to the president believing that he could give her access to the migratory frameworks available to men across Mexico. She requested an opportunity to work in the U.S. in order to provide additional income to her family household. Records show that many women petitioned Mexican presidents for permits and visas to enter the U.S. labor pool. Like many braceros, they hoped that through remittances they could dramatically improve the quality of life for their children.

Many women saw migration as a realistic solution to their economic problems and felt that they could enter a migrant labor market. Single women without children also wanted an opportunity to assist their families. In 1962, María Consuelo Miranda Luna of Irapuato, Guanajuato formally requested a similar permit. The report states, “She asked that she be given a passport to move to the United States of America and help support her household that consists of her mother and nine young siblings.”²³⁹ Despite the distance and their different family positions, Miranda Luna and Botello were compelled to follow in the footsteps of those heading north. Although these women viewed working in the U.S. positively, other women felt that the Bracero Program negatively affected their

²³⁸ Archivo General de la Nación Adolfo López Mateos (ALM) vol. 715 exp. 546.5/37
“...me permito el asirle [sic] saver [sic] mis nesicidades [sic] que quiero que Ud. a pesar de no conoserlo se dicne [sic] asermi [sic] fabor [sic] de que Ud. tal ves pudiera darme un permiso par ir a trabajar a los [sic] Estados Unidos por que llo [sic] tengo mucha familia y lo que gano aquí no me es suficiente para el sostento de mis hijos.”

²³⁹ Archivo General de la Nación Adolfo Lopéz Mateos (ALM) vol. 715 exp. 546.5/37.
“Pide se le proporcione un pasaporte para trasladarse a los Estados Unidos de Norteaméricaa y poder ayudar al sostenimiento[sic] de su hogar que consta de la madre de la recurrente y nueve hermanos pequeños.”

families and marriages. For some families, the program provided undue hardship and separation.

Mothers of underage children reported that their children enlisted as braceros despite the fact they should not have been given a contract because of their age. In May, 1944, a government inspector reported:

Regularly every train that leaves has around 850 braceros and lately many under aged [men] have left (17 to 19 years), until the Federal Forces lately intervened and removed from the train two of them who could not prove their age... The parents of the families are... protesting, because there are various under aged students that are enrolling as braceros, and they say they will go to the competent authority to avoid this.²⁴⁰

Families felt that the appropriate authorities working for the program did not act vigilantly to weed out those under-aged men from entering the program. They asked for assistance in the matter and worked towards preventing the departure of their youth.

Women not only lost their young sons, but some also felt that they lost their husbands.

Letters in the Archivo General de la Nación offer evidence of women who wrote to government agencies in order to locate their husbands.²⁴¹ Forgotten women such as Maria Concepción Rosales experienced the pain of abandonment and financial neglect resulting from her husband's desire to enter the Bracero Program. In August 1947, her husband left along with four other laborers in an attempt to attain a bracero contract. Five months passed and Rosales' husband had not communicated with her, making her feel deserted and concerned about the future of her children. Unlike families who

²⁴⁰ Archivo General de la Nación Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) vol. 91 exp. 5. *"Por lo regular cada tren que sale lleva alrededor de 850 braceros y ultimamente han salido muchos menores de edad (17 a 19) años, hasta que la Fuerza Federal ultimamente intervino y bajo [sic] de tren a dos de ellos que no pudieron comprobar su mayoría de edad... Los padres de familia estan [sic] – protestando, pues ya son varios los estudiantes menores de edad que se enrolan como braceros, y dicese [sic] van a recurrir a la autoridad competente para evitar esto."*

²⁴¹ Archivo General de la Nación Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV), Adolfo López Mateos (ALM), Manuel Ávila Camacho (MAC).

developed transnational strategies to deal with the long-term separation, women like Rosales identified the Bracero Program as the cause of much of their misfortune. Rosales wrote to Mexican president Miguel Alemán Valdés from Rio Grande, Zacatacas:

Before you, with the respect you deserve, even though I am no one, consider my motives. Because of the contracting and the wetback passes [i.e. guest worker contracts] although these things are beneficial they also ruin the homes for many[.] [I]n the community where I live we are 5 women that cry oceans of tears because of our abandonment and the lack of bread for our children. You can help us in our situation[:] require marriage certificates to wetbacks and those contracted and hopefully [this will] make them return to their homes when they have finished their contracts and I will have some comfort.²⁴²

Rosales believed that her husband abandoned her and worried about her children. She also went further in the letter and expressed her views that the program created an underclass of illiterate workers because without financial support from her husband her children could not attend school and felt forced to work as laborers.²⁴³ In her eyes the Bracero Program perpetuated a cycle of poverty that she hoped would be broken.

Although the program was supposed to provide Mexican families with better sources of temporary income, Rosales points towards a lived reality in which many women had no other choice but to send their children to work rather than attend school. Many families hoped that the program would provide the opportunity needed to break free from abject poverty, but instead, women like Rosales faced a deep disillusionment with a national system that could not hold braceros accountable to their families. Rosales understood that she, along with many other women, suffered the repercussions of a state-

²⁴² Archivo General de la Nación Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol. 587 exp. 545.3/98.

“Ante Ud. con el merecido respeto expongo aunque no soy nadie pero tome en cuenta mis razones. debido [sic] a las contrataciones y pases de mojados cosa que beneficia y a la vez ruina para mucho hogares[.] en la comunidad donde vivo somos 5 mujeres que lloramos a mares debido a nuestro abandono y falta de pan para nuestros hijos. Ud puede ayudarnos en nuestra situacion [sic], exigir acto de matrimonio a mojados o contratado y hacerlos volver a los hogares terminando los contratos ojalá y tener yo comodidad.”

²⁴³ Archivo General de la Nación Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol. 587 exp. 545.3/98.

sponsored program that encouraged men to engage in work away from their hometowns and families. The social networks, extended family, and communities that could work towards pressuring some of these men to become responsible fathers and husband were fractured in some cases and women like Rosales had little legal recourse.

Rosales felt frustrated that she could not ultimately find help. She looked towards the Mexican Consul for assistance in locating her husband, and they told her that many braceros used false names to obtain contracts, making it more difficult for these men to be found.²⁴⁴ Since the Consul could not provide assistance, she thought that the Mexican president should ask those men to return to their country and work the lands that had not been sowed since their departure.²⁴⁵ Because the nationwide program produced the situation many woman like Rosales faced, Rosales thought about ways to address the dilemma and wondered if a solution existed on the level of national public policy. She wanted some assurance that her family could reap the benefits of the program without risking the permanent loss of her husband.

Other women sought help because they believed that their husbands should be forced to send back earnings. Señora Concepción Bejarán de Muñoz's worked with both the *Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados Unidos* (Alianza), and the Mexican Consul to pressure her husband to fulfill economic family obligations and support his children.²⁴⁶ These wives attempted to claim remittances as child support and alimony. No official channels existed for financially abandoned women to formally claim remittances, but women like Bejarán de Muñoz fought to make their concerns evident. The Alianza and the Mexican Consul collaborated in an effort to locate Bejarán de

²⁴⁴ Archivo General de la Nación Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol. 587 exp. 545.3/98.

²⁴⁵ Archivo General de la Nación Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV) vol. 587 exp. 545.3/98.

²⁴⁶ Stanford University Special Archive Galarza Papers Box 19 Folders 6 and 7.

Múñoz's husband and call his attention to the necessities of his family in Mexico. It is unknown if he actually sent his family remittances but it is clear that his wife attempted to find mediation for this problem.

Mexican consuls in the U.S. recognized the growing problem of braceros who neglected the financial needs of their families back home. Bracero Asterio López León describes the Consul's attitude with respect to braceros deemed irresponsible. León came to Blythe as an undocumented laborer but his employer assisted him in obtaining a guest worker contract. On one occasion the Mexican Consul went to Blythe to tell the braceros whom López León worked with, "Well, he [the Mexican President] wanted to throw out all of the braceros because there were many who did not send back money to their families, nothing, they spent everything here. [He wanted] To throw everyone out to send new braceros. At that time the contracting was in Guanajuato, Guanajuato."²⁴⁷ The Consul attempted to remedy this growing problem by threatening deportation to Mexico.

Although the Consul deemed the lack of remittances sent back by braceros unacceptable, many braceros used their earnings to relieve work pressures and create spheres of pleasure and recreation. Many men played poker or other card games in Mexico, but in the U.S. their social networks and families could not provide the social pressure needed to keep some of these men supporting their families or investing their earning in more productive areas. Unlike other areas of vice, local communities and

²⁴⁷ Interview with Asterio López León for Bracero History Archive by Violeta Mena on May 22, 2006 in Blythe, California.

Asterio López León: "Dio la orden [el Presidente Mexicano] de que echecharan todos los braceros para fuera. Por que había muchos que, ya no mandaban dinero a sus familias, nada, que todo lo gastaban aquí. [Quería] Que los echaran todos afuera para mandar braceros nuevos. Que entonces eran las contrataciones en Guanajuato, Guanajuato."

owners of farms turned a blind eye to braceros engaging in gambling. Guest worker Mauro González Gómez explains how out of hand these games could get:

We would wake up in poker...we would take Saturday to be ready and Sunday until 10 to sleep and wake up Monday to work again. One day a soldier from the south killed a poor guy there, there precisely in Pecos. Yes, well the soldier was always drunk and the won all of his money there. Then he took it back at knife point, and the guy didn't want to give it to him and he stabbed him with a knife...They were all braceros...and he even left in a hurry. The law [enforcement] didn't catch him...I will tell you something[:] in the U.S. when a Mexican is killed...they see him like a dog, [the assassin] takes off and they don't look for him.²⁴⁸

The patrón prohibited them from playing again, but he could not really prevent them from gambling or reprimand those who gambled. These games could also escalate into violence when men found themselves unhappy with the outcomes. As González Gómez describes, no incentive existed for the authorities to do something about bracero-on-bracero violence. Mauro González Gómez also points out that other men took care of their paychecks and did not place wagers on games. The winnings from gambling helped González Gómez feel like he made a better income in the U.S. than just what he earned from his labor. In 1953, in Las Aminas, New Mexico he said, “In the cotton I made very little but it went really well for me in the game.”²⁴⁹ He subsidized his income with his poker playing habit.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Mauro González Gómez for Bracero History Archive by Myrna Parra-Mantilla on June 12, 2003 in Meoqui, Chihuahua.

Mauro González Gómez: “*Amanecíamos en la poker...agarrábamos el sábado pa' estar listos, y el domingo si hasta las diez si acaso pa' dormir y amanecer el lunes otra vez a trabajar...Una vez un soldado del sur mató un pobre allí también, precisamente allí en Pecos. Si pos el soldado todo el tiempo anda grijo y le ganaron toda la lana allí. Entonces se las quitó con la navaja y el vato no se las quiso dar y le atacó la navaja...Eran braceros todos...y hasta se fue el pelado. No lo agarró la ley...yo le voy decir una cosa en los Estados Unidos cuando matan a un Mexicano...lo ven como un perro, se pela [el asesino] y no lo buscan.*”

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

“*En el algodón ganaba poco pero en la jugada me fue muy bien.*”

The Consul, along with many women, were concerned that braceros spent their money elsewhere and thus could not fulfill their financial obligations. Guest worker Hilario Martínez confirmed the suspicions of women who were not receiving remittances by explaining that in California he noticed that guest workers could spend their wages on many vices. He states, “Well, those who wanted to...there was money, see. Those who wanted to play cards or dice. Which by the way, many people instead of bringing back money came back [to Mexico] with empty hands. They lost everything. Drunks, from beer have always existed. You didn’t need to go to town, a car or a truck arrived there with beer.”²⁵⁰ Lucrative businesses based on vice catered to the desires of braceros. Men who worked long and difficult hours could find themselves passing time drinking, gambling or soliciting prostitutes. Local businesses knew this and provided services to the bracero camps keeping in mind leisure time and pay cycles.²⁵¹ Merchants providing access to vice moved closer to camps and many locals engaged in discussions about the leisure activities of these guest workers.²⁵² Some men could find themselves spending their paycheck faster than the time it took them to earn it.²⁵³ Bar and liquor store owners in small towns of Southern California enticed braceros by offering them transportation

²⁵⁰ Personal conversations and interview with Hilario Martínez Cortez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 22, 2008 in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

Hilario Martínez Cortez: “Bueno, el que quería...centavos había ¿vedá? El que quería jugar a la Barajas, pos jugaban o a los dados. Que por cierto, pos muchas personas en lugar de traer dinero venían con las manos vacías. Todo perdían. Borracho, pos de cerveza siempre hay. Si no necesita ir al pueblo, llegaba un carro o una comionet ahí con la cerveza.”

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Garcia, Matt. *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970, Studies in Rural Culture*. Chapel Hill, NC.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

²⁵³ Personal Conversations and interview with Hilario Martínez Cortez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 22, 2008 in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

services to and from their work sites, and providing access to prostitutes. In places like Cucamonga, California these businesses doubled from 1952 to 1955.²⁵⁴

While some men proved to be unfaithful, many also worried that their wives would engage in extramarital affairs while they worked in the U.S. This distrust led men like Hilario Martínez Cortez to make sure he left his wife pregnant before every contract departure. His participation in the Bracero Program deeply shaped his wife's reproduction patterns. When interviewed Martínez Cortez responded:

ML: But at that time, you had children?

HM: Yes

ML: When you were coming as a bracero?

HM: Yes. When I left, I left her covered.

ML: Is that why no one won her over.

HM: Well, that's why no one won her over, well the trap was already occupied.²⁵⁵

He believed that even if she would cheat, there would be no concrete repercussions because she was pregnant. In addition he assumed men found her less appealing because she was expecting. This gave him the peace of mind he needed to feel comfortable leaving her in Mexico and confident that she would be there when he returned from his temporary labor contract.

During casual conversation Martínez Cortez also shared jokes about infidelity common in the bracero community. Men who returned to their communities arrogantly showed off new clothes or gadgets like a radio, or shared stories of adventure. Such

²⁵⁴ Martínez, Daniel. Thesis: *The Impact of the Bracero Program on a Southern California Mexican-American Community*. Claremont, The Claremont Graduate School, 1958.

²⁵⁵ Personal Conversations and interview with Hilario Martínez Cortez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 22, 2008 in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

ML: *¿Pero en ese tiempo, ustedes tuvieron hijos?*

HM: *Sí*

ML: *¿Cuando usted estaba viniendo de bracero?*

HM: *Sí. Es que cuando me salía, la dejaba cubierta*

ML: *¿Por eso nadie se la ganaba?*

HM: *Bueno, así no me la ganaban, pos ya la trampa estaba ocupada.*

gloating sometimes earned them the ridicule of men who stayed behind. Non-braceros joked about the ways in which they sexually comforted the wives, mothers, and daughters of braceros.²⁵⁶ Some braceros feared that their wives would participate in extramarital affairs during their work contract. These types of jokes articulate that apprehension that in fact women left in Mexico would encounter new opportunities for sexual liaisons while males in their families, be they fathers, brothers, or husbands, worked in the U.S.

In these ways, women proved that they were not going to wait idly by while men from their communities gained access to a financial world spurred by the Bracero Program. The threat of extramarital affairs in Mexico demonstrate that women also held a sexual power within these long-distance relationships, even as the bracero and non-bracero men might brag about their sexual prowess. As women reimagined their lives through the structure of the Bracero Program, gendered power relationships within the transnational households had to be negotiated and re-negotiated. While men have been portrayed as potential breadwinners, this did not mean that women did not also make attempts to participate in the bracero economy as laborers. It also did not mean that women did not put pressure on men to spend money in ways beneficial to those still living in Mexico. These intimate and fluid economies of exchange, power, and potential helped to reimagine the very workings of the family unit in complex ways across national boundaries.

²⁵⁶ Personal Conversations with Hilario Martínez Cortez by Mireya Loza on June 22, 2008 in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

Extramarital Encounters

While Martínez Cortez articulates braceros' concerns about the fidelity of their wives, other braceros such as Roberto Guardado Montelongo and José Torres Gracian openly discussed the opportunities that the Bracero Program provided for romantic liaisons and infidelity. For some men the program gave them the freedom of engaging in non-monogamous behavior away from family and social networks that might chastise it. Although still embedded in social networks across Mexico and the U.S., many braceros felt a sense of sexual freedom structured by the border and the Bracero Program. Their ability to travel far from home and maintain separate family spheres, knowing that the structure of their work might call them away at the end of a contract, meant that expectations for stable families were limited for both the braceros and the women they courted.

One example comes from Roberto Guardado Montelongo who, while working in Shelby, Michigan, began to date a young Native American girl. He felt conflicted about the pregnant wife he left behind and worried about their future if he continued his affair. He met the Native American woman while working in the fields her father owned. Many men courted her because they felt a relationship with her could lead to a better position on the farm and permanent immigration status in the U.S. Montelongo wondered if after marriage he could run the farm and thereby secure permanent status in the U.S. Eventually, before the wedding, other braceros approached him asking him about what would happen to his wife in Mexico. He realized that other men wanted to expose him in order to court the Native American woman. They threatened him and they physically fought. After the altercation he realized that he needed to leave the farm and return to

his wife to Mexico.²⁵⁷ He claims that the infidelity did not affect his wife because he ultimately chose to continue in his marriage. While Guardado Montelongo felt the freedom to begin an extramarital affair, the roles of the other bracero men brought home the connections between sexual practice in the United States and family life in Mexico -- the two were never truly separate.

Bracero José Torres Gracian also experienced romantic liaisons and affairs during his stay in the U.S. as a guest worker that exemplify the complex connections between affairs in the United States and the roles of families in Mexico. His story exemplifies the power of transnational labor to shape the freedoms and limits of sexual practice. Born in Cojumatlán, Michoacán on July 28, 1931, Torres Gracian came to the U.S. as both an undocumented worker and as a bracero. During his first experience in the U.S., his employer in McAllen, Texas assisted him in obtaining a three-month bracero contract and he stayed in town after the contract ended. In McAllen, Texas he meet a young Tejana whom he lived with, and she became the mother of his first daughter. They separated in 1951 and he became a distant father. In the same year he moved to another town in Oklahoma and began dating a different Tejana named Hortencia. After two months of dating, her family thought that if they married he could become a permanent resident. Despite the potential of obtaining residency he returned to Michoacán and promised to return to her, a promise he never kept. She suspected this and before he left she said, “You’re going to leave and you’re not coming back.”²⁵⁸ He replied, “Look, if you want I

²⁵⁷ Personal Conversations and interview with Roberto Guardado Montelongo for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 21, 2008 in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

²⁵⁸ Personal Conversations and interview José Torres Gracian with for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on Dec 20, 2007 in Caruso Madrazo, Quintanna Roo.
José Torres Gracian: “*Tu te vas a ir y ya no vas a regresar.*”

will leave my clothes...so you will see I will come back.”²⁵⁹ Hortencia responded, “No, take your clothes because I know you’re not coming back.”²⁶⁰ She began to cry when he got on the departing truck; he remembers, “I even wanted to get down [from the truck] but I made up my mind that I was going to come to Michoacán.”²⁶¹ He left her that day and did not feel compelled to tell her the truth that she would never see him again.

Hortencia still hoped to see him again and sent letters to his home in Mexico. In the beginning, Torres Gracian replied but on New Year’s Day in 1952 in his hometown he married María Chávez Flores. Before he married, his family gave him Hortencia’s letters. After he married another woman, his family refused to give him any further correspondence from Hortencia, and they sent a note to tell her that he traveled to the U.S. to work once more. They believed this would keep her from continuing to look for Torres Gracian in Michoacán. Eventually, Torres Gracian wanted to return once more to the U.S. to work as a bracero. Although the temporary work contracts were difficult, he experienced a freedom in engaging in extramarital relationships that he could not experience in his hometown.

The watchful eyes of neighbors and people in his social networks seemed distant when he worked in the U.S. He felt free of the moral judgment of friends and family in Mexico might pass. While on contract, he explained that in his free time, “I went to the cantinas and the parties.”²⁶² As a married man he continued to date and said, “[W]omen

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

José Torres Gracian: “*Mira si quieres voy a dejar mi ropa...para que veas que voy a regresar.*”

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

José Torres Gracian: “*No llevate tu ropa que yo se que no vas a regresar.*”

²⁶¹ Ibid.

José Torres Gracian: “*...hasta me dieron ganas de bajarme [de la troca] pero no ya tiene la mente que me iba venir a Michoacán.*”

²⁶² Ibid.

José Torres Gracian: “*Por alli iba a las cantinas a los parties.*”

wanted to rope me in and fix my papers.” This meant, women offered to marry him so he could obtain legal residency and thus change his immigration status in the U.S.²⁶³

Furthermore he stated:

In reality one [woman] there in Los Angeles wanted me to marry her...I said, “[L]ook I cannot marry you because” I said, “because I am married in Mexico and you know I am married in Mexico.” “It doesn’t matter,” she said, “Look we can marry, and, well, your wife and your family will not do without anything,” she said “we will be sending [money].” She said, “[E]very 15 days, every month, whatever you decide. They will not go without anything.”²⁶⁴

He chose to stay with his wife, and his wife never found out because he never told her.

Like Roberto Guardado Montelongo, he thought that his spouse never felt the adverse effects of his extramarital affairs because he broke the relationships off and chose to stay with his spouse. Unlike Roberto Guardado Montelongo, he left a partner and child in Texas for whom he provided no economic support or parental care and guidance.²⁶⁵

I tell these stories not as a means to damn the men as being bad or lacking character, but rather to expose the ways that the Bracero Program helped to structure the sexual practices of men who participated in the program and the women that they encountered because of the program. Thus, while the program was primarily interested in structuring labor relations, it also shaped sexuality and family ties. Even as men experienced new sexual opportunities while travelling with the program, their choices still had to be negotiated through family ties on both sides of the border. This constant

²⁶³ Ibid.

José Torres Gracian: “...*Mujeres me querían enlazar para áreglarme papeles.*”

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

José Torres Gracian: “*De hecho una haya en los Angeles quería que este que me casara este con ella... le dije, ‘mira yo no puedo casarme contigo’ digo porque, ‘porque yo soy casado en Mexico y tu sabes que yo soy casado en Mexico. ‘No no importa’ dice, ‘mira este nos casamos, o sea que a tu señora, a tu familia no le va ser falta nada’ dice ‘nosotros le vamos a estar mandando [dinero]’ dice ‘cada quince dias, cada mes como tu quieras, como tu decidas. No le va ser falta nada...’*”

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

struggle between family members curtailed the feelings of freedom that the men experienced.

Mujeres Alegres

As sexual opportunities for men changed the landscape of sexual practice, women's sexuality also underwent changes and challenges. The spectre of prostitution, for example, pointed to women's changing sexual roles as part of the Bracero Program. As men moved back and forth across the border, separated from their former communities, prostitution became a sexual outlet. This part of the emerging bracero economy marked challenges for both men and women who questioned the morality of prostitution while understanding that, for some, it was a necessary form of survival.

On November 6, 1956, two groups in Baja California came together to write a collective letter to the then-President of Mexico, Adolfo Ruíz Cortínez, asking that he address the growing problem of prostitution on the border. The *Grupo de San Luis* and *La Unión de Inquilinos del Estado de Baja California* wrote:²⁶⁶

We are Honored: To inform you that we are aware of the difficult economic situation that thousands upon thousands of women, the majority with children, that because of this, see themselves entering prostitution creating a grave social problem.²⁶⁷

Due to the Bracero Program many women moved to the border to be closer to their bracero family members working in the U.S. and for better work opportunities. The arrival of braceros at border towns created service industries based on the needs and

²⁶⁶ The Group of San Luis and the Renters Union of the State of Baja California.

²⁶⁷ Archivo General de la Nación Adolfo Ruíz Cortínez (ARC) vol. 893 exp. 548.1/124.

“Nos honramos: Representar, compenetrados de la situación económica tan dicil (sic) por la que atravisan (sic) miles miles de mujeres todos la mayoría con hijos ya que pro esta situacion se ven orillados a ekercer (sic) la prostitucion creando con esto un grave problema social...”

desires of these guest workers. *Aspirantes* and returning braceros found themselves in towns such as Mexicali, Baja California and Empalme, Sonora to obtain or renew contracts. These cities also became sites of weekend recreation for braceros working in fields in close proximity.

Some braceros preferred that their mothers, wives, and children live closer to the national border because it made it easier for them to spend time with their families either on the weekends or between contracts. Still other women found themselves working close to the border with the goal of eventually crossing to the U.S. as undocumented labor because it was the only option available to them if they choose to work in the U.S.

While on the border, many of these women provided services to both braceros and *aspirantes*: as cooks, laundry women, and or as prostitutes. The *Grupo de San Luis* and *La Union de Inquilinos del Estado de Baja California* wanted local and national governments to address this issue by allowing women to migrate to the U.S. They explained:

[W]e are asking you in the most attentive and respectful way that you dictate orders to allow these women to work honorably as domestic workers in the United States of America, with a local passport. In this [way] we believe that they could by night, tend to their homes, tend to their children and in this way resolve their economic problems, putting an end to this foreign ill.²⁶⁸

They felt that women could resolve their economic problems by transforming their sex work into domestic labor. Although their idea never received serious consideration from the government, women of these Baja California organizations believed that prostitution

²⁶⁸ Archivo General de la Nación Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez (ARC) vol. 893 exp. 548.1/124.

“...estamos de la manera mas [sic] atenta y respetuosamente, solicitando de Ud, que de ser posible dicte a su muy amable ordenes para que gestione las pasadas de trabajar howramente [sic] aunque sea de domesticas, a los Estados unidos [sic], de Norte America, con pasaporte local, ya que de esta forma nosotros queémos (sic) que podrán por la noche, aque [sic] en sus hogares atender, a sus hijos, y en esta forma resolver sus problemas, economicos, acabando con este añejo [sic] mal.

could be addressed if women were allowed to also create transnational families on the border and mirror the family situations that braceros were allowed to create for themselves.

The increasing rates of Mexican female prostitution on the border and in the U.S. near work camps helped paint braceros as philanderers. Daniel Martínez, who conducted research on braceros in the 1950s, argued that the large majority of prostitutes provided services to these guest workers in places such as cantinas. He claimed that local women often betrayed by braceros who made false promises of marriage look for work in these cantinas. Martínez created a narrative about the presence of these guest workers fracturing Mexican American communities. He stated that braceros left Mexican American with children, thus forcing some women to enter the arena of sex work to provide for their family.²⁶⁹

The reality is that some women entered prostitution as a means of survival. Ex-bracero Juan Topete recalls recognizing one of these women involved in sex work on the border. Born and raised in Mascota, Jalisco by his single mother, Topete knew very little about his father. As a teenager, he decided to leave his hometown in order to travel to several places, from small ranches to larger cities, like Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, to work. A young girl, Margarita, from his hometown accompanied him through these travels. He explains, “Yes, I robbed her,”²⁷⁰ meaning he took her from her home without her parent’s consent. He states, “Well we were boyfriend/girlfriend for some time, I had told her that I need to come [to Mexico] and she said: ‘Don’t leave,’ And she started, you know, to

²⁶⁹ Martínez, Daniel. Thesis: *The Impact of the Bracero Program on a Southern California Mexican-American Community*. Claremont, The Claremont Graduate School, 1958.

²⁷⁰ Interview with Juan Topete for Bracero History Archive by Grisel Murillo on May 24, 2006 in Heber, California.

Juan Topete: “*Si, me la robé...*”

say. Then I said: ‘Well,’ I said, ‘We can get married if you want and if you don’t,’ I said ‘we can see what happens.’ She said: ‘That’s fine.’”²⁷¹ She willingly left her home, without her mother’s consent and without marrying, to travel with Topete as he attempted to find steady work. His promise of marriage seemed to be enough for her to leave her home and begin her adventure with him.

In a restaurant in one small town, a waitress informed Topete that his father lived in Amatlán de Cañas, Jalisco and said, “He just returned from the United States.”²⁷² Topete decided that he wanted to get to know his father, so he went to go look for him. When he finally found his father’s home, someone there told him that his father was in. They asked his father, “Do you recognize this kid?”²⁷³ His father responded, “No, I don’t recognize him. Who is he?”²⁷⁴ His father was told, “Well... You really don’t recognize him.”²⁷⁵ His father repeated, “No.”²⁷⁶ His father was told, “Well this is Juan, he is Mercedes’ son.” It then dawned on his father that Topete was his son. That night he and Margarita stayed at one of the homes of his father’s extended family. He explained to his father that he intended on traveling to Tepic, Nayarit to look for work and stay with his

²⁷¹ Ibid

Juan Topete: “*Bueno porque ya teníamos mucho tiempo noviendo yo le había dicho que tenía que venirme y me dijo, digo: ‘No te vayas,’ Y empezó ella, usted sabe, a decirme. Entonces le digo: ‘No’, le digo, ‘Pos nos podemos casar si tú quieres y si no,’ le digo, ‘pos a ver qué pasa.’ Y me dijo: ‘Está bueno.’*”

²⁷² Ibid

Juan Topete: “*‘Sí, ta recién venido de Estados Unidos ‘orita.’*”

²⁷³ Ibid

Juan Topete: “*¿No conoces este muchacho?*”

²⁷⁴ Ibid

Juan Topete: “*No, no lo conozco. ¿Quién es?*”

²⁷⁵ Ibid

Juan Topete: “*¿No lo conoces de veras?*”

²⁷⁶ Ibid

Juan Topete: “*‘No’... ‘Pues este es Juan, el hijo de Mercedes.’*”

uncle on his mother's side. His father disliked the idea and asked, "Well and what about this girl?"²⁷⁷ They talked about the young woman:

"Well she is with me" I said. "She is with you?" "Yes" I said. He said, "Well I wanted to send you to the United States," he said "but this woman, you have to take her back from where you got her. You have to take her back to her father or her mother," he said. And, "No" I said. Then at night I went to go talk to her. "I will go [home] if you want" she said, "Once you get there [the U.S.]," she said, "write me." "Yes" I said, "that's fine." Well I went back to my hometown to take her back [to] her mother, they liked me a lot, her mother, because she didn't have a husband.²⁷⁸

His father did not want Topete to bring the young woman along and abandon her en route to the contracting station. Topete stated, "Well he [Topete's father] told me that...he did not want me to leave her in some place where she didn't know anyone."²⁷⁹ If Topete abandoned her at the border, Margarita would be absolutely alone. His father believed that Topete acted inappropriately taking her without her mother's consent and then not marrying her. He understood that Topete had not thought about the best interests of Margarita. If Topete married Margarita, he might feel a moral obligation to care for her and send her remittances. Although Mexico created no institutional guarantee that the wives of braceros would receive remittance or child support, unmarried partners of braceros held an even weaker claim to economic support.

²⁷⁷ Ibid

Juan Topete: "*¿Pues y, esta muchacha?*"

²⁷⁸ Interview with Juan Topete for Bracero History Archive by Grisel Murillo on May 24, 2006 in Heber, California.

Juan Topete: "*'Pues ella viene conmigo' le digo. '¿Cómo que viene con[tigo]?' 'Sí,' le dijo. Dice 'Pues yo te quería mandar pá los Estados Unidos,' dice 'pero esta mujer la vas a llevar a onde te la trajiste. Tienes que llevarla con su papá o su mamá,' dice. Y 'No,' le digo. Entonces ya en la noche y platicué con ella. 'No si quieres yo me voy' dice 'nomás llegando a allá,' dice 'pos me escribes.' 'Sí' le dije, 'está bien.' Pues me fui de vuelta pa mi tierra a llevarla con la mamá, ellos me querían mucho a mi, la mamá de ella y pues, la señora no tenía esposo.'*"

²⁷⁹ Ibid

Juan Topete: "*Pues él me dijo que...solo que no quería que la dejara por ahí en algún lugar sin conocer ella a nadie.*"

Topete accompanied her back to Mascota, Jalisco and then met his father in Amatlán de las Cañas to begin their long journey to Mexicali. He worked several times as a bracero and as an undocumented worker. He got to see Margarita again stating:

You see, you see when I got out in 1949, I went out to Mexicali and I saw her. I saw her in a place they called the, the Patio, where I went, lots of braceros went there and everything like that. Lots of people went there to dance and I started hearing them saying: “This song is dedicated to Margarita...” I said, “Well, what is she doing here?” Yes she was, she was... Yes, she took to life, to the ‘happy life’ and well, there it was. I was sitting drinking a beer when she came and she looked at me, she left the fringe and she sat down with me and she gave me a hug and well no, well anyway no, we didn’t continue, she and I didn’t continue, because no, well no. Not anymore.²⁸⁰

He softened his description of her work as a prostitute by saying that she took to “*la vida alegre*” or the happy life. Margarita made her way to Mexicali, just as Topete had, from Mascota, Jalisco. Women *robadas* such as Margarita who returned to their families were often viewed unfavorably in their communities. These affairs presented difficult hurdles for women such as Margarita to overcome in order to get married, and without much support, Margarita’s options were limited.

This was also true for Mexican American women in the U.S. abandoned by braceros who made the same decision to engage in sex work as Margarita.²⁸¹ The experiences of these women colored the perspectives of Mexican American families who did not want to see young women in their communities marry braceros. There existed a

²⁸⁰ Interview with Juan Topete for Bracero History Archive by Grisel Murillo on May 24, 2006 in Heber, California.

Juan Topete: “*Verá, verá que cuando yo salí en 1949, salí pá Mexicali y la miré a ella. La miré en un lugar que le decían, El Patio, onde iba, allí caían todos los braceros y todo eso. Ahí caían a bailar y voy oyendo que dicen: ‘Esta canción va dedicada para Margarita ...’ Dije: ‘Pos ¿qué anda haciendo aquí?’ Si, ella era, ella era... Si, pues agarró la vida, la vida alegre y no, pos ya. Estaba yo sentado tomando una cerveza cuando llegó y me miró, soltó el ruedo y se sentó conmigo y me abrazó y pues no, pero de todos modos ya no, ya no seguimos ella y yo, porque, porque no, pues no. Ya no.*”

²⁸¹ Garcia, Matt. *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970, Studies in Rural Culture*. Chapel Hill, NC.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

general distrust that these men were not faithful and rumors that they perhaps left families in Mexico.²⁸² Mexican American communities also believed that many of these braceros married Mexican American women in order to obtain status as legal residents in the U.S. and that they would leave their wives once they received U.S. citizenship.²⁸³

Topete explains that the prostitution at El Patio, not only affected the women at El Patio but also the wives and families left in other areas of Mexico. Topete explains, “And many completed their contract and the finished and left the same way they entered; without anything, eh.”²⁸⁴ After taking care of their needs, these men spent any surplus income that they should have sent home on gambling, prostitution, and liquor. Topete goes on to state: “It was, it was wrong, because they didn’t save anything. But they did have fun, well fine, but they didn’t save anything... Well, many, many at that time left their families because...because everything seemed easy here, and they didn’t send anything.”²⁸⁵ Although the work braceros carried out was extremely difficult, for some men it was easier to use their income for diversion, even if their families in Mexico would encounter difficulties compounded by the economic strain. Away from their home communities they faced less social pressure to take care of their families and provide for their children. The legal recourses available to wives of braceros did not apply to this transnational work arrangement.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Interview with Juan Topete for Bracero History Archive by Grisel Murillo on May 24, 2006 in Heber, California.

Juan Topete: “*Y muchos terminaban su contrato y lo terminaban y así como entraron, así salían; sin nada, ey.*”

²⁸⁵ Interview with Juan Topete for Bracero History Archive by Grisel Murillo on May 24, 2006 in Heber, California.

Juan Topete: “*Tabla, Tabla mal, porque pos no guardaban nada. Eso sí, se divertían, pues bien, pero no guardaban nada...Pues muchos, muchos en ese tiempo dejaron sus familias por...Porque ellos aquí se les hacía fácil todo, no mandaban nada.*”

The contracting and processing centers encouraged a peripheral economy of prostitution. Born in Michoacán on April 8, 1926, José Baltazar Sánchez, worked in agriculture in his youth. His father's abusive tendencies drove him to run away at the age of 13. He eventually enrolled in the Mexican Army but decided to leave for the U.S. as an undocumented worker. In 1953 he returned to Mexico for the opportunity to obtain a bracero contract. The program first sent him to Yuma, Arizona. He continued as a guest worker until he obtained his last contract in 1962 while working in Oxnard. On one occasion, the U.S. immigration authorities and police came to his work site in Yuma, which employed about 200 braceros. He explained why the authorities came into the labor camp:

Ah, you know why they went, now I remember the reason. There was a report that there were men taking women to the camps, that's what it was, that's why they went. Because men were taking women to the camp and to dance...the immigration and the police went...but I am not aware if they took anyone.²⁸⁶

Police looked for prostitutes whom immigration services believed might be undocumented. Sánchez cannot recall that anyone they apprehended, but they did cause a stir and commotion. Beyond noticing prostitution, Sánchez, describes the gambling and drinking that went on in the labor camps as:

The patrón had a cantina, I think they didn't [charge to cash paychecks], because he had a cantina, it wasn't the patrón it was one of the supervisors, it was named el Café Sonora, and it was a cantina and we went there to drink beer. They didn't charge us [to cash our checks], but we spent our paycheck there.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Interview with José Baltazar Sánchez for Bracero History Archive by Veronica Cortez on May 22, 2006 in Blythe, California.

José Baltazar Sánchez: *"Ah sabe por qué iban, ya me recuerdo por qué razón. Había un reporte de que había hombres que llevaban mujeres a los campos, eso es, por esa razón iban...Porque hombres que llevan mujeres a los campos o al baile...la inmigración y la policía llegó a ir...pero que yo me di cuenta no se llevaron a nadie."*

²⁸⁷ Ibid

Individuals like supervisors provided services such as access to alcohol relatively easily as a sound business exchange. Owners of these businesses recognized the importance of the pay cycles of these men. Those closest to the bracero work force, such as *patrones* or supervisors held the best position to do this.

Men could also create their own spheres of vice through gambling. He also explains that many braceros spent their time playing with decks of cards:

I had lots of friendship with many and had many enemies. We are not all the same. With many I had a good friendship and with many I didn't and more or less because of the card games, that was everything. There we played a lot of cards, a lot...yes, to play and bet money...there many who left lost and they would get mad, that's when we had problems.²⁸⁸

Some braceros hope to double their salary by making wagers on card games and became upset if they lost their paycheck.

Julius Lowenberg was employed in the office of Public Health at the Rio Vista Processing Center in Texas when he first noted the intertwined economies of bracero contracting and prostitution. He recalls that other employees at Rio Vista worked with prostitutes who provided services on site. Lowenberg recounts, "I remember the guards. I remember they used to have at night, they had prostitutes coming out."²⁸⁹ The guards

José Baltazar Sánchez: *"El patrón tenía una cantina, yo creo que no [cobraban para cambiar el cheque], porque tenía una cantina, uno de los mayordomos no el Patron, que se llamaba el Café Sonora, y allí era cantina y allí íbamos a tomar cerveza. No nos cobran [para cambiar el cheque], pero allí gastábamos el cheque"*

²⁸⁸ Ibid

José Baltazar Sánchez: *"Tuve mucha amistad con muchos y enemigos con muchos. No todos somos iguales. Con muchos tuve muy buena amistad y con muchos no y más bien por el juego de la baraja, eso era todo. Ahí se jugaba mucho la baraja, mucho...si a jugar apostar dinero...Ahí muchos salían a perder y se enojaban, es donde habían problemas."*

²⁸⁹ Interview with Julius Lowenberg for Bracero History Archive by Richard Baquera on March 19, 2003 in El Paso, Texas.

opened the chain link fence that surrounded the center in order to let them in and Lowenberg believed that these prostitutes came from Juarez, Mexico.

Like Lowenberg, Sebastian Martínez provides the perspective of those who worked closely with braceros and witnessed the sexual economies in which braceros participated. Born in 1938 in Zaragosa, Texas, Sebastian Martínez eventually moved with his family to Pecos, Texas in 1943. His father worked at a car dealership but the owner ran a farm and the Martínez family tended their own animals and livestock there. He states:

I worked in some of those farms along side some of the braceros, we commuted back and forth to the farms...my dad did odd jobs and I also chopped cotton and that kind of thing during the 50s...I was fourteen or fifteen when we started working with the braceros...Some of the things that were bad was when they went into the town to Pecos they were more or less herded over to the east side where the Mexican population of Pecos was because the town was very rigidly segregated. The east side was the Mexican community and the west side was the Anglo community. So they were mostly bused to that area of town.²⁹⁰

Braceros abided by the customs of segregation of the cities and towns they lived in, and racial segregation shaped both their social lives and their sexual lives.

As a young teenager Martínez became aware of the intense relationship between braceros and sex workers. He goes on to state:

But most of them took time to go into town on Saturday nights and either went to the bars the cantinas and the whore houses... Yeah, most of them of course went into town for recreation and there were a lot of cantinas. I recall there were some blocks, some city blocks that had anywhere from four to five cantinas. It reminded me of Juarez here in the 60s where the red light district [was located]. Pecos turned into that, at least the east side of town turned into a red light district. Because Pecos had basically a population of 6 to 10 thousand then the population would swell to

²⁹⁰ Interview with Sebastian Martínez for Bracero History Archive by Karim Ley Alarcón on November 12, 2005 in El Paso, Texas.

as much as 50 thousand because all [the] men [came]. They filled the cantinas, and they had to get their recreation somewhere, and there were a lot of women who serviced the men in the cantinas. Sometimes these recreational activities became well organized where you had a man who would buy a van, would take two or three women and would go from farm to farm soliciting the business. Some of them did very well. I recall...several women who were very poor but eventually they ended up with good convertibles.²⁹¹

Prostitution took on many forms from women available for solicitation in cantinas to women who used pimps who provided the space and transportation to engage in sex work. Prostitutes who catered to braceros in Pecos, Texas could do very well for themselves because many braceros used their services often. These sex workers could also spread sexually transmitted diseases at alarming rates.

Dr. Pedro A. Ortega worked with braceros and noted the abundance of guest workers affected by sexually transmitted diseases. Born south of Havana on February 22, 1927, he worked as a surgeon in Cuba before migrating to the U.S. on April 5, 1961. Upon arrival, he found a job providing medical examinations to braceros at the Rio Vista contracting station. He decided to take the job because he did not speak English and wanted a job living near the beach because it reminded him of the water surrounding Cuba. He looked at a map and thought it would suit his needs because it was close to the Gulf and the Rio Grande. He began to work the United States Public Health Service with braceros fourteen days after he arrived to the U.S. Because he spoke Spanish he replaced the army doctors who had come to work processing braceros for 3-6 month periods. He remembers that the largest number of men processed at the station was a little over three thousand.

²⁹¹ Interview with Sebastian Martínez for Bracero History Archive by Karim Ley Alarcón on November 12, 2005 in El Paso, Texas.

Dr. Ortega remembered that one of the most common tests he ran was for sexually transmitted diseases and because of this he contributed to research on new systems for detecting syphilis in braceros. They had a large enough volume of men to conduct research on the reliability of the new test. He always checked for hernias, deformities, tuberculosis, and syphilis and other sexual transmitted diseases during his medical examinations. He explains:

Any infectious or contagious disease that we were not able to control we did [reject the bracero]...I remember one time we started getting people positive for syphilis...more than usual, all of them were coming from one small place in the state of Guerrero...they were Indians, they were almost all of them were relatives, they didn't speak Spanish, there was one interpreter...more than 15 [came from] the same place with syphilis.²⁹²

It was easy to contract sexually transmitted diseases in the U.S. through prostitution and clusters of tightly knit communities. Although the most common illness that Dr. Ortega diagnosed was syphilis, he still allowed these men to obtain contracts because he could give them a treatment that lasted several months and he hoped that they would return to Mexico by the time they became contagious once again.

As new sexual economies emerged at the border, gender and sexual relations were again re-imagined. The answers to the dilemmas were often not obvious as Topete's story displays. While prostitution grew as a means to fill the new sexual needs necessitated by the bracero program, interpretations of acts of prostitution varied. While some believed that prostitution was a scourge on society, they also might acknowledge that it was necessary. This dual way of thinking through women's changing sexual roles

²⁹² Interview with Dr. Pedro A. Ortega for Bracero History Archive by Richard Baquera on March 21, 2003 in El Paso, Texas.

provides a complex answer to questions of men's and women's sexuality as part of the peripheral economy of the bracero program, where women who participated in these economies were neither valorized as sexually free, nor condemned as wantonly promiscuous; rather, they trod a path in between.

Non-heteronormative Desire

In the process valorizing and making the bracero contributions a source of national pride, complicated stories of non-marital sexual desire are placed in the margins and a stoic image of the noble laborer emerges. The narrative most often silenced when discussing the sexual encounters of braceros are those that are not based on heterosexual desire. Braceros encountered homosocial space and some could engage in sexual homosexual sexual encounters with relative ease. This is not to say that sexual identities were not contested in Mexico.²⁹³ As seen in the previous examples, gender and sexual roles were in a state of flux because of the ways that the bracero program re-structured families. This meant that not only did men have the opportunity for heterosexual dalliances, but also queer sex acts. As Lionel Cantú notes, “we must move away from one-dimensional cultural models and examine these sexualities from a more complex and materialist perspective that recognizes that culture, social relations, and identities are embedded in global processes.”²⁹⁴ The creation of transnational labor networks, then, provides a space to investigate how changing material conditions also shaped negotiations over queer masculinities. Anti-gay hostility did not prevent some men from

²⁹³ Gutmann, Matthew. “Seed of the Nation: Men’s Sex and Potency in Mexico.” in *The Gender Sexuality Reader: Culture History Political Economy*. eds. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo, 194-206. Chicago: Routledge, 1997.

²⁹⁴ Lionel Cantú, “De Ambiente: Queer Tourism and the Shifting Boundaries of Mexican Male Sexualities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.1-2 (2002): 140.

coming out in public areas and these men stood against the myths of complete isolation or invisibility.²⁹⁵

Bracero Gustavo Eloy Reyes Rodríguez openly shared stories of queer encounters. Born in San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Oaxaca on July 19, 1941, and he received his first contract to work in Blythe, California. He explains:

Look, in [19]60 when I was in Blythe, in that time, you heard very little talk about, about those people, well. But before, you could see very few of, of those people, well. But before you could see very few or maybe there were very few. But in the camp, in the barrack where I was, where I slept, there was one, one kid that also lived in the same barrack, in the entrance of the barrack, where one day the light was cut off, but we didn't know why until there was a discussion, an argument among those by the door and the next day they clarified why it happened. That kid was named Porfirio, he was from the state of Oaxaca and ... and they figured out that it was him, like they say now, the gays or homosexual or like that. Then that kid clarified that it was him, he clarified that he turned off the light because he was in a man-on-man relationship. And then we called his attention to it in the *files*, while working, like people say, no? Back then we called them *files*, meaning fields where we worked. And then he said yes, that he was of that...he was gay.²⁹⁶

Rodríguez explained that everyone assumes that Porfirio had a love affair with another bracero, and to keep the anonymity of his lover, he cut the wire that led to the light switch. They would fix the wire and find that it was cut again, and at night they could

²⁹⁵ Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994.

²⁹⁶ Interview and personal conversations with Gustavo Eloy Reyes Rodriguez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 3, 2008 in San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Oaxaca.

Eloy Reyes Rodríguez: “Mire, en el [19]60 cuando yo estuve en Blythe, en ese tiempo este, pos se oían hablar muy poco de, de esa gente, ¿no? Pero antes, pues se veían muy poco de, de esa gente, ¿no? Pero antes pues se veía muy pocos, o muy pocos había. Pero en el campo, en la barraca donde yo estaba, donde yo dormía, allí estaba un, un chavo que también estaba viviendo en la misma barraca, en la entrada de la barraca que allí un día se fue la luz, pero no sabíamos por qué razón hasta que después hubo una discusión, una alegata ahí entre ellos, que estaban a la puerta y a otro día se aclaró por qué fue. Ese muchacho se llamaba Porfirio, era del estado de Oaxaca y este, y se alcaró que él era él, como le llaman ahora, los gays, o sea homosexual o así. Entonces ese muchacho se aclaró que así era, y se aclaró que apagó la luz porque estaba con una pareja de hombre con hombre. Y después le llamamos la atención en el fil, que en el trabajo, como dice uno, ¿no? Que entonces le llamaba uno los files, los campos onde trabajábanos. Entonces él dijo que sí, que él era de, de esa...era gay.”

hear noises, which Rodríguez assumed came from the two lovers. Since the bunk became pitch black at night, the braceros in the barrack could not see exactly where the noise came from.²⁹⁷ The other men in the barrack became annoyed because there was no source of light at night because Porfirio cut the wire.

Porfirio's gay identity bothered one of the braceros in the barrack and he felt compelled to confront and intimidate Porfirio. Rodríguez witnessed this interaction:

He performed the mannerism as if he declared it publicly that, that he was, because he was very public, he had the mannerism, even the way of walking, no? And he never said no, he said yes. And his yes and we said no, someone from Michoacán told him that he should leave. With strong words because he said: "You're going to leave this place" he said. And then he [Porfirio] ... he said yes. But he was a worker, how was he going to leave? So he didn't leave and he continued. But now he didn't commit the error of cutting off the light. But yes, it was then that it became clear, that it was the kid [Porifio]. But he didn't deny it, he said yes.²⁹⁸

The Bracero Program limited Porfirio's mobility and he, like many workers, had only two choices: skip out on his contract and become an undocumented laborer or fulfill the obligations of his contract. Despite the challenges that Porfirio faced in the labor camp he continued to work and was open about his sexual preferences. Ironically, Eloy Reyes never discovered the identity of Porfirio's lover and this man never faced the bullying Porfirio faced during that particular work contract, though he may not have been regarded

²⁹⁷ Personal conversations with Gustavo Eloy Reyes Rodríguez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 3, 2008 in San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Oaxaca.

²⁹⁸ Interview and personal conversations with Gustavo Eloy Reyes Rodríguez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 3, 2008 in San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Oaxaca.

Eloy Reyes Rodriguez: "*Él hacía los ademanes como que se declaraba públicamente que, que él sí, porque es muy decalarado, no hace sus ademanes, hasta el modo de caminar ¿no? Y sí, él no dijo que no, él no dijo que no, él dijo que sí. Y él sí, pero le dijimos que no, le dijo uno de Michoacán que, por favor que ya se fuera yéndose allí. Con palabras pesadas porque le dijo: 'Te vas a largar mucho de aquí,' dice. Entonces allí le dijo que, que sí. Pero era trabajador, ¿cómo se iba ir? Así es que él no se fue, siguió. Nómas que ya no cometió el error de cortar la luz. Pero sí, entonces fue que se aclaró cómo, qué era el muchacho. Pero no se negó, dijo que sí.*"

as queer in the same way that Porfirio was.²⁹⁹ Rodríguez also claimed that a large majority of the men at that camp did not care much about Porfirio's sexual preferences and chose not to make a big deal about the matter.³⁰⁰ To the majority, men like Porfirio did not seem so out of the ordinary in these migrant labor spaces.

Some men in this camp pursued social encounters not only with Porfirio but also with other individuals that expanded their sense of nonheteronormative desire. A range of prostitutes worked on the border, some even took the opportunity to go to the U.S. and provide services to camps across the border. Gustavo Eloy Reyes Rodríguez explained that a transgender group often came to introduce themselves to braceros at the camps.³⁰¹ They traveled up from Mexicali to visit Rodríguez' work site that employed over three hundred workers. Rodríguez explained that these men dressed as women and that there was no way that they could be confused for braceros. Despite this, these transgender individuals felt comfortable enough to introduce themselves to braceros. Rodríguez never witnessed threats of violence towards these prostitutes and the frequency of their visits points towards their popularity for sexual solicitation.

As the sexual economy changed for women, it also changed for queer men, transgendered prostitutes, and men who engaged in queer sex acts. Significantly, the telling of these stories has been largely elided from bracero histories. However, through these stories a fuller picture of gender and sexual negotiations becomes visible, providing both a humanizing picture of braceros, while also demonstrating that there are limits to

²⁹⁹ Cantú also notes that the term "*de los otros* [of the others] refers to "homosexuals", but that homosexual acts were not enough to guarantee this marker. "If it did," Cantú argues, "then possibly everyone would be 'de ambiente.' For although 'homosexuality' is stigmatized, bisexuality is reportedly common among Mexican men." Cantú, 140-1.

³⁰⁰ Personal conversations with Gustavo Eloy Reyes Rodríguez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 3, 2008 in San Pedro Ixtlahuaca, Oaxaca.

³⁰¹ Ibid

the sexual freedoms that border crossings permitted. The rearrangement of material practices that constituted the shifting boundaries of sexuality again provided opportunities for men and transgendered people to explore new sexual relations, even as limits were placed on these feelings of freedom.

Conclusion

The Bracero Program shaped the family lives and intimate encounters of bracero communities. It is through these interactions that a more complex and less idealized vision of masculinity, family and labor emerges. These experiences challenge the heroic narrative created to legitimize the national contributions of these men and present a more varied vision of bracero sexual economies. My aim is not to vilify these guest workers but to shed light on the experiences of these men. Intimate encounters did not exist solely as marital heteronormative interactions for these communities before the program but the program provided additional anonymity and distance from family. Some men engaged in extramarital affairs outside of the watchful eyes and social pressures of their home communities. Men faced less severe ostracizing and many chose to place their own needs for leisure activities and vice above the economic needs of their families. Parents worked to keep their children from enrolling in the Bracero Program and women like Maria Concepción Rosales fought to claim back wages as alimony and child support. Some women restructured their family lives by moving closer to the border in order to visit with their bracero family members on the weekend. Sexual economies providing services to the guest worker grew both in border towns in Mexico and around labor camps in the U.S. Economies of pleasure and vice emerged to cater to the needs of these

guest workers. In addition, braceros created their own spheres of vice through practices such as gambling.

The heroic narratives about these guest workers as husbands, fathers, sons, and noble laborers obscures the complicated family interactions, economies of pleasure and sexual encounters shaped during this period. The yearning for a socially acceptable vision of masculinity shapes the use of particular historic imagery of the program. Despite the intents of creating narratives rooted in ideal visions of labor, the Bracero Justice Movement reproduces imagery that de-centers these narratives and reminds the viewer of the alienating and intimate space structured by the program.

CHAPTER 4

Reviving the Dead: Creating the Bracero Justice Movement, 1998-2009

“Revivimos un muerto...porque esto ya estaba sepultado.”
“We revived the dead...because this [case] was already buried.”³⁰²

-Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba, Bracero Pro-A Activist and daughter of a bracero

“Por Dignidad, Por Vergüenza”
“For Dignity, Because of Shame”³⁰³

-Felipe Muñoz Pavón, ex-bracero

Nearly half a century after the termination of the Bracero Program, braceros and their families are reclaiming their historic contributions in order to bring attention to their present-day struggles against government corruption, abuse, and resistance to the recuperation of wages owed. While contracted in the United States, 10% of braceros' wages were withheld in individual savings accounts and subsequently aggregated into a single pool, from which braceros were promised reimbursement of those wages upon their return to Mexico. Initiated as part of the international agreement to provide braceros with savings and economic capital upon the fulfillment of their contracts, the account served as an incentive for braceros to “go home” to Mexico.³⁰⁴ As early as 1942, a small portion of these men began to claim their saved, or back, wages.³⁰⁵ However, the Mexican government failed to establish a bureaucratic mechanism for the distribution of these funds. Braceros residing in or near the nation's capital who made inquiries to government officials were often given the run-around. For braceros residing in rural

³⁰² Interview with Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

³⁰³ Interview with Felipe Muñoz Pavón for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on November 8, 2008 in Chicago IL.

³⁰⁴ Driscoll de Alvarado, Barbara. "10% Solution: Bracero Program Savings Controversy." *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* Fall (2003).

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

villages, the additional travel to Mexico City to petition government officials for their wages made the process both costly and frustrating. Others were not aware of the 10% deduction from their paycheck, confessing they could not read proficiently enough to fully understand the contract.³⁰⁶ It is estimated that the Mexican government collected over 32 million dollars.³⁰⁷

In the 1990s, the wife of a former bracero living in Purandiro, Michoacán, asked her grandson, a migrant labor organizer based out of Coachella, California, to make inquiries about her husband's Social Security entitlement. She believed that her husband was entitled to these payments through his contract as a guest worker in the United States. Armed with his grandfather's original contract as a railroad bracero, Ventura Gutierrez discovered that his grandmother was not entitled to Social Security benefits, but rather 10% of his grandfather's collected wages. It quickly dawned on him that 10% of over 4.5 million contracts amounted to billions of dollars of back wages owed.³⁰⁸ Gutierrez also recognized that many present-day transnational workers felt a deep connection to the parts their parents and grandparents played as guest workers, as he did. The Bracero Program had normalized successive waves of migrants' departures to work seasonally in the U.S. Gutierrez further understood that many of these bracero families lived in conditions that could be greatly improved with the payment of these back wages. Many bracero families in the U.S. and Mexico lived in deep poverty, and that payment of back wages could drastically change their lives. He was left with two questions. Where

³⁰⁶ Personal conversations with Braceros in Salinas CA in July 28, 2005.

³⁰⁷ Belluck, Pam. "Settlement Will Allow Thousands of Mexican Laborers in the U.S. to Collect Back Pay" New York Times, October 15, 2008.

³⁰⁸ Driscoll de Alvarado, Barbara. "10% Solution: Bracero Program Savings Controversy." ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America Fall (2003).

did this money go, and more importantly, how could bracero families reclaim what the Mexican government owed them?

In 1998, Ventura Gutierrez founded Bracero Pro-A, a transnational organization committed to achieving social justice for Mexican guest workers living on either side of the border, and who had participated in the bilateral labor program between 1942 and 1964. Those most active in the movement in the U.S. and Mexico are elderly ex-braceros, their wives, and their children. Like other social justice movements in Mexico, these activists worked towards exposing what is commonly known as “El Mal Gobierno,” the bad government. The “Mal Gobierno” failed to protect braceros in the past and acted reluctantly to make amends. Journalists could not help but capture compelling images of the protests in Mexico, featuring gatherings of elderly men and women peacefully protesting to gain public recognition for their plight, as well as the government response to these protests in the form of police brutality. The public cringed at the sight of these elders facing the billy clubs of the police. In the United States, the movement manifested in ex-bracero meetings in places ranging from small towns, such as Salinas, California, to larger cities, like Chicago, Illinois. Through these meetings, bracero communities discussed strategies to secure the back wages owed to them. These meetings also served as platforms for ex-braceros to reconnect with one another, and to gain recognition for the little known contributions of braceros to United States histories of labor and migration.

This chapter explores the binational trajectory of what historian Stephen Pitti calls the Bracero Justice Movement³⁰⁹ (BJM), Mexican state repression, U.S. legal gains, and

³⁰⁹ Pitti, Stephen. "Legacies of Mexican Contract Labor." Lecture at Repairing the Past: Confronting the Legacies of Slavery, Genocide, & Caste. New Haven, Connecticut, 2005.

the movement's internal tensions. In doing so, I center this examination on Bracero Pro-A and its relationship to this transnational movement and other bracero organizations. Bracero Pro-A is the largest, and often considered the first of the contemporary bracero organizations.³¹⁰ As such I focus on the period from 1998 through 2009 because 1998 is commonly recognized as the beginning of the Bracero Pro-A; and because December 2009 marks the end of a major chapter in the movement, as the braceros residing in the U.S. received the first and final compensation for their back wages. In the Mexican and U.S. media, Ventura Gutierrez, the head of Bracero Pro-A, is often portrayed as the spokesperson of the BJM. Mexican officials recognize Gutierrez directly in negotiations for bracero back wages and additional social services. Additionally, many bracero families, both in the U.S. and Mexico, know him personally and regard him as the voice and the heart of the BJM. His experience as an educator and community organizer informs the activist stance of Bracero Pro-A, and his personal relationships with bracero families profoundly impacts their participation in the BJM. This chapter thus includes an examination of the parts that family members play in these organizations, and those modes through which they understand their activism in these communities as braceros or as the wives, children, and grandchildren of braceros.

³¹⁰ Activist in other bracero organizations, such as Carmen Martínez of La Alianza de ExBraceros del Norte, recognize Gutierrez as the founder of the movement. Informal conversation with Carmen Martínez on April 28, 2009, Santa Paula California.



Bracero Widows in a 2006 protest³¹¹

Although many of the factions of the BJM build alliances with leftist movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas, my examination of the BJM finds dramatic points of difference. Despite the participation of children of braceros, the core members of the movement are elderly men and women, who are not asking for social change in the realm of education or the distribution of natural resources, or for the right to self-determination. The movement is constantly battling time because the passing of each day reduces the number of braceros and their wives. With this reduction comes the loss of the social and community memory of the Bracero Program. As such, the BJM is more urgently concerned with the past and present than the future. While many of the larger social movements in Mexico concentrate on securing a better future for children and generations to come, the BJM on the other hand attempts to secure dignity during the twilight years of many braceros.

³¹¹ <http://alianzabracerosproa.blogspot.es/>

Bracero Pro-A and the Bracero Justice Movement

Born in 1948 in Purandiro Michoacán, Ventura Gutierrez recalls the radio his maternal grandfather brought back to Purandiro after his participation in the Bracero Program. For his family, the radio served as a reminder of his grandfather's work in the U.S.³¹² Gutierrez's father was born in the U.S. and brought his two sons and wife to live in a trailer in Coachella Valley in 1950. As field workers, they depended on wages earned through agricultural labor, harvesting crops such as onions, carrots, tomatoes, okra and grapes. After saving some of their earnings, his parents moved their family into a one-bedroom home in a Mexican neighborhood of Coachella, commonly known as Coachellita Number I. When the family grew, with six additional siblings, the original house slowly expanded with the construction of additional bedrooms.

In 1969, Gutierrez made his way to community college before being drafted for the Vietnam War, though he was not sent to war immediately. As a conscientious objector he applied for a discharge, later withdrawing his application in exchange for being stationed in Germany for over one year. He changed his mind about his military service upon reflection and concluded that he “. . . had to swallow the same medicine. Independently of whether I was in agreement of the war . . . and I pulled my application and let the dice roll.”³¹³ Explaining that he wanted “. . . nothing to do with the military,”³¹⁴ upon returning to Coachella, Gutierrez tossed his military duffle bag and its contents into the trash. Gutierrez continued to pursue an education through the GI bill, eventually enrolling in the University of California at Riverside and completing a

³¹² Interview with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

bachelor's degree in sociology. He then enrolled in a master's degree program in Education and Chicano studies, but discontinued his studies shortly before completing the requirements for graduation.

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Gutierrez worked in higher education, believing that teaching provided a means to promote social change. However, he initially encountered difficulties attaining a teaching position because of his public activism within the Chicano Movement and other involvement in community organizing. Many young residents of the Coachella Valley participated in the movement through organizations, such as the United Mexican American Student Organization (UMAS), *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA), Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), and the United Farm Workers of America (UFW). Gutierrez began as an active member and supporter of many of these organizations, but by the mid-1980s Gutierrez had become very disillusioned. Gutierrez objected to the tenets of a “centralized democracy” practiced by these organizations, in which a few individuals took on leadership roles and set the agenda for the rest to follow.³¹⁵ Gutierrez preferred to organize at the local grassroots, rather than the state or national level.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gutierrez dedicated himself full-time to the unionizing of date workers in Southern California. By 1996, convinced that these transnational workers could be more effectively organized from their sending communities, Gutierrez helped to establish *Unión Sin Fronteras*. This organization then established a service center in Purandiro, Michoacán. Gutierrez felt inspired by the political work of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and invited him to cut the ribbon to inaugurate

³¹⁵ Ibid.

the service center.³¹⁶ During this event, Gutierrez's grandmother gave him his grandfather's bracero identification card and asked that he investigate whether she had a right to compensation. On a research trip to El Paso, he stopped in to visit a friend and a long-standing local activist Carlos Marentes. At the time, Marentes was focused on creating a bracero memorial and writing a book on the Bracero Program. In a room at Marentes' center, Ventura noticed that Marentes had collected boxes of bracero IDs and contracts, organized in alphabetical order by states from Aguascalientes to Zacatecas.³¹⁷ Marentes had convinced thousands of braceros to hand over their documentation for a potential museum. (As described in more detail later in this chapter, Marentes came under scrutiny and tremendous criticism from the bracero community for archiving these important documents, since these documents serve as the only proof recognized by the Mexican government that an individual had participated in the Bracero Program.) During this visit, Marentes gave Ventura a copy of the labor agreement, and as Ventura read through the document, he came to the section concerning the 10% savings fund. Gutierrez asked Marentes to join him in organizing braceros but Marentes declined, stating that his only interest was writing a historical account of the program and building a memorial for braceros in El Paso, Texas. This refusal was fortunate. Because Marentes had repeatedly failed to respond to the community's call to return the original documents to their owners, the fact that Marentes is not involved in Bracero Pro-A made it easier for movement activists to gain the trust of local communities.

³¹⁶ From 1974-1980 Cardenas served as senator of Michoacán, then as governor from 1980-1986, and unsuccessfully ran for president in 1988. With several leftist Mexican Parties he founded the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD).

³¹⁷ Interview with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 30, 2008 in Acapulco, Guerrero.

On May 5, 1998, Gutierrez brought together four braceros as an initiative of *Unión Sin Fronteras* to determine what should be done about the 10% savings. They unanimously committed to resolve a fraud committed over fifty years ago. Simultaneously, *Unión Sin Fronteras* collaborated with existing Mexican organizations, such as Purandiro's *Proyecto Aquí y Allá*. Two of Proyecto's representatives, José Angel Batista and Josefina Cruz, played key roles in organizing the first bracero meetings and worked through their already existing organization with braceros until 1998. In the first phase of organizing braceros, many meetings and press conferences were held in Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Jalisco. Gutierrez felt the movement would succeed if he could organize these states effectively. He also understood that the state of Guanajuato was historically one of states that sent the largest number of workers during the Bracero Program. Previously in 1994, Gutierrez's interest in organizing agricultural workers had led him to help organize a mushroom workers strike in Pennsylvania among workers from Morelon, Guanajuato. He noticed at the time that many of the individuals who participated in the mushroom strike were the children or grandchildren of braceros, and later came to believe that these relationships would be a successful building block for the movement. Because of his close relationship to these workers, he chose their hometown to hold a meeting for braceros from Guanajuato in November 1998. The family members of the mushroom strike workers became central participants, but many more families joined the struggle to claim back wages.

On July 19, 1999, he held a meeting with 5000 people in Irapuato, Guanajuato. This became a major turning point in organizing ex-braceros, because it was then that he recognized the massive effort it would take to organize these people across the

U.S./Mexico border. For the movement to succeed, he needed to connect the communities in the U.S. to those in Mexico. These communities were already tied through transnational family networks, but they needed to come together to pressure the Mexican and American governments to take a closer look at the lingering issue of back wages. Groups in Michoacán and Guanajuato took a step towards this goal by joining the organization *Corriente Migratoria*.³¹⁸ Ultimately, Gutierrez realized that bracero families needed an organization solely focused on bracero issues. On February 5, 2000, Alianza Bracero Pro-A was formed. Gutierrez named it after one of the largest Mexican bank frauds commonly known as Fobaproa, committed by the *Fondo Bancario de Protección al Ahorro* six years earlier. Gutierrez stated that the name helped people quickly comprehend the scope of the fraud. Thus Alianza Bracero Pro-A's motto quickly became, "The first proa theft was not Fobaproa but Bracero Pro-A."³¹⁹ Through this analogy, Gutierrez meant to convey that the first large-scale fleecing of the people was not this recent banking fraud, but the decades ago withholding of braceros' back wages. The popular slogan referenced bank fraud and reminded the bracero community that the original banks that held the savings accounts were partly responsible for the fraud.

Through the support of Bracero Pro-A members, Ventura Gutierrez traveled from large cities like Monterrey in northern Mexico, to small towns in the south such as Dzoncauich, Yucatán, holding meetings with hundreds of bracero families in an effort to keep these communities informed and connected to the case. Ventura traveled several times a year for four to six week-long periods. Local organizers asked members for

³¹⁸ The name *Corriente Migratoria* translates to Migratory Current.

³¹⁹ Personal Conversation with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.
Ventura Gutierrez: "El Primer Robaproa, No fur el Froaproa, Sino el Braceroproa."

donations to pay for Gutierrez' bus fare. Some families donated 2 pesos, the equivalent of 20 U.S. cents, while others offered more if they could. Activists pooled these meager funds together for Gutierrez's basic travel expenses. Moving from town to town, often sleeping in bus terminals, he managed to form organizations that covered most of Mexico. He also organized bracero families in regions in which many thought no bracero families resided, such as Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas. On these trips, Gutierrez collaborated with local leaders who volunteered to receive the email updates and disseminate the information among the bracero families. These local leaders also helped organize trips to protests and rallies. During these visits, he built lasting relationships with bracero families, as many housed him, fed him, and when possible drove him to his next destination, even if that meant that he ride on back of a pick up truck for six to eight hours.³²⁰ Many of these regional chapters felt a deep commitment to Gutierrez' leadership and vision. In places like Oaxaca, local leadership vowed to dissolve the chapter before joining a competing bracero organization.³²¹

In small ranches and towns, he often held meetings in a public plaza, to which members traveled from surrounding towns to listen to his updates and voice their concerns. Following Gutierrez' lead, many Bracero Pro-A organizers, such as Alma Fraile, held meetings in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán's main public plaza. She took day trips to organize indigenous Purepecha communities from the Island of Janitzio, where meetings took place in the playground of their local grammar school. The activists committed to following Gutierrez' vision often subsidized their efforts with their own income.³²² It is

³²⁰ Personal Conversation with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

³²¹ Personal conversation with Antonio Aragon July 2, 2008 in Oaxaca, Oaxaca.

³²² Personal conversation with Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

through travel on second and third class buses, sleeping in bus terminals and eating with bracero families that the activists of Bracero Pro-A organized large numbers of bracero families who participated in protests on short notice.

Activist Tactics and Legal Gains of the BJM

Bracero Pro-A tactics for calling attention to the bracero's plight and organizing bracero families caught major attention in the political and legal spheres in the last decade. Early campaigns centered on building a case against banks in the U.S. and Mexico thought to be in possession of the savings fund. When this did not yield the gains anticipated, they began pressuring elected officials in Mexico, such as the president and members of the congress and senate, to pass the necessary legislation to compensate braceros.³²³ In the U.S., the most significant gains made, were accomplished through the U.S. judicial system.

The organization targeted Banrural in Mexico and Wells Fargo in the United States, thought to have managed or held the original savings fund. Wells Fargo had deducted the money from the braceros' U.S. paychecks, while the Banco Nacional de Crédito Agrícola received these apportions from these salaries, but it merged with Banrural, one of the major banks of Mexico, and as a result, Banrural inherited this thorny legacy. However, the bank was unwilling to work with activists from the BJM to investigate the disappearance of these funds. Banrural argued that when it merged with the Banco Nacional de Crédito Agrícola, no saving funds were flagged as bracero accounts. Nonetheless, in April 2000, Gutierrez led a protest at the corporate offices of

³²³ Personal Conversation with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

Banrural in Mexico City that shut down the bank.³²⁴ Although the bank again publicly stated that they did not have a record of ever holding the savings, bracero families responded that there was never an independent verifying investigation.³²⁵

Gutierrez quickly felt the backlash of his organizing efforts. On April 11, he headed to the airport in a taxi to escort activist Emma Valdovinos Plata, who was heading to Chicago to conduct archival research on railroad braceros. En route to the airport on the principal freeways of Mexico City, he found that seventeen Suburban trucks had surrounded the taxi in which he was riding. Simultaneously, a woman who identified herself as a journalist stopped the taxi, claiming she wanted to interview Gutierrez. Several men emerged from the Suburbans and approached the taxi. These individuals pulled Gutierrez out of the taxi and beat him. Gutierrez tried desperately to run away but slipped and fell. They caught him, tore the ligaments of his left shoulder, and muscled him into one of their vehicles. As these thugs drove him around, they interrogated him with intimidating questions. The journalist also sat in the same Suburban. Sobbing, she asked to call someone. It occurred to him that he too should make the same request, so he proceeded to ask for a phone to call Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Gutierrez believed Cárdenas' political clout as a prominent leader of the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) might intimidate his captors. They allowed him to place the phone call because they did not believe Gutierrez had the ability to personally contact Cardenas. To prove his strong ties with Cárdenas, Gutierrez asked them to check his back pocket where they would find Cárdenas' number. A man retrieved the number and Gutierrez

³²⁴ Cuza, Bobby. "Bracero Rights Activist Says He Was Kidnapped in Mexico." Los Angeles Times April 26, 2000.

³²⁵ Sánchez, Julián. "Niegan Existencia De Ahorros De Bracero." El Universal April 7, 2000.

requested an additional phone call to the U.S. embassy. There was silence in the vehicle when they became aware that he was a U.S. citizen. Gutierrez said, “all of a sudden the cell phones started ringing all over the place, and one of them said, ‘Plans have changed.’”³²⁶ They tossed him into the main office of the *Procuraduría General de la República*³²⁷ to sign a statement declaring that he voluntarily presented himself to that office. He later learned from his attorney that the dates on the files dated the incident before it had actually taken place. This led the attorney to believe that this assault and kidnapping was planned from within the government.³²⁸ Although the police never pursued those who kidnapped Gutierrez, this incident made all the activists within the organization extremely conscious of the risks this work entailed.

In 2001, the BJM’s efforts to call attention to state and institutional accountability in this situation moved to center stage in the United States. While commandeering bus number 9 in the Zapatista caravan to Mexico City, Gutierrez learned that the Chicago law firm of Hughes, Socol, Piers, Resnick and Dym Ltd. filed a class action lawsuit against Wells Fargo. Gutierrez left the march and felt it urgent to organize a press conference in Morelia, Michoacán, announcing the legal action taken on behalf of the braceros. As such, despite the legal setback for Bracero Pro-A with Banrural’s initial refusal to acknowledge these funds, Gutierrez wanted to call more attention to the historic plight of the braceros by recognizing the contemporary presence of these communities in the American West. On February 5, 2002, Bracero Pro-A began *La Caravana de Las*

³²⁶ Cuza, Bobby. "Bracero Rights Activist Says He Was Kidnapped in Mexico." Los Angeles Times April 26, 2000.

³²⁷ *Procuraduría General de la República* is the attorney general of Mexico, the unit that is responsible for investigating and prosecuting federal crimes.

³²⁸ Interview with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 30, 2008 in Acapulco, Guerrero.

Botas,³²⁹ a protest caravan leaving from Yakima, Washington, and touring through bracero communities in the U.S. and Mexico to its final destination in Mexico City.³³⁰ Gutierrez named this event the Caravan of the Boots to allude to the fact that then Mexican and U.S. presidents Vicente Fox and George W. Bush wore boots, as did the many men who went through the program (a popular axiom described the laborers as wearing sandals when they left Mexico, and returning home in boots). The caravan focused on catching the national attention of both leaders and nations, tracing an imagined reverse trajectory of braceros. In Mexico City, the organization sought an audience with the House of Representatives and President Fox.

In the next year, Bracero Pro-A managed to capture national attention in Mexico. By October 27, 2003, the House of Representatives took steps to inaugurate an initiative to compensate braceros. The approval of braceros' eligibility to benefit from this initiative lay within the *Secretaría de Gobernación*, the department responsible for administering Mexico's internal affairs. The first phase of this initiative called for a census to account for citizens who had been braceros. The second phase, because its aim was to distribute monetary compensation, was not approved by the *Secretaría de Gobernación*. Since the second part had not been approved, Bracero Pro-A refused to participate, citing that there was no incentive for their members to take part in the census. Wanting to move the approval of the compensation forward, on November 18, 2003, Bracero Pro-A pleaded with the *Gobernación* Secretary Santiago Creel to assist during the approval processes. During this same month, other bracero organizations, such as La

³²⁹ The Caravan of the Boots

³³⁰ Martínez, Araceli. "Anuncian Caravana De Ex Braceros a México: Planean Demandar a Fox Que Exija El Pago De Sus Ahorros Detenidos Entre 1943 Y 1964." *El Universal* March 30, 2002.

Asamblea Nacional de Ex-braceros (ANB), pressured legislators to pass this initiative. On January 23, 2004, Santiago Creel accused the House of Representatives in Mexico of delaying its passage.

The frustration with this process contributed to Bracero Pro-A's decision to adopt a more confrontational form of protest. Bracero Pro-A finally received international attention when the organization invaded former President Fox's ranch in Guanajuato on February 7, 2004. About one thousand members of Bracero Pro-A peacefully protested on the private property of Mercedes Quesada, mother of the Mexican president Fox. They demanded to speak to Fox, his family, or a designated representative about Fox's inability to repay bracero communities. Mercedes Fox Quesada, the former president's sister, was the first to listen to their concerns, with the *Subsecretario de Gobernación* Ramón Martín Huerta continuing the conversation. During the protest, the president's mother fainted and was taken to a hospital in the state capital. Gutierrez told reporters, "We did not come here with the intention to be violent, but the national security committed a grave error when they laughed in the faces of 55 year old grandmothers and grandfathers who came here to find a solution."³³¹ On February 9, 2004, President Vicente Fox issued a public statement that he did not have the executive powers to compensate the braceros. This, he argued, fell under the rule of Congress. Simultaneously, the Fox family also dropped charges of trespassing against the leaders of Bracero Pro-A.³³²

³³¹ "Allanan Rancho De Fox." *El Siglo de Torreon* February 08, 2004.

Original: "*Nosotros no llegamos aquí con la intención de violentar nada, pero cometió un grave error el Estado Mayor y los de seguridad, cuando se burlaron en la cara de abuelitas y abuelitos que tienen 55 años buscando una solución*"

³³² Interview with Ventura Gutierrez for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 30, 2008 in Acapulco, Guerrero.

The protest at the Fox ranch received so much media attention that the *Secretaría de Gobernación* felt pressured to find some incentive to persuade the bracero community to participate in the census. On February 12, 2004, Bracero Pro-A decided to cooperate with the *Secretaría de Gobernación*, who in turn, offered to include the braceros in the *Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social* (IMSS) and the *Secretaría de Desarrollo Social* (SEDESOL). Through the IMSS and the SEDESOL, braceros became eligible for federal social services. The first protest at the Fox ranch was relatively successful, winning tangible gains for the BJM, but leaders in the movement continued to work towards recovering the back wages. On March 22, 2004, Bracero Pro-A decided to return to the Fox ranch and peacefully express their concerns about the back wages. The second protest received the same level of attention as the first. In April 2004, congressional representatives agreed to create a special commission for braceros. In June 2004, the *Cámara de Diputados* lobbied to pass a special proposal for 2005 that would allow monetary compensation and social programs for additional braceros.

Although Bracero Pro-A is the largest organization in the BJM, other organizations, such as La Asamblea Nacional de Ex-Braceros, La Unión Binacional de Exbraceros, and La Alianza de Ex-Braceros del Norte, made substantial contributions and called attention to different aspects of the BJM's demands. On July 1, 2004, members of La Unión Binacional de Exbraceros protested in front of the *Palacio Legislativo* and the delegation of *Instituto Nacional para la Atención de Adultos Mayores* (INAPAM) to demand that the SEDESOL and IMSS provide the social services promised to braceros earlier that year. In July 21, 2004, La Unión Binacional de Ex-Braceros led a protest in front of the Mexican Consulate in San Diego, demanding that the Mexican Consul give a

letter to the *Secretario de Gobernación* Santiago Creel Miranda requesting that he widen the parameters of the investigation. In September 27, 2004, they returned to his office, this time requesting that the consul give the letter to President Vicente Fox.

Based on the gains made directly after the first protest on the Fox ranch, the largest action of the movement, La Unión Binacional de Exbraceros and Bracero Pro-A understood the need for more international attention. Gutierrez acknowledged that many of the advances within the movement were made by shaming government officials into supporting the bracero community. On November 22, 2004, five thousand members of Bracero Pro-A unsuccessfully attempted to protest on a ranch belonging to President Fox's family to call attention to the fact that no legislative action had been passed to compensate braceros. The *Policia Federal Preventiva* (PFP) and the Guanajuato state police stopped them as they approached the property. They finally succeeded in their third attempt, breaking through the fence placed by the *Policia Federal Preventiva* in January 2005.

On April 22, 2005, the House of Representatives approved a law that would establish a trust for braceros, which would be administered by *El Fondo de Apoyo Social para Ex Trabajadores Migratorios Mexicanos*. This trust would monetarily compensate braceros or their widows and children who participated in the early census, and particularly those that worked from 1942 to 1946. On April 29, 2005, the Senate went on to approve this law as well. Braceros or their family members that registered with the earlier census collected by the *Secretaria de Gobernación* were entitled to 38 thousand pesos, which was roughly 3,800 US dollars. In May of 2005, Bracero Pro-A led the fifth protest march to the Fox family ranch in San Cristobal in Guanajuato. They demanded

that more individuals be included on the rosters of those who would receive bracero benefits.³³³



Ventura Guterrez leading bracero rally in León, Guanajuato³³⁴

Bracero Pro-A continued to focus its attention on President Fox, hoping that protest and activism directed towards the president would bring about immediate change. They engaged in new tactics focused on shaming the Mexican government. In November 2006, Gutierrez led a pilgrimage through Michoacán, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes and other states. The final destination was the Basilica to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, where his group planned to impede the entrance of Vicente Fox on the final day of his presidency. Representatives from the group explained that they would only allow him inside the church if he intended to ask the Virgen of Guadalupe for forgiveness. This was particularly interesting because President Fox was accused various times during his

³³³ Diego, Martin, and Claudio Banuelos. "Pago De 100 Mil Pesos a Cada Ex Bracero, Compromiso Asumido Por Gobernación." *La Jornada* May 28, 2005.

³³⁴ Ventura Guterrez leading bracero rally in León, Guanajuato from Bracero Pro-A blog website: <http://alianzabraceroproa.blogspot.es/1152723000/>

presidency of mixing church and state matters. Although Mexico is a largely Catholic country, many pride themselves on the fact that religious freedom in Mexico is guaranteed by the separation of church and state. Because he often visited churches and visibly prayed before political events, Fox was criticized for pushing these boundaries. Thus acknowledging Fox's religious tendencies, Bracero Pro-A planned to humiliate him on the feast day of the Virgen of Guadalupe.³³⁵



Bracero Pro-A Meeting in Villahermosa, Tabasco³³⁶

Major legal gains were made on May 9, 2007, as the Mexican Supreme Court ruled that all braceros who worked through the official Bracero Program between 1942 and 1964 were entitled to compensation from the Social Support Fund for Ex Migratory Mexican Workers (*El Fondo de Apoyo Social para Ex Trabajadores Migratorios*

³³⁵ Personal Conversation with Ventura Gutierrez by Mireya Loza on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

³³⁶ Bracero Pro-A Meeting in Villahermosa, Tabasco on December 12, 2007. Photograph taken by Mireya Loza.

Mexicanos). They also ruled that in cases in which the bracero is deceased, only the widow or children of that bracero would be able to register for the compensation, but parents and siblings were directly excluded.³³⁷ Additionally, the court ruled that all of those enrolling for the \$3,500 during this period and early periods had to reside in Mexico; there was no avenue for braceros residing in the U.S. to receive this compensation other than a costly registration trip to Mexico.

Simultaneously, as braceros in the U.S. registered for representation in the class action lawsuit (more on this later), braceros in Mexico were resolving how the last group of braceros would receive the monetary compensation from the Social Support Fund for Ex Migratory Mexican Workers. The Mexican government finally responded to the call made by the BJM to award monetary compensation to all braceros. On September 1, 2008, the government published the laws that officially established the trust for the Social Support Fund for Ex Migratory Mexican Workers. In the *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, the new law was published on the 14th and 30th of October 2008, which would open the registration period for the final payouts. Living braceros, bracero widows and their children were allowed to register from November 28, 2008, to January 28, 2009, in any of the 36 registration centers created across Mexico. Hundreds of ex-braceros, and the widows and children of deceased braceros lined up everyday in these registration centers.

The lines became so long that men recreated scenes from their bracero past. They slept overnight on sidewalks in order to receive service the next day. They purchased their meals from vendors and often traveled to these reception centers in groups from

³³⁷ Aranda, Jesus. "Ordena la Corte Incluir en Padrón a todos los Ex Braceros o sus Familiares: Plantea Como Requisito que hayan Trabajado Legalmente en EEUU entre 1942 y 1964." *La Jornada* May 10, 2007.

their villages, towns, or their neighborhoods. These groups looked out for one another, holding their place in line while others purchased something to eat or visited the restroom. Older individuals who went on their own often had a harder time. Reports of braceros whose health suffered in these lines became the center of discussion for members of Bracero Pro-A. The organization spoke out after news surfaced of a bracero who suffered a heart attack while in line.³³⁸ Bracero Pro-A complained about the conditions and asked the local government to provide water, restrooms, and a larger staff to process registration so that these men could have speedier transactions. Their petitions fell on deaf ears as the lines continued to grow throughout January. One bracero reported that he waited for over six hours in a line of over three hundred on the January 22 and 24 in León, Guanajuato.³³⁹ He also observed that strangers asked many ex-braceros for *mordidas*, bribes, similar to what they had paid to become braceros decades ago. Hustlers walked up to men in line and told them that they would speed up the registration process for a small “fee.”³⁴⁰ Those who paid this “fee” reported not only losing their money and their place in line, but also their irreplaceable documents.

For some, the establishment of the Social Support Fund for Ex Migratory Mexican Workers and the latest registration periods signaled the final chapter of the BJM. However, this was not the end for Bracero Pro-A, because there were still thousands of bracero families without official proof that they or their family members were braceros; and without the documents, they were left with nothing. These families formed the core of Bracero Pro-A’s fight towards broadening the scope of federally recognized bracero documents. They argued that documents such as official

³³⁸ Email Correspondence from Ventura Gutierrez February 12, 2009

³³⁹ Personal communication with Juan Loza on January 22 and 25, 2009.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

correspondence from employers and personal letters sent home by braceros should be recognized as proof. Furthermore, they asked the federal government to find or compile official lists of braceros with archival research in the *Archivo General de La Nación*, the U.S. National Archives, and the U.S. Agricultural Archives. They identified these archives as one avenue through which braceros could be identified and verified. In this manner activists argued that the states should accept some of the burden of proof instead of placing this burden solely on braceros or their families. Bracero Pro-A made it clear that this monetary compensation was not the full 10%, and that these aging men and their families deserved more than what was being offered. Thus many activists continued the struggle because braceros had not actually, formally received their back wages, only provisional social support in the form of a small, and mostly symbolic, payment.

Conflicts within the Bracero Justice Movement

Throughout the development of the movement, important and sometimes crippling internal conflicts arose. The internal tensions rooted in acts, and rumors of acts, by activists abusing power and taking advantage of bracero families caused a general distrust in many bracero communities. Several groups splintered off Bracero Pro-A when accusations of corrupt activists surfaced, even though Bracero Pro-A publicly denounced organizers who behaved badly. Leadership in Bracero Pro-A expelled activists because of mismanagement of funds or use of the organization to advance personal political careers. Other activists left Bracero Pro-A willingly because of interpersonal problems with the organization's leadership. In the first decade of the movement, Bracero Pro-A implemented a non-partisan policy in both the Mexico and the U.S. This policy upset

Mexican activists who believed that the BJM stood to benefit from an alignment with the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD). These activists blamed the PAN for the government's inability to pay the braceros what was owed to them, and believed the BJM needed to work aggressively against the PAN. They also blamed President Fox for the lengthy nature of the bracero struggle, and identified his administration's stalling as a tough blow to the movement, as many braceros and their wives literally could not wait any longer for the president to address the issue. During protests on the Fox ranch, braceros chanted "*No más atole con el PAN*"³⁴¹ highlighting that they were no longer willing to work with the PAN. Although in this early period Bracero Pro-A did not publicly support the PRD, many of the activists articulated strong critiques against the PAN. Thus despite formal declarations that Bracero Pro-A was non-partisan, many organizers wrongly used communities involved in Bracero Justice as supporters for PRD campaigns. Misuse of power grew across the board within several bracero organizations and many people became disillusioned with the movement. Bracero communities encountered problems assessing the legitimacy of organizers and weeding out the genuine activists from those who were not. Tensions within the movement grew, as organizers fought to claim grounds within the larger movement and fractures surfaced within Bracero Pro-A.

Among those whose presence in the movement exacerbated these fractures, Carlos Marentes stands as one of the most controversial figures. Marentes had long worked towards labor and immigration rights on the border, primarily through the El

³⁴¹ In Mexico *atole* is a traditional hot beverage and the use of the word *pan* has a double meaning of bread and the governing party the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN). This is chanted in marches and protest to communicate that they will no longer accept the rhetoric of the ruling party and wash it down with a beverage.

Paso-based organization *Sin Fronteras*. During the early 1990s, he and his colleague Enrique Lomas began an initiative to recognize bracero contributions. By the end of the decade, they had amassed a large quantity of bracero contracts and identification cards. Braceros and their families willingly gave this material to Marentes, because he had told them he was working towards establishing a monument, and potentially museum, in homage to braceros as well as establish a Bracero Day. Furthermore, he established the Bracero Project as an initiative to promote the recognition of the historical contribution of braceros.³⁴² From 1996 to 1997, Marentes and Lomas worked with over 300 braceros in the state of Coahuila and Chihuahua. In 1997, Marentes created a web-based work entitled "*Las Raices del Trabajador Agrícola*," or The Roots of Agricultural Work, focused on the history of the Bracero Program. On November 22, 1997, they celebrated Bracero Day, when approximately 250 people turned up to pay homage to braceros in a ceremony that included handing out diplomas and banquets.³⁴³ When Enrique Lomas passed away in 1998, Marentes continued working on the project. Marentes collected even more bracero documents through PRI support. Although Lomas was adamantly against the PRI, Marentes had formed a relationship with the party from which he received support for his project.³⁴⁴

Although he declined to work with Gutierrez, Marentes continued to amass more and more bracero documents. His collection, however, complicated the perception of the Smithsonian Institution's Bracero History Project because bracero communities assumed that it coincided with Marentes' project; many ex-braceros as such did not want to work with the Smithsonian project. While documenting oral histories within bracero

³⁴³ <http://www.farmworkers.org/thebday.html>

³⁴⁴ Paterson, Kent. "New Movement Demands Justice for Farmworkers." Borderlines, 10 December 1998.

communities, I often encountered individuals who interrogated me in order to discover the relationship of my work to Marentes' collection. One bracero in Monterrey recently recalled that when he gave Marentes his documents in the 1990s, he never imagined that braceros would actually see monetary compensation for the 10% that was taken from him. For this bracero, his documents were just old pieces of paper that were no longer useful to him.³⁴⁵ When the Mexican government finally published payment requirements, individuals from bracero communities pleaded with Marentes to return their documents, since one of the central requirements for compensation was the presentation of original identification, a contract or a pay stub as proof. For several days in March 2006, approximately 200 to 300 individuals lined up outside of Marentes's office in an effort to recover their documents and register for payouts from the Mexican Congress. Marentes claimed that he never expected this problem, stating, "This man came one day with the box from the interior of Mexico, and we said, 'We can't take it just like that, without information.'" ³⁴⁶ This man's documents were among an estimated 70,000 files in Marentes' possession. Marentes declined to give the documents to anyone other than the original owner, but in many cases where the bracero has passed away, the bracero's wife or children asked Marentes to turn the documents over to them. This became particularly problematic when the Mexican government allowed widows and children of braceros to claim the government payout entitled to their husband or father.

In a protest on August 4, 2008, a group of women who wanted their family members' documents returned demonstrated against Marentes, seeking to warn others about his collection and his refusal to return these papers. Marentes's followers, which

³⁴⁵ Conversation with a Bracero, Monterrey Nuevo Leon June 21, 2008.

³⁴⁶ Gilot, Louie. "Lines Grow but Bracero Sign Ups Are Over." El Paso Times March 24, 2006.

media coverage reported was predominately male, confronted this group by calling the women “*marijuanas*” or “*borrachas*.”³⁴⁷ In his own defense he stated, “I’ve never let down the people.”³⁴⁸ Marentes also accused the PAN of paying out the communities of braceros who support the PAN such as those in Guanajuato, Jalisco and Queretaro.³⁴⁹ His early alignments with the PRI made activists in Monterrey suspicious of his role within the Bracero Justice Movement. A resident of Monterrey explained to me his beliefs that Marentes played a key role in the fleecing of braceros, because he collected these documents at the same time that Gutierrez’s Bracero Pro-A was growing.

One of the first organizers to be expelled from Bracero Pro-A was Baldomero Capiz. Members of the organization removed him in 2001 at a meeting in San Jose, California, for two reasons. First, he used the Bracero Pro-A meeting as a political platform to run for office in Mexico on the PRD ticket; and second, organizers in other areas had received complaints that he made it mandatory that braceros contribute funds in order to receive updates on the legal aspects of this movement. Three organizers in Sonora, specifically Hermosillo, Emplame and Ciudad Obregon left because they felt dissatisfied with the expelling of Capiz. Capiz subsequently broke off with some of the communities and organizers he worked with previously and established Union Binacional de Exbraceros.

Through the Union Binacional de Exbraceros, Capiz managed to call attention to the Bracero Justice Movement by carrying out protests and hunger strikes. In January of 2004, Federico Navarro, Bracero Pro-A organizer of the Imperial Valley, wrote to José

³⁴⁷ Bustamante, Angélica. "Reciben con gritos a Carlos Marentes." *El Mexicano* August 4, 2008.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Two of these states also happen to be the states that sent the largest numbers of men to the Bracero Program.

Antonio Larios, Mexican Consul of Los Angeles, to ask him to exclude Baldomero Capiz from meeting in which he was to represent bracero interests. Navarro stated that Bracero Pro-A had expelled Baldomero Capiz for using the organization for personal gain.³⁵⁰ In some places, like Salinas, California, this stirred controversy, as some braceros opted to leave Bracero Pro-A because none of them received the funds that their Mexican counterparts did.³⁵¹ In order to register for the payment, many entrusted their documents to a bracero organization or went down directly to the Mexican Ministry of the Gobernación. Ignacio Gómez, former bracero and Bracero Pro-A organizer, collected the paperwork of fellow contract workers and mailed them to the Ministry of the Interior. Because none of the Salinas braceros appeared on the list of those who would be paid, they came to believe that Capiz's organization would include them in the next pay out. The inability of bracero communities to go directly to Mexico to register caused the economically disadvantaged and the undocumented in the U.S. to become some of the fiercest participants of bracero organizations.

Ventura Gutierrez claims that other organizers stole from the braceros, including his own cousin, Rojelio Pantoja Méndez. After Gutierrez learned that Pantoja Méndez took money from the braceros for personal use, Gutierrez borrowed money from Pantoja Méndez and used it to pay back what Pantoja Méndez owed. He unknowingly paid his debt to the members of Bracero Pro-A. Pantoja Méndez is only one of a series of organizers accused of mismanaging monies. In Michoacán, organizer Alma Fraile sought legal recourse to recover mismanaged funds, suing former Bracero Pro-A local

³⁵⁰ Federico Navarro Duran, "Letter to the Mexican Consul in Los Angeles." *Bracero History Archive*, Item #1136 (accessed October 07 2008, 1:59 pm)

³⁵¹ Mel, Claudia. "Braceros Excluded from List: Mexican Government Won't Pay Local Men from Special Fund." [The Monterey County Herald](#) June 2, 2006.

organizers. The largest amount of mismanaged funds came from the collection of dues for legal fees in Mexico. Despite this mismanagement, many of the organizers of Bracero Pro-A claim that these are anomalies, and they are working towards preventing these problems. These issues are not unique to Bracero Pro-A, as similar problems occurred in other bracero organizations.³⁵²

Gutierrez has not been immune to controversy, having come into conflict with one of the original organizers of Bracero Pro-A, Rosa Marta Zárate. Zárate is a well-known activist and nun from San Bernadino, California. With commitments rooted in liberal theology, she already had a long history of leading social change in immigrant, feminist and religious circles. Her support of Bracero Pro-A and its efforts led her to form a friendship with Ventura Gutierrez. Gutierrez claims that this friendship, based on their activist work among braceros, led to a romantic relationship between 2005 and 2006. According to Gutierrez, this relationship was not made public in order to maintain Zárate's public image as a religious figure. He claims to have ended his amorous relationship with Zárate in 2006. Subsequently, Gutierrez accused Zárate of tarnishing his image as an organizer by spreading rumors of theft and corruption. To counter these accusations, Zárate claimed that Gutierrez had tarnished her image as an organizer and spiritual leader in this community. During a Bracero Pro-A assembly in September 2007, Zárate resigned. Other women, including Violeta Dominguez and Carmen Martínez, chose to leave the organization in support of Zárate. Carmen Martinez claims that she happily organized bracero families in the Bracero Pro-A until she felt the organization had taken a turn in ways that worked against her vision of the movement. She felt unhappy with the movement's treatment of women, in particular the treatment of Rosa

³⁵² Personal Conversations with Bracero Pro-A organizers December 2007, Paraiso, Tabasco.

Marta Zarate. Zárate and the other activists who followed her subsequently organized the Californian bracero communities they had worked with to form La Alianza de Exbraceros del Norte. Certainly, activists within La Alianza de Exbraceros del Norte recognize Ventura Gutierrez as the founder of the BJM and acknowledge the importance of his early work to call attention to the plight of the braceros. Under this new organization, Zárate further worked with bracero groups in Washington, Nevada, California, and Arizona. Carmen Martinez, among others, believed that under Zarate's leadership in La Alianza, the interests of the braceros with whom she worked would be better protected.

The Bracero Justice Movement and Zapatismo

In the 1990s, Ventura Gutierrez supported and was inspired by the uprising of the Zapatistas. He saw value in the organizing efforts in Chiapas, and participated in commandeering a bus of protesters to Mexico City in 2001. He incorporated much of his understanding of this movement into organizing strategies for Bracero Pro-A, and also received reciprocal support from Zapatista leadership. In September 2005, Bracero Pro-A held a press conference in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, announcing their alignment with *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) and *La Otra Campaña*.³⁵³ *La Otra Campaña* aimed to create coalitions between marginalized groups committed to promoting social change outside of electoral politics. Both organizations experienced a deep disillusionment with electoral politics, feeling that the Mexican political establishment did not strive to address their needs. Bracero Pro-A and the Zapatistas felt that their situations came about because of an ethically bankrupt political

³⁵³ Reynoso, Maricela. [Alianza Braceroproa Joins La Sexta Declaración De La Selva Lacandona](http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2005/09/14/17672041.php). September 14, 2005. Indy Media. Available: <http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2005/09/14/17672041.php>. September 20, 2008.

system in which the Mexican government did not protect the interests of its own citizens, but instead folded under the imperial demands of the U.S. Both of these groups acknowledged the Bracero Program as one example of this capitulation. Ventura Gutierrez, as well as the leadership of other bracero organizations, pursued efforts to incorporate bracero activists into *La Otra Campaña*. Leadership in Bracero Pro-A traveled from various states in Mexico and the US to assist Zapatista-led workshops in Chiapas. Organizer Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba cites these workshops as a central experience for her, shaping indelibly her sense of social justice and of the strong ties between the activist struggles of indigenous communities in Mexico with those of the braceros.³⁵⁴ Zapatistas too understood that these movements crossed paths, as the state strove to impose social death through the historical erasure of both indigenous communities and bracero communities.³⁵⁵



Member of Bracero Pro-A speaks at press conference with EZLN³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Personal communication with Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

³⁵⁵ Hermann Bellinghausen Enviado. "Invita *Marcos* a Ex Braceros a Reuniones con Mexicanos que Trabajan en EU." *La Jornada*, Febrero 21, 2006. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/02/21/020n1pol.php>

³⁵⁶ Member of Bracero Pro-A speaks at press conference with EZLN on September 9, 2005. Image taken by Maricela Reynosa for San Diego Indy Media. <http://sandiego.indymedia.org/en/2005/09/111002.shtml>

Although Bracero Pro-A created ties with the EZLN, the Asamblea Nacional de Exbraceros (ANB) is the closest ally of *La Otra Campaña*. Established in 2003 in Tlaxcala, it is led by Luz Rivera and created chapters in six Mexican states. Founding member of the ANB, Felipe Muñoz Pavón, explained how the movement began in Tlaxcala, “It [news about the bracero backwages] came out in a newspaper, in a Los Angeles newspaper. The article was acquired by the son of a bracero, who sent it. He sent the newspaper to his father, who is from a town in Tlaxcala.”³⁵⁷ This bracero, Aurelio, shared the news he received from his son with his compadre and Muñoz Pavón. Muñoz Pavón in turn told his neighbor and a nephew, both ex-braceros. The three of them proceeded to find other braceros. Muñoz Pavón explains:

The three of us went to a sound system to announce the news of the article that had come about braceros. If any compañeros present there...had been braceros, that they go to the address of your home [Muñoz Pavón’s home]. Well that’s how it was . . . some came by.³⁵⁸

The newly formed group sent members to government officials in the state of Tlaxcala to inquire about the back wages. Muñoz Pavón places the onus directly on the Mexican government to identify those persons who were owed these monies; because the government could have alerted braceros about their withheld compensation through the

³⁵⁷ Interview with Felipe Muñoz Pavón for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on November 8, 2008 in Chicago IL.

Felipe Muñoz Pavón: “Salió en un periódico de Los Angeles California, una nota del ahorro del 10% de los braceros. Esa nota la adquirió un hijo de un bracero, y lo mandó. Mandó el periódico a su papá, que es de un pueblo de Tlaxcala.”

³⁵⁸ Interview with Felipe Muñoz Pavón for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on November 8, 2008 in Chicago IL.

Felipe Muñoz Pavón: “Ya los tres fuimos a un aparato de sonido a anunciar de ese periódico que había salido de los braceros. Que si algunos compañeros que estaban allí presente, ...que habían sido braceros, que se acercaran a la dirección de la casa de usted (meaning his house)” Pues así fue...se acercaron algunos.”

radio or newspaper during the run of the program, Pavon notes that instead, “The government kept silent.”³⁵⁹

After many frustrated attempts, they decided to approach Licenciada Luz Rivera. She decided to help them, as Muñoz Pavon recounts, “... We are very grateful, she was interested in helping us. She, herself made us, not all of us but some of us, to tell others, to every township of Tlaxcala ... Groups went to distinct...townships.”³⁶⁰ At the first meeting, about fifty men attended; by the eighth meeting, over five thousand ex-braceros arrived.³⁶¹ Soon they developed chapters in Tlaxcala, Guerrero, Oaxaca, San Luis Potosí, Jalisco, Hidalgo and el Estado de México. They developed organizing strategies based on bringing bracero communities together for meetings and protests. They carried out protests at Los Pinos (the president's residence), Zocalo, Ciudadela, la Cámara de Diputados, Gobernación, and El Banco Nacional de México. During all of these travels, “Everyone paid their travel fare, their expenses and copies... what helped us a lot, is that the licenciada didn't, didn't charge, we didn't give her anything. We still haven't given her anything... that helped us a lot, that she didn't receive a dime from us.”³⁶² Instead they pitched in money for the travel cost of representatives to take paperwork to the state capital and Mexico City. They even went so far as to send a team, which included Muñoz Pavón, to the Archivo General de la Nación to conduct research on the

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

Felipe Muñoz Pavón: “*El gobierno guardó siempre el silencio.*”

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

Felipe Muñoz Pavón: “...*Le agradecemos mucho, tomó interés en ayudarnos. Ella misma hizo que fuéramos, aunque no fuéramos todos pero fuéramos algunos, a hacer conocimiento a los, a todos los municipios de Tlaxcala... Fueron grupos a distintos... municipios.*”

³⁶¹ Interview with Felipe Muñoz Pavón for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on November 8, 2008 in Chicago IL.

³⁶² Ibid.

Felipe Muñoz Pavón: “...*Cada quien pagaba su pasaje, sus gastos no, las copias también... Lo que nos ayudó mucho, que a la licenciada no, no cobró, no le dimos, no. Hasta la presente no le damos nada... eso fue lo que nos ayudado mucho, que ella no recibe ni un centavo de nosotros.*”

whereabouts of their savings. Muñoz Pavón explains, "... all of that contributed to the government taking precautions."³⁶³ He believes the government requested that the entire research team be banned from the national archives because the staff eventually denied their entry.

The EZLN came out strongly in support of the ANB. In February 2006, Subcommandante Marcos, head of the EZLN, asked that braceros unite with him on a march during *El Día del Trabajo* (the Day of Work). At a meeting of the ANB, Subcommandante Marcos reveals what ex-braceros told him:

Hey, sub, they treat us like we are old wrapping paper in this system, as if we were an old piece of furniture that no longer works, and they have us in a corner, waiting to see if the animal eats us or the climate ruins us; like we are put aside, hindering them. And we weren't born elderly. We worked and we worked hard, generating riches and now we are not useful, they want to put us aside, they want to kill us.³⁶⁴

The ex-braceros felt as if the Mexican government had pushed aside their demands, hoping that more of these men and their widows would soon pass away. Identifying with this sinister form of state silencing by slow attrition, Zapatistas viewed the plight of the ex-bracero as similar to their own. During a large meeting of the ANB, Delegado Zero, representative of the EZLN, illustrated how the experiences of ex-braceros resonated with that of the Zapatistas, "Like the indigenous people they are waiting until we disappear, that we die like Indian pueblos, that we lament the color we are and the language of our

³⁶³ Ibid.

Felipe Muñoz Pavón: "...*todo eso contribuyó a que el gobierno tomara precauciones.*"

³⁶⁴ Hermann Bellinghausen Enviado. "Invita Marcos a Ex Braceros a Reuniones con Mexicanos que Trabajan en EU." *La Jornada*, Febrero 21, 2006. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/02/21/020n1pol.php>
Original: "*Oye, sub, es que a nosotros en este sistema nos tratan como si fuéramos una envoltura ya vieja, como si fuéramos un mueble que ya no sirve, y nos tienen ahí arrinconados, esperando a ver si nos come el animal o si nos echa a perder el clima; como que estamos allí arrumbados, estorbándonos. Y nosotros no nacimos ancianos. Trabajamos y trabajamos duro y generamos riqueza, y ahora que ya no les servimos nos quieren hacer a un lado, nos quieren matar*"

culture, that is the way they are waiting for the older generation, the braceros of that generation in the U.S., that they die and then the problem with you will cease.”³⁶⁵

The Legal Battle in the U.S.

The question of the legal rights of braceros in the U.S. remained on the table. In 2008, the U.S.-based Mexico Solidarity Network sought to call attention to the plight of the braceros by arranging a speaking tour for Felipe Muñoz Pavón. During this speaking tour, Felipe Muñoz Pavón asked U.S. college students to lend their energies toward pressuring their government to intercede on behalf of braceros. But neither the Mexico Solidarity Network nor Muñoz Pavón were fully aware that the Chicago law firm of Hughes, Socol, Piers, Resnick and Dym, Ltd. had already settled a class action lawsuit with the Mexican government. At the time of Pavón’s speaking tour, the law firm was searching for all braceros residing in the U.S. who could be included in the settlement.

Years earlier, in 2001, Hughes, Socol, Piers, Resnick and Dym, Ltd. filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of a former bracero against Wells Fargo, the U.S. bank responsible for withholding the savings from laborers’ paychecks and transferring the money to Mexican authorities. This firm had garnered a national reputation for working on high profile social justice and civil rights cases. Its lawyers first heard about the issue from paralegal Raúl Ross during a suit against Money Gram and Western Union for inflating currency conversion and fees. Ross initially became aware of the plight of the

³⁶⁵ <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/la-otra-campana/207/>

Original: “*Así como los indígenas están esperando a que desaparezcamos, a que muramos como pueblos indios, a que nos arrepintamos del color que tenemos de la lengua que tenemos de la cultura, así están esperando a que la edad mayor, los braceros que estuvieron en esa época en Estados Unidos, se mueran y así acabar el problema que tienen con ustedes.*”

braceros when individuals in the money transfer suit approached him with questions about the legal avenues of action for bracero communities. Although the lawyers were unsure of the outcome, the firm felt compelled to accept the challenge of settling one of the largest cases of withheld back wages for guest workers.³⁶⁶ The case represented a complex legal puzzle that led to countless hours of investigation and transnational archival research. In the course of pursuing their investigation, the lawyers' main goal sought to discover the whereabouts of these withheld back wages and identify legal avenues to force those in possession of the savings accountable to the original bracero contracts. In the early years of this research, Bracero Pro-A had more contact with Hughes, Socol, Piers, Resnick and Dym, but by the time Joshua Karsh began working on the case in 1999, contact between the lawyers and activists had dwindled. For Karsh there did seem to be a disjuncture between the U.S. class action suit and the social movement headed by bracero organizations.

One of the first major challenges to the case was the statute of limitations, but the law firm got past this hurdle. They proposed and passed a statute at the General Assembly in California stating that any claims filed by December 2005 would be deemed timely. This statute allowed them the opportunity to get past the statute of limitations and present the case in the U.S. District Court in the Northern District court of California in San Francisco. Although they could have chosen to file the case in various district courts across the country, they chose Northern California because of its liberal reputation. They proceeded with a lawsuit against Wells Fargo because this bank had at the time been responsible with deducting and holding 10% of braceros' wages. Despite this, the case was dismissed on August 23, 2002, after Judge Charles R. Breyer found that lawyers

³⁶⁶ Personal conversation with Joshua Karsh on November 3, 2009 in Chicago, Illinois.

failed to state a claim against the bank.³⁶⁷ Lawyers of the firm attempted to overturn the ruling, but in June 2003 Judge Breyer claimed that his ruling stood.³⁶⁸ Wells Fargo provided the evidence that they transferred the funds to the Mexican government through the Banco Nacional de Crédito Rural.

The law firm proceeded with the lawsuit, believing they could hold accountable the Banco Nacional de Crédito Rural and the Patronato del Ahorro Nacional. They presented the case to Judge Charles R. Breyer, who needed to determine what body of law applied to this case: Would it be Mexican law, international law, or California state law? Judge Breyer explained the complexity of the case: "Defendants Banco Nacional de Credito Rural, S.A. and Patronato del Ahorro Nacional move for dismissal arguing that the exercise of personal jurisdiction over them would be unconstitutional. Plaintiffs reply that, as instrumentalities of Mexico, the defendant banks are not 'persons' within meaning of Due Process Clause."³⁶⁹ On March 30, 2005, Judge Breyer thought it best to dismiss the case in favor Mexican law. He goes on to state:

The Court agrees with defendants that Mexico has a more significant relationship to the parties and the alleged wrongs. Although the labor producing the savings funds was performed in the United States (and partially in California), plaintiffs were at the time of employment Mexican citizens who, pursuant to the braceros' individual contracts, were required to return to Mexico in order to recover the funds. Defendants are, of course, located in Mexico and the alleged refusal to return the savings funds is occurring in Mexico. Taken together both the parties and the claimed wrongs have a more significant relationship with Mexico than with California.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Whitaker, Barbara. "Judge Dismisses Mexican Laborers' Suit for Savings Taken from Pay in 40's." New York Times August 30, 2002.

³⁶⁸ Driscoll, Barbara. "The 10% Solution: Bracero Program Saving Account Controversy." ReVista Harvard Review of Latin America. Fall 2003.

³⁶⁹ Memorandum and order Granting Mexican Defendants' Motion to Dismiss. March 30, 2005

³⁷⁰ Memorandum and order Granting Mexican Defendants' Motion to Dismiss. March 30, 2005.

Through Mexican law, the law firm would have little recourse because the Mexican statute of limitations could limit legal resolution in that country. Lawyer Joshua Karsh feared taking the case through the Mexican juridical system because they found very few allies with the experience to take the case to trial in Mexico.³⁷¹ Luckily, Judge Breyer stated that California held an interest in the outcome as it is still home to a significant population affected by the case. This statement provided the cornerstone for the firm to return to court and argue that the case needed to be heard in the California under state law because the outcome bore significant consequences for Californian residents.

The law firm began negotiations with the Mexican federal government, and on October 10, 2008, it received preliminary approval from the federal court for the settlement. Mexican government would admit no wrongdoing, but offered braceros who worked in the United States from 1942 to 1946 an opportunity to register for the same compensation their Mexican counterparts received. A registration period was set from October 23, 2008 to January 5, 2009. As long as U.S. braceros met the requirements established in Mexico, but had not already registered with the *Secretaría de Gobernación*, they were eligible to receive this money in the U.S.

On February 6, 2009, a fairness hearing took place in the United States District Court of Northern California. The members of the class action lawsuit were given the opportunity to voice any objections to the settlement. Legal adviser for the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Joel Hernández stated: “We are happy that we were able to reach a settlement agreement with the plaintiffs. We think it's very important to reach that stage in order to make it possible that any potential applicant may file an application for

³⁷¹ Personal conversation with Joshua Karsh on November 3, 2009 in Chicago, IL.

social support.”³⁷² The media coverage of this settlement, as well as the official website for the bracero legal representation, claim that those eligible for monetary compensation are braceros who worked from 1942 to 1946. But according to Verónica Cortez, legal assistant for the law firm Hughes, Socol, Piers, Resnick & Dym, the Mexican government successfully sought to exclude the claims of braceros who came from 1946 to 1964 as part of this class action suit.³⁷³ Mexican officials asked that this request not be publicized, for fear of facing an overwhelming number of plaintiffs in the suit. Furthermore, the Mexican government continues to frame the monetary compensation as social support since the meager \$3,500 represented much less than the actual 10% of the wages garnished between this period.

Faces of Bracero Justice

Despite conflicts within the Bracero Justice Movement, many older members of the bracero community feel that it has inspired and changed the way they see themselves. As Asamblea Nacional de Exbraceros’s Luz Rivera explains, “We are a horizontal assembly, not a vertical organization, this requires more work to organize and mobilize, but this way we think that braceros participate in all of the decision making process.”³⁷⁴ She points toward the varied organizing styles within the larger movement, and the ways in which her organization strove to include braceros within their decision-making process. Motivated and empowered, many elderly participants in the movement travel

³⁷² Belluck, Pam. "Settlement Will Allow Thousands of Mexican Laborers in U.S. To Collect Back Pay." *New York Times* October 15, 2008.

³⁷³ Personal Communication with Verónica Cortez on January 8, 2009 in Chicago IL.

³⁷⁴ Cueva, Jesus Ramirez. "El Engaño Se Repite." *La Jornada*, Febrero 15, 2004. Original: "*Somos una asamblea horizontal, no una organización vertical, eso cuesta más trabajo para organizarse y para movilizarse, pero así creemos que los braceros participan de todo el proceso de toma de decisiones*".

throughout Mexico to attend protests and meetings. They board buses or car pool together in order to hear the latest news on the case and to pressure the government to make amends.

Braceros such as Antonio Aragón found a place in the movement, and followed the gains and the pitfalls of the movement. Initially he was drawn to the movement's efforts to recuperate the wages he lost while working as a bracero. Aragón's father had pulled Aragón from the agricultural fields at a young age and sent him to military school in Oaxaca City. But his father, having departed for the United States as a bracero, could send only sporadic support. His mother alone could not pay his tuition in school in Oaxaca, and so he returned to his small town of Arazola and decided to follow in his father's footsteps. Aragón then found himself working in the unfamiliar fields of California. Decades later, Aragón ascended to leadership roles in Bracero Pro-A quickly. In the first stage of his involvement, he was the secretary of his local chapter. Then the head of the chapter ran for president of his town and left the organization. Along with many others in Bracero Pro-A, Aragón felt betrayed and used. He thought that this organizer had utilized the Bracero Pro-A as a platform for his own political gain. Aragón then ran to become head of his local chapter and currently holds this position.³⁷⁵ He and his local group were part of several critical protests by Bracero Pro-A.

³⁷⁵ Interview with Antonio Aragón for the Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on July 2, 2008 in Oaxaca, Oaxaca.



Antonio Aragón ³⁷⁶

These protests changed the way he saw his legacy as a bracero, as well as gender relations in and outside of the movement. His children watched television avidly, as he was part of the widely broadcast first protest at the Fox ranch. They sobbed when they saw him, but Aragón was not fearful. During that specific protest, his group from Oaxaca did not permit women's participation. Aware of the danger and potential violence that erupted during some protests, Aragón thought it inappropriate to take women. Even though other Bracero Pro-A groups included women in these actions, Aragón thought that the women in his group could get hurt and it was too risky. It was in another protest that Aragón changed his view on the role of women in the organization. They were protesting in the *Oficinas de Gobernación* and he felt again that the women could be put in harm's way. He asked the women in his group, Rufina and Isabel, to wait for them at the bus station. They refused to go to the bus station and stated that women followed

³⁷⁶ Photograph taken by Keisha Banks on July 2, 2008 in Oaxaca, Oaxaca.

their husbands during the time of the revolution, and that if the state were to kill their fellow men, they would also have to be killed. The women decided to carry the most attention-grabbing banner, proclaiming, “*No Más Atole con El Pan.*”³⁷⁷

Regional Coordinator Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba became involved with Bracero Pro-A through her father’s activism in the organization. When her father first became involved, she and her siblings would laugh at him because they thought it was a futile fight. Many older people were beaten at protests and she told her siblings to let him go “so that he can get a beating.”³⁷⁸ In one instance, her father returned beaten from a protest. But her father also asked her to help him because he could not read or write, and she then felt compelled to meet Ventura Gutierrez. Gutierrez explained to her and her brother what the program was about. The organization was in need of someone that they could trust because a previous organizer had already betrayed the organization. Rubio Leyba claimed that this organizer had received a bribe from Banrural. In 2000, she committed to supporting the movement. In the first phase of her involvement, she was organizing out of her home. She spent much of her own funds to keep her chapter of the organization running. Eventually, she and her husband thought that the organization was becoming too much of a financial burden. Rubio Leyba was economically drained, primarily because of the traveling she undertook to organize braceros in her region. She then traveled longer distances to converse and plan with other regional coordinators during meetings. Eventually the bracero community in her region decided to implement

³⁷⁷ *Atole* is a warm traditional beverage and *pan* has a double of bread and the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN). They chant this to point out that they will no longer be accepting PAN rhetoric and washing it down with a warm beverage.

³⁷⁸ Interview with Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba: “. . . *para que le pegen un friega.*”

monthly dues. This money was used to rent office space and to subsidize the travel costs associated with organizing. The office space is primarily used for clerical work associated with the movement, but Rubio Leyba points out that it also functions as a social space for this community. Many braceros use the space to drink coffee and converse with each other for hours.



Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba³⁷⁹

One of the most difficult aspects of the movement for her is the toll it has taken on her family. She often leaves her handicapped son with her husband and her mother, while her other children at times accompany her to her regional meetings with bracero communities. She tells them not to call her “mom” in public because she fears for their safety. Rubio Leyba has suffered greatly because of the amount of state surveillance encroaching on her public and personal life. She claims that she has had individuals watch her when she left home or work. For some time, she worried that at any moment she could be detained.

While she committed to serving these men and aiding them in their struggle, she found that some treated her disrespectfully. A few acted aggressively towards her,

³⁷⁹ Photograph of Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba in December 2007 taken by Mireya Loza.

treating her as if she were the one who stole their wages. One bracero in particular was so demanding that she decided to return his dues and ask him to leave the organization. After some time, he returned, apologetic for his behavior. Some of her work also involves assessing what role is best for a particular bracero to adopt in the movement. She states that some do not like church, while others attend the memorial masses that she organizes for braceros who have passed away. Others, she points out, are not in good health and cannot bear the long trips to protest in other area. These protests are attended by individuals in good health; those that she calls her “guerilleros” or warriors. When contemplating the gender dynamic within the organization, Rubio Leyba said that many men leave the responsibility to the women. She said chuckling, “how generous.” Then continued on “. . .the men are always more fearful.”³⁸⁰ She stated that women became involved in the movement because, “when you weren’t a daughter of a bracero, you were a sister of a bracero, and a family of a bracero.”³⁸¹ These commitments place many of the women in key roles during the protest. Rubio Leyba claimed that during one such protest, “Almost all of us in front were women.”³⁸² Through all of these struggles and threats to her organizing efforts she admits, “I don’t fear disappearing.”³⁸³ The gains that the organization made fills her with pride: “People used to tell me that I was going to

³⁸⁰ Interview with Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on December 21, 2007 in Merida, Yucatán.

Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba: “*Les dejan la responsabilidad a uno, los hombres, son tan amble*” (humor) “*siempre el hombre es mas miedoso.*”

³⁸¹ Ibid.

Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba: “*Cuando no eras hija braceros eras hermana de bracero y eras familiar de bracero.*”

³⁸² Ibid.

Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba: “*Casi las que estábamos en frente somos todas mujeres.*”

³⁸³ Ibid.

Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba: “*No tengo miedo desaparecer.*”

revive the dead, and that you can't revive that.”³⁸⁴ Her work for the BJM proved that she could revive an issue that the Mexican government had deliberately forgotten and buried. Women such as Rubio Leyba forced the government to confront its past and thus revived the dead.

Conclusion

Despite the distance, braceros such as Antonio Aragón in southern Mexico worked alongside women such as Rubio Leyba in the northern areas and US based organizers like Ventura Gutierrez. They emailed, called each other and organized transnational meetings. Organizations, such as La Asamblea Nacional de Ex-braceros, La Unión Binacional de Exbraceros, and La Alianza de Ex Braceros del Norte also contributed to the seemingly impossible gains made by the BJM. They called attention to the exploitation experienced by the braceros and the injustice inherent in the denial of their back wages. Though recovery efforts are unfortunately incomplete, and activists are still working towards the full recovery of wages for all braceros, the BJM did not only result in these partial victories of monetary and social resources for bracero communities. The movement further called attention to the historical importance of the Bracero Program and the contributions braceros made to Mexico and the U.S. The “official” acknowledgement of the program triggered community examinations of the hardships and exploitation endured by braceros. In addition, the BJM provided a platform and multiple avenues for bracero families to connect with each other and publicly acknowledge the impact of the Bracero Program on their lives. Although bracero

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

Alba Nidia Rubio Leyba: “*Antes me decían a mí que yo iba a revivir un muerto, y que eso no se revivía.*”

communities could not right the wrongs committed against braceros in the past, they could work towards a more just treatment of the plight of these men in the present. Through the Bracero Justice Movement, entire families fought alongside one another for the purpose of correcting the injustice experienced by braceros and their lingering consequences. The image of a generation of single migratory laborers, cast adrift into the North and forgotten in the South, was transformed by the movement into a population of men attached to local but also transborder communities, fiercely committed to protecting the contemporary interest of these guest laborers.

EPILOGUE

“Hubo momentos de gusto, alegría, conocimientos, pero tambien hubo momentos de tristsa y de ser imponente [impotente] por no poder hacer algo para remediar la situacion.”

“There moments of joy, happiness, knowledge but there was also moments of sadness of being impotente because I could not do anything to remedy the situation.”

--Felipe Muñoz Pavón³⁸⁵

On September 9, 2009, the exhibition *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942-64* opened at the National Museum of American History (NMAH). Peter Liebhold, curator at NMAH described the exhibit as, “modest but powerful.”³⁸⁶ It consisted of fifteen free-standing banners with text and images, and two audio stations. The banners contained bilingual text. At the NMAH curators added objects and additional images to the opening show that would not travel to other venues hosting the exhibit. The team of curators working on *Bittersweet Harvest* consciously decided to simplify the exhibit so that more institutions could afford the shipping and travel costs associated with hosting. They suggested that host institutions collect objects that illustrate local bracero history to display when hosting *Bittersweet Harvest*. The topic of the show and the affordable cost stirred so much interest in the exhibition that the NMAH created a duplicatet to simultaneously travel to additional venues. Institutions in the Southwest, South, Midwest, and East coast signed on to host the exhibit that will travel until 2014.

³⁸⁵ Interview with Felipe Muñoz Pavón for Bracero History Archive by Alma Carrillo on November 8, 2008 in Chicago IL.

³⁸⁶ Informal conversation with Peter Liebhold on September 30, 2009 in Washington, DC.



Bittersweet Harvest at the National Museum of American History

Some who attended the opening of the exhibit felt moved by the Leonard Nadel images and the objects, such as bunk beds collected from a labor camp which house braceros. Labor Secretary Hilda Solis sobbed during the opening of the exhibit as she stated, “My father was a bracero.”³⁸⁷ The audience comment books for the exhibition are filled with statements from visitors whose uncles, father, and grandfathers who were braceros.³⁸⁸ The guests saw the NMAH taking up and legitimating their own family histories. Student Teresa Ramirez viewed the NMAH shortly after *Bittersweet Harvest* opened and she felt surprised to see an exhibit depicting a controversial topic. The photographs and text moved her as she imagined her own bracero grandfather working agricultural fields in the U.S.³⁸⁹ She saved photographs of the exhibit on her camera for months after her visit in an effort remember her grandfather, as she recognized she knew little of what he endured as a bracero.

³⁸⁷ Clough, Wayne G. *From the Castle: Our Plan*. Smithsonian Magazine, December 2009.

³⁸⁸ *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942-64* comment books.

³⁸⁹ Personal Conversation with Teresa Ramirez on October 16, 2009 in Irvine, California.



Bittersweet Harvest at the National Museum of American History

A smaller number of visitors expressed an outrage in the comment books that the NMAH would create an exhibit about, “illegal” Mexicans. Despite the carefully chosen words by curators such as Stephen Velasquez, the contribution of these braceros was lost when visitors did not read the text or listened to the audio stations. Braceros became conflated with any and all undocumented migration from Mexico. To these visitors the nuances of the guest worker experience was lost. Although many visitors enjoyed the exhibit, there existed a small group that felt insulted by the presences of this exhibit in the nation’s history museum. Their strong reaction suggests the ways in which Latinos have become conflated with issues of immigration. For some, the racialization of the issue of immigration is currently so strong that the nuances of stories can be lost.

The exhibit was just one product of the Bracero History Project, the other tangible product was the Bracero History Archive. The Bracero History Archive is a bilingual online digital archive where visitors can view the documents and photographs of bracero

communities and hear their oral histories. The archive contains over 700 oral histories and thousands of digitized documents and photographs.³⁹⁰ The legacy left behind by braceros and their families is seen and heard in the archive for communities across borders. In these oral histories guest workers and their families talk about their fears, their hopes, and their thoughts on what they lived. It was through public collection and countless discussion with bracero communities that I developed my topics of my dissertation. Conducting oral histories for a public archive made me very aware of the lasting nature of these recording and reminded me that this process was not about solely collecting information for my dissertation but about preserving as many stories as possible and covering as many topics as possible.

I explore the themes of my dissertation through interdisciplinary case studies grounded in past and present day struggles of bracero communities. The first chapter examines the historic transnational activism of braceros through the organization, Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de Mexico en los Estados Unidos. I argue that the Alianza left long-lasting effects on the role of undocumented Mexican labor within contemporary union organizing in the U.S. The second chapter explores the racial and ethnic diversity within Bracero communities through indigenous populations. Employing oral histories of Mixtec, Zapotec, Purhepecha, and Mayan communities, this chapter exposes the ethnic, inter- and intra-racial tensions during the program and explains them in the context of the complex processes of nation-building in Mexico and the U.S. The third chapter examines gender relations among bracero families, constructions of masculinity, and the forms of sexual desire among braceros working in the U.S. My fourth chapter is an ethnographic

³⁹⁰ Currently the Bracero History Archive and University of Texas' U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project are the largest Latino oral history projects in the US.

chapter on the transnational efforts of the contemporary Bracero Justice Movement. The main goal of this movement is to recuperate the back wages taken in the form of a 10% deduction of each paycheck from every bracero. Together these chapters explore the lasting impact of this historic guest worker program on the social formation and cultural practices of contemporary transnational communities.

Archives

Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City
Archivo Historico del Estado de Guanajuato
Bracero History Archive
Galarza Papers, Stanford University Special Collections
National Archives, College Park
National Archives, San Bruno

Newspapers and Magazines

Agricultural Life
Borderlines
El Mexicano
El Paso Times
El Siglo de Torreon
El Universal
Indy Media
La Jornada
The Monterey County Herald
New York Times
Smithsonian Magazine

Oral Histories

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Ayala, Alonso. Interview by Mireya Loza for Bracero History Archive on July 9, 2008 in Cansahcab, Yucatán.

Barocio Ceja, Luis. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 28, 2008 in Jiquilpan, Michoacán.

Bentura Cortez, Audelia. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 26, 2008 in Janitzio, Michoacán.

Delgado Garfía Tiburcio. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 27, 2008 in Patzcuaro, Michoacán.

Domínguez, Pedro. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 27, 2008 in Patzcuaro, Michoacán.

Flores, Felix. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Mireya Loza on June 26, 2008 in Janitzio, Michoacán.

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Martínez, Sebastian. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Karim Ley Alarcón on November 12, 2005 in El Paso, Texas.

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Villareal, Severiano. Interview for Bracero History Archive by Verónica Cortez on May 22, 2006 in Blythe, California.

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