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A History of The Bracero Program as an Agent of Transnational Modernity in the 20th Century

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January 23rd, 2024

Abstract

The Bracero Program was an agreement devised between Mexico and the United States which provided a state-sanctioned avenue for Mexican men to work as contract laborers in the United States. It was originally intended to alleviate the World War II labor shortage in the United States, but would continue past the war until 1964. Its longevity was due to the central role it played in bringing Mexico and the United States into a modern, transnational relationship. I aim to examine the relationship between the two nations in two contexts: an historical-economic one, and an ethnographic one. These lenses are two sides of the same coin, in that they are both ways of viewing the change that modernity and transnationalism brought to Mexico and America.

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From 1942 to 1964, the United States and Mexican governments collaborated on a project called the Bracero Program. The program would contract Mexican men to do agricultural work in American farms, usually for one growing season at a time. Originally, it was intended to supplement the American workforce, depleted by the World War II draft. But it continued into the 1960s, profoundly shaping subjectivities in both Mexico and the United States. Specifically, the subjectivities created by the program were defined by their modern and transnational nature--created by forces from both above and below.

From above, the Bracero Program was a collaboration between nations constructing new economic structures in the age of modernity. The United States was in need of an expendable workforce to fill wartime labor shortages, especially in agriculture and railwork. The Bracero Program gave the United States economy more flexibility as its core labor pool transitioned from agricultural work, to factory work, to post-industrial mechanization. In Mexico, bracero farmers would return with knowledge of modern agricultural techniques which were then integrated into the Mexican economy.

From below, the program created myriad and oftentimes conflicting cultural impacts in both of the involved nations. In America, the public grappled with the use of foreign laborers; Mexican culture was welcomed by some, while others rejected the perceived threat of stolen labor. In Mexico, the absence of migrant working fathers forced women into the workforce--encouraging more progressive views regarding the role of women in the family. Braceros themselves often found excitement and adventure in the program, despite working in worse conditions and for lower wages than their American counterparts.

A History of the Bracero Program

In order to understand the significance of the Bracero Program for both the Mexican and United States governments, it is necessary to have a cursory understanding of the history of Mexican-American relations prior to World War II. In the latter half of the 19th century, both nations implemented policies which would stimulate economic growth and industrialization. Their shared striving for progress would both differentiate and unite the two within the context of an increasingly capitalist global economy. Mexico was in the pursuit of a more autonomous national economy--developing their industrial sector and opposing the dominating presence of American companies. However, the same forces of modernization which developed Mexico were increasingly connecting the North American continent through expedient trade networks and imperialism. This push-pull dynamic became essential to the two nations' relationship in the 19th century and would set the stage for the Bracero Program in the 20th.

In Mexico, the era of modern economic progress was first defined by the presidency of Porfirio Diaz, who was in office from 1876 to 1910. His policies expanded the Mexican industrial sector, prioritizing railroad construction and the conversion of the large peasant population into industrial workers.[1] In the United States, industrialization was so widespread that it had no substantial peasant population to draw upon. Therefore, it was constantly necessary to have a surplus army of laborers to manage potential work shortages. Crucially, this army needed to be dispensable enough to adapt to the vacillations of the market--present during periods of high labor demand, but absent when it experienced a glut. The most convenient solution was immigrant workers. In the former half of the 19th century, Chinese migrants filled this niche, working primarily on American railroads. But in reaction to their presence slowly transitioning to a more permanent one, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was enacted--prohibiting Chinese immigration to the United States. Japanese immigrants subsequently filled the hole left by the Chinese, and found a similar fate in the 'Gentleman's Agreement' of 1907.[2] As soon as immigrant groups threatened to integrate fully into the labor market (not just as a short-term fix for a shortage), public mistrust prompted governmental restriction.[3]

Come World War I, Mexican immigrants would be the next group to experience that same cycle of enticement and exile. The draft sent America's able-bodied men abroad, creating an immediate need to replace their peacetime productivity.[4] The

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[1] Chantel Renee Rodriguez, "Health on the Line: The Politics of Citizenship and the Railroad Bracero Program of World War II" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013), 43-44.

[2] The "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1907 was a treaty signed by the United States and Japan which forbade Japan from issuing passports to common laborers.

[3] Gilberto Cárdenas, "United States Immigration Policy toward Mexico: An Historical Perspective," *Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review*, 2 (1975): 68.

[4] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* xii.

American Government responded by creating legal opportunities for Mexican men to enter the country for work; immigration policies which were generally meant to restrict immigration to the United States exempted the Mexican population in one way or another. The Immigration Law of 1917 placed restrictions on immigrants--an eight-dollar tax and a literacy test--but included a proviso which stipulated that immigrant workers could be admitted under "necessity." And it was on that basis that the United States began to receive large numbers of Mexicans to work in agriculture and on railroads--a wave of immigration that is often referred to as the "First Bracero Program" in bracero literature.[5] After the end of World War I in 1918, Mexicans laborers were in large part replaced by Filipinos but did not disappear totally from the American market.[6] The Quota Act of 1924 established a quota system for United States immigration, meaning that for each immigrant-sending country, a numerical cap was determined to limit the number of immigrants admitted to the United States. Excluded from the Quota Act were countries in the Western Hemisphere, most notably Mexico. Proponents of this exemption, and Mexican migrant labor in general, came from diverse perspectives: capitalists wanted a reserve of cheap labor, the Department of Agriculture needed more labor for reclamation projects, and the State Department wanted to maintain good Pan-American relations.[7]

American demand for labor and the primacy of Pan-Americanism were temporarily interrupted by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Mexican immigrant laborers were scapegoated by the public--blamed, due to their large numbers, for the devaluation of American labor. As a result, they were deported in mass numbers from the United States.

Then, in 1938, Mexico nationalized their oil, sullying the political relations between the two nations. Movement of workers across the border resultinglyabated.[8] The forces of modernization were driving the two countries apart--each increasingly interested in their own self-sufficiency and growing economies. But the rift would not last long, becoming ideologically and economically untenable in the face of a looming world war.

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[5] Rodriguez, "Health on the Line," 57-58.

[6] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* xii.

[7] Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy," 69.

[8] Rodriguez, "Health on the Line," 95-96.

With World War II (1939-1945) came another major labor shortage in the United States, and like World War I, "the Mexican peasant was called upon."[9] This time, in an official bilateral framework: the Bracero Program. Conditioned by around 50 years of significant labor relations, Mexico and the United States signed onto an agricultural agreement on August 4th, 1942 that would officially regulate Mexican migrant labor in the United States. The program, originally planned to terminate in 1947, would end up persisting past World War II and until 1964.[10] During that time, it would issue 4.5 million work contracts to aspirant Mexican men.[11] And although the specific terms of contracts would differ from employer to employer, they all adhered to (in theory, at least) an exceptional set of standards put forth by the original 1942 agreement. The chief stipulations are simplified elegantly by María Herrera-Sobek in *The Bracero Experience: Elitelore versus Folklore* as follows:

1. Mexican laborers shall not be subject to the military draft.
2. Discrimination against braceros is forbidden.
3. They shall be guaranteed transportation, food, hospitalization, and repatriation.
4. They shall not be used to displace other workers nor to lower wages.
5. Contracts made by employee and employer will be made under the supervision of the Mexican government and shall be written in Spanish.
6. Expenses incurred for transportation and lodgings from point of origin to destination shall be paid by the employed who will be reimbursed by sub-employer. [12] [13]

Although the main catalyst for the 1942 agreement was the shortage of labor in the United States, the benefits of the Bracero Program were bilateral. The above stated conditions guaranteed that braceros would experience agricultural work as it existed in the United States--wage labor. Because the Bracero Program essentially relied on the Mexican peasant, or *campesino*, braceros had often grown up on family farms without a wage-system. Enlisting the most backward part of the Mexican population meant that braceros could be used as agents of modernity upon their return. Herrera-Sobek quotes Gambio C. León saying that the braceros had “stimulated social change in communities that seemed destined to be changeless.”[14] And that was the benefit that Mexico would ultimately reap from the program--one perhaps more salient than the influx of labor received by the United States.

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[9] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* xiii.

[10] Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy," 77.

[11] Madelina Cordia, "They Came for the Harvest: The Bracero Program in Jackson County, Oregon, 1951–1955," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2019): 151.

[12] In the terms of the contract, the word "sub-employer" refers to the individual growers who contract braceros. The word "employer," on the other hand, refers to the Farm Security Administration of the Department of Agriculture of the United States of America.

[13] Maria Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience: Elitelore versus Folklore* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1979), xiii.

On April 29th, 1943, the first amendment was made to the 1942 agreement when Mexico and the United States agreed to extend the Bracero Program beyond agricultural work to American railroads;[15] by Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States had a shortage of over one hundred thousand rail workers.[16] Given the extreme shortage, the United States was happy to take as many workers as possible. But where American companies expected to contract six thousand workers, Mexico only expected around three hundred.[17] In the final agreement, the maximum number of Mexican rail workers to be contracted was set at fifty thousand--illustrating the dominance of United States policy in the bargaining process.[18]

United States hegemony had defined the extant history of Mexican workers on railroads; from 1910 onward, railroads in Mexico were funded by United States companies to promote commerce and the import of resources to Mexico. This would only become more important with the coming world wars. In fact, the Pullman Company was one of the few American companies to remain in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920 despite the strong opposition to foreign intervention.[19] The success of these United States-funded railroads, of course, was dependent upon Mexican labor. And from the beginning of the Mexican industrialization project in 1876, that labor had been sourced from the *campesinos* of the Mexican countryside. The bracero agreement was only an extension of a long-standing goal to modernize the most feudal elements of the nation. “The engine of modernity had created a modern subject--the migrant worker.”

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[14] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 125.
[15] Cardenas, “United States Immigration Policy,” 77.
[16] Rodriguez, “Health on the Line,” 105.
[17] Rodriguez, “Health on the Line,” 109.
[18] Cardenas, “United States Immigration Policy,” 77.
[19] Rodriguez, “Health on the Line,” 49-46.

The intertwinement of United States and Mexican commerce was an essential aspect of the Pan-American home front ideology propagated during World War II, and the braceros were the physical agents of this material tie. Braceros on the railroad facilitated the movement of resources between countries, and braceros in agriculture carried valuable information when it came to farming. In both cases, the intention was that more modern ideas and commodities be imported to Mexico. By the end of World War II, Mexico was experiencing a “green revolution,” meaning their agricultural sector saw widespread modernization and increased productive power. Successfully moving towards larger farms, they became better equipped to feed their rapidly growing population. The causes of this revolution were multitudinous, but braceros were certainly one; Mexican men would get experience with advanced farming techniques in the United States and bring them home. The intentionality of their effect was demonstrated by a wartime provision that withheld 10% of braceros’ wages until they returned home, where they were then encouraged to use the extra money to buy farming equipment.[20]

It is worth nothing that although the flow of information between the United States and Mexico is traditionally conceived of to be from the former to the latter, the inverse also occurred. One bracero recounted how his method of castrating bulls differed from that of the American farmers; instead of using a knife, he would pull on the bovine testicles. The method that the bracero used was preferable because it did not put the bull at risk for infection; the standardized American ways of farming were not always superior to those of the Mexican peasants.[21]

World War II marked the first stage of the Bracero Program, and perhaps the period in which America most immediately needed its surplus labor. However the presence of braceros in America during the war was relatively little. During the war, braceros made up 5-10% of United States farm laborers and were limited to contracts of six months in length as stipulated by the 1942 agricultural agreement. (Although, braceros would often return year after year, even requesting to return to the same farms.)[22] In 1947, the original bracero agreement expired--ending the first phase of the program. But the program had become popular amongst United States growers, and they continued to contract Mexican migrants under the Immigration Act of 1917.[23]

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[20] Rodriguez, “Health on the Line,” 31.

[21] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 61.

The Bracero Program had become a staple in farming--braceros were trusted by growers and were motivated to return year after year. So in 1951, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Public Law 78, under which the Bracero Program would continue for the remainder of its existence. The law was an amendment to the earlier Agricultural Act of 1949, which outlined the responsibilities of the state and the Commodity Credit Corporation in regulating and stabilizing the prices of agricultural commodities.[24] The Bracero Program was thus integrated long-term into the American mission to regulate its economy via state intervention--an essential aspect of modernism in the 20th century. Public Law 78 itself maintained the benefits originally afforded to braceros: chiefly, that transportation and subsistence be provided by employers and that braceros be legally allowed to enter the United States as a contract worker.[25] The most notable difference between the original 1942 agreement and the 1951 law was that the latter, no longer operating under a wartime labor shortage, took extra stipulations in an attempt to protect native United States labor. In the 1942 Agricultural Agreement, one clause reads: "Mexicans entering the United States under this understanding shall not be employed to displace other workers, or for the purpose of reducing rates of pay previously established," but this is not elaborated upon.[26] Section 503 in Public Law 78 reads:

> No workers recruited under this title shall be available for employment in any area unless the Secretary of Labor has determined and certified that (1) sufficient domestic workers who are able, willing, and qualified are not available at the time and place needed to perform the work for which such workers are to be employed, (2) the employment of such workers will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers similarly employed, and (3) reasonable

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[22] Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*, (Chapel Hill N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 23.
[23] Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy," 77.
[24] Agricultural Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81-439, 63 Stat, 1051.
[25] Act of July 12, 1951, Pub. L. No. 88-607, 78 Stat, 119, 119-121.
[26] Agreement of August 4, 1942, 56 Stat, 1759.

> efforts have been made to attract domestic workers for such employment at wages and standard hours of work comparable to those offered to foreign workers.[27]

This section both anticipates and responds to the growing public opposition to imported labor in the United States. In 1959, a man named David K. Webster wrote to the New York Times that the Bracero Program's imported labor, cut wages and contributed to the fall of single-family farms. He declared it "one of the worst disgraces" of the time that "a nation as rich as [the United States] should take advantage of its neighbor's poverty," putting "native Americans" at a disadvantage to the end of farming for a steeper profit.[28] Webster's sentiment reflects an antimodern conservatism in its clinging to antiquated modes of farming; given the rapidly increasing United States population, the proletarianization[29] of farming was a national necessity. But he was also correct to identify the way in which the Bracero Program allowed growers to overlook local labor.

Growers often preferred bracero workers to local labor, even after the wartime labor shortage had subsided. This was for two reasons. The first was the braceros' relative willingness to do hard jobs. The second was that they were contractually prohibited from engaging in labor organizing. Braceros could be used as strikebreakers, significantly hindering the movement to unionize farmworkers. And although in several instances braceros would break the terms of their contract to advocate for better working conditions, they generally preferred not so as to avoid deportation. In fact, growers would often support braceros so that they could work undocumented in between growing seasons.[30] This phenomenon was scorned by the United States government, especially because braceros who stayed as undocumented immigrants would often attempt to arrange illegal border crossings for their families. In response, the United States censored letters to or from braceros if they contained content that tempted illegal border crossing.[31]

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[27] Act of July 12, 1951, Pub. L. No. 88-607, 78 Stat, 119, 120.

[28] David K. Webster, "Importing Farm Labor," *New York Times,* September 9th, 1959.

[29] What is meant by "proletarianization" is that workers on farms became free laborers--as opposed to sharecroppers or even subsistence farmers, as was more common in the earlier part of the modern era.

[30] Ibid, 29-30.

[31] Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu : Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014), 129.

In an ultimate attempt to eradicate illegal activity and dispel Mexican immigrant presence, the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service carried out "Operation Wetback" in 1954. The term "wetback" referred to Mexicans who waded across the Rio Grande when illegally entering the United States, and had come into usage over "bracero" or "Mexican national" in the early 1950s.[32] Although braceros on contract held legal residence in the US, the operation still targeted those braceros who stayed in the United States illegally, along with their families. According to a report by the Immigration and Naturalization Serivce in 1954, Operation Wetback apprehended 1,075,168 illegal Mexicans. And the apprehensions would continue through the 50s, removing as much as one sixth of the Mexican population in the United States.[33]

Despite the large number of deportations by Border Patrol, the Bracero Program persisted. Public Law 78 was extended a total of six times, and the peak of the program wasn't until 1959--when braceros composed 25% of the United States agricultural workforce. [34] [35] Braceros brought a distinct discipline and initiative to work on American farms, and would be consistently praised for their willingness to do the jobs that Americans often avoided. Fundamentally, though, the program relied on a shortage of labor in the United States and the desire for a flexible and dispensable workforce that could serve the needs of the modernizing nation. So following increased mechanization and public protest of surplus imported labor, the Bracero Program came to an eventual end in 1964.

The Relationship Between Transnationality and Modernity in the Bracero Program

Unlike most immigrant stories, the story of the bracero is one orchestrated from above. In a bilateral agreement, the United States and Mexican governments decided that the Bracero Program would be mutually beneficial for their respective countries and their 20th century developments. The intention was to bring modernization to Mexico, not Mexican culture to the United States--but the two processes proved to be inseparable. The Bracero Program became one of the most important examples of transnationalism in the 20th century. Equally important to an economic and historical analysis of transnational relationships is an experiential one--how did national economic relations manifest in the lives of braceros?

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[32] Cordia, "They Came for the Harvest," 165.
[33] Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy," 81.
[34] Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy," 78-79.
[35] Cohen, *Braceros*, 24.

There is a significant discrepancy between the way that the bracero experience was portrayed in popular culture and how braceros themselves report their experiences. The outside perspectives of the American left and the Mexican intellectual elite are particularly illustrative. Although the two differ, they are similar in one central way: they saw the bracero experience as one of submission and misery. Consequently, the bracero is made out to be somewhat of a wretched man--at the mercy of forces more powerful than he.

In the case of the American left, the Bracero Program became notorious for its exploitation and abuses of Mexican men. The director of the AFL-CIO Department of Legislation said that the bracero was "treated virtually as a commodity, to be imported and exported unilaterally by the grower."[36] The AFL-CIO also famously opposed the program because it provided strikebreakers on most farms. Historian James Cockcroft even argued that the program was part of a systematic attack on labor activism by the United States government.[37] The combination of pro-labor and anti-immigrant abuse stances made the Bracero Program a popular target of attack by the contemporary American left. In 1966, protest folk star Phil Ochs played his song "Bracero" live at Carnegie Hall in New York. *And the sun will bite your body, as the dust will draw you thirsty. While your muscles beg for mercy, bracero. In the shade of your sombrero, drop your sweat upon the soil. Like the fruit your youth can spoil, bracero.*[38]

In the case of the Mexican elite, their opposition to the Bracero Program grew largely out of the Mexican nationalism that was shaped in the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. In Agustín Yáñez's 1947 book *The Edge of the Storm*, he depicts life in an "hermetically closed" Mexican 1909 town. The Mexican men who leave to work in

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[36] Allan H. Ryskind, "End of the 'Bracero' Program," (*Human Events (Washington)*. Vol. 25. Washington, D.C: Human Events Inc, 1965).

[37] Cohen, *Braceros*, 30.

[38] Phil Ochs, "Bracero," Track 2 on *Phil Ochs in Concert,* Elektra Entertainment, 1966.

America and then return "undermine patriotism" by bringing back a totally different culture. "[T]hey come back with round-toed shoes, felt hats, wide-legged trousers, and shirts with wristbands and shiny cuff-links."[39] Although he depicts events before the impetus of the Bracero Program, Yáñez's portrayal of these Mexicans is almost certainly influenced by the equivalent of the year of publication, which was the bracero program. Braceros in Jesús Topete's 1949 book *Aventuras de un bracero* were similarly seen to be betraying the Mexican national attitude. The bracero would go to the United States, "where the hook with the dangling dollar was."[40] Topete, a bracero himself, shared negative memories of the farm labor: "You may feel like dying of heat and thirst, and from exhaustion, but if you can still move you have to continue working."[41] Although Topete undoubtedly shared valuable insights into the bracero experience, his account should be considered within the context of the politics surrounding the program. María Herrera-Sobek writes in *The Bracero Experience: Elitelore versus Folklore* that Topete's book failed to depict the bracero as fully human and was merely "another not very-well written novel of social protest."[42]

Both the American left and the Mexican intellectuals took a conservative stance in their oppositions to the Bracero Program; the program represented the ascent of modernization and, in America, the arrival of mechanization. In the United States, the protection of the working class was the primary concern. Although many anti-migrant-labor narratives in the United States hinged essentially on racism,[43] that racism derived from the fact that the United States had used immigrant labor in times of labor scarcity--a tactic which limited labor unions' ability to leverage labor demand against companies. Therefore per the AFL-CIO and James Cockcroft, the Bracero Program had concretely negative effects on American labor. Mexican intellectuals were similarly correct in saying that the Bracero Program was degrading national Mexican culture--the culture that braceros brought back was distinctly western and modern. Concerns brought against the Bracero Program, however, fundamentally resisted the change that global capitalism demanded--the mechanization of the United States workforce and the modernization of the Mexican economy. For the most part, the bracero himself possessed more agency, was more aware of the realities of the program than was depicted in popular culture.[44] And although it remains relevant to identify the abuses of the Bracero Program which allowed growers to exploit Mexican men, the program existed not by virtue of American greed but by the economic necessity of progress.

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[39] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 14-15.
[40] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 23.
[41] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 28.
[42] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 28.
[43] Cardenas, "United States Immigration Policy," 71.

The transnational economics of the program manifested in myriad ways in everyday bracero lives. Most obvious is the new commodities that braceros purchased for themselves and their families. Braceros were specifically encouraged to buy American commodities over the duration of their contracts, introducing braceros to new technology and lifestyles. In turn, Mexican companies would recreate American commodities for returning immigrants to buy at home.[45] In one instance, bracero Augustine Lopez bought for his wife Maria Elena Lopez "a new winter coat, pairs of shoes to comfortably complete day-to-day tasks and attend special family gatherings, a sewing machine to make her own dresses, warm and soft blankets to weather the winter months, and a record player for her to listen to her favorite musicians."[46] Some of these were simply luxuries that already existed in Mexico, but they signified a move towards a more modern and individualistic lifestyle. Raymondo Villa, who grew up working with and translating for braceros, recalls that braceros from the interior of Mexico would dress more traditionally. Less affected by United States influence, this looked like baggy clothing--not jeans or khakis, like Mexicans from close to the border. Many braceros could not even wear shoes."They were used to huaraches. The shoes and boots were too hard on their feet. They would blister pretty bad."[47]

The program also forced changes in Mexican lifestyle by challenging the traditional family structure. Women and children were specifically disallowed from coming to America, leaving millions of Mexican households without sons and fathers.[48] To further strain this dynamic, both braceros and their wives at home were discouraged from expressing longing to one another.[49] In order to care for their children without steady income from a husband, many women were forced into the workforce--mirroring the same dissolution of the family that was occuring in the contemporary United States.

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[44] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 74, 113.

[45] Cohen, *Braceros,* 32.

[46] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 153.

[47] Raymondo Villa, Interview by Richard Baquera, April 21, 2003.

[48] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 30.

In *Abrazando El Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border,* Ana Rosas tells the story of women and children at home through letter correspondence between braceros and their families. As stated above, the United States censored letters to and from braceros after 1942 in an attempt to prevent illegal border crossings by families of braceros. This meant that wives who wrote to their husbands, wanting to reunite, would often not receive replies. The effects were devastating for Mexican women, who were already encouraged through traditional Mexican culture to conceal feelings of love and longing. To be too open about their love was considered scandalous and undignified.[50]

Insofar as braceros were allowed to share their experiences with their loved ones back home, they were encouraged to do so through a prefabricated album called "El Tesoro del Bracero," or "The Treasure of the Bracero." Produced by a Washington DC printing company, the album had designated places to list things like the people braceros met, the food they ate for lunch, or the types of crops that they picked. It did not, however, provide room for the emotional complexities of the bracero experience--instead presenting a bracero life full of adventure and excitement.[51] The album generally did not sit well with braceros or their families, obviously directing the bracero narrative away from its transnational dimension. In the eyes of the US, the bracero should not change his surroundings or express emotion--he should serve to absorb American experience and culture and act as an agent of "Pan-Americanism" in Mexico.[52]

The widespread longing felt by families of braceros affected Mexican media, popularizing songs and films that portrayed the absence of fathers and sons. One such film was *Cartas a Eufemia*, or *Letters to Eufemia*, which portrayed the emotional turmoil felt by Mexican women waiting for their boyfriends or husbands to return. But it also cautioned women against acting too brazenly.[53] Contemporary Mexican folk music similarly focused upon themes of longing. Played on turntables, it gave braceros something to listen to that conveyed how they felt. Bracero Alejandra Ortega would listen to the song "El Hijo del Pueblo," or "The Rural Town's Son." Translated to English, it reads: *Ill-fated in love, I'm a drunk and a troubadour. But how many rich men want to live my life? To sing of poverty without feeling its pain.*[54] [55] Some corridos were even specifically written about the bracero experience. The song "Lamento de un Bracero" or, "Bracero's Lament" reads *Oh, my dark virgin! I do not want to die here, I want to die in my land.*[56]

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[49] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 26-27.

[50] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 129-148.

[51] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 142.

[52] Cohen, *Braceros*, 26.

The effects of Mexican culture on American cities, especially those in the Southwest, are well documented. But the equal effects felt in Mexican cities are more seldom discussed in American academia. In the context of the Bracero Program, it was the absence of Mexican men that shifted the culture of love and individualism in many Mexican towns. Then upon the return of the braceros, material aspects of Mexican culture were imported. This ultimately shaped a more modern Mexico.

Braceros in Medford, Oregon 1943-1964

In order to understand the bracero's subjective experience in the United States, it is useful to take a specific example. Jackson County, Oregon, of which Medford is the central city, is unique in that its braceros were consistently treated well. They could rely on fair wages, decent food and living conditions, and were valued by growers. Jackson County farming, most of which took place in Rogue Valley, centered around pear growing. The average work for a bracero would be picking the pears from ladders of 12 to 16 feet, with bags up to 45 pounds slung around their necks to carry the pears. Pears were a particularly delicate fruit, so the braceros were instructed to take special care when picking (despite being paid piecemeal, instead of by the hour). The average pay was 14 to 16 cents per box of pears.[57]

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[53] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 145.

[54] Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu,* 158-159.

[55] José Alfredo Jiménez, "El Hijo del Pueblo," Track 2 on side B of *Las 100 Clásicas, Vol. 1*. BMG Entertainment Mexico, 2000. Translated by Gabriel Topping.

[56] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 112.

[57] Cordia, "They Came for the Harvest," 156.

When not working, most braceros in the Pacific Northwest stayed in small housing units with several other men, although the specific configurations varied from farm to farm. In “Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest, 1943-1947: A Photographic Essay,” Erasmo Goamba includes several pictures of dwellings. Some were converted labor camps originally used to house German prisoners-of-war during World War II. Others were temporary 16 foot by 16 foot tents, made specifically for the braceros.[58] One picture from Medford, published in local bilingual newspaper *Opportunity News*, shows a picture of immigrant housing in the form of one long building composed of small adjacent rooms, each likely housing one or two men.[59] Raymondo Villa recalls yet another configuration from Lake Chelan, Washington--“two-room sheds” in which three braceros would live. They were given cots for sleeping and a small kitchen.[60] This is to say, that bracero housing in the Pacific Northwest was generally in the form of small rooms housing a few braceros, instead of converted barns or other more communal forms of housing as exhibited elsewhere. In Rogue Valley, all or most of the braceros would have lived in one of the above described configurations.

As promised by the terms of the program, braceros in Medford received subsidized lunch in the form of sack lunches from their employers. Food was an essential part of daily culture; lunchtime broke up the day’s continuous hard labor, so the quality of food had great effects on bracero morale. In August of 1951, when braceros at one Rogue Valley farm complained of the quality of the food, the camp manager subsequently ceased providing sandwiches and spoiled eggs, instead opting for Mexican staples like tortillas, rice, and beans. He even made Mexican specialties on special occasions.[61]

The treatment that Rogue Valley braceros received was good especially in the context of the rest of the Pacific Northwest. Idaho, only a couple of hours away, was blacklisted from the Bracero Program in 1948 due to the extreme racism directed towards braceros by Idaho natives.[62] And over the course of only nine months in 1956, there were five outbreaks of food poisoning in Pacific Northwest braceros.[63] Discontent with bracero laboring conditions in the Pacific Northwest was reflected by near-constant striking over the duration of the program. This was unique from the rest of the United States, where the clauses in bracero contracts prohibiting labor activism generally succeeded in preventing forms of protest.[64] In Medford, by contrast, there was virtually no labor organizing and Mexican culture was accepted by the locals. In 1944, over one thousand people attended the Medford Cinco de Mayo parade. In 1952, the Medford Council of Churchwomen included Mexican food at a dinner celebration for World Community Day. Twenty-seven braceros attended, and in turn invited community members to their labor camp for another celebration the following night.[65] Medford Braceros were accepted within their farms, as well. Gamboa claims that the program became cost-prohibitive in the Pacific Northwest after 1947, and in most of the region "Mexican nationals" (non-bracero Mexican immigrants) replaced bracero labor. But Rogue Valley continued to import braceros until the termination of the program in 1964.

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[58] Erasmo Gamboa, “Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest, 1943-1947: A Photographic Essay.” (*Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, *73*(4)), 175–181.

[59] Ralph Cake Jr., *Migrant labor housing in Medford, Oregon,* 1966. Image.

[60] Villa, Interview.

[61] Cordia, “They Came for the Harvest,” 158.

[62] Erasmo Gamboa, “Braceros in the Pacific Northwest: Laborers on the Domestic Front, 1942-1947,” (*Pacific Historical Review* 56, no. 3, 1987), 387.

Braceros in Medford saw pear picking as an opportunity. They rarely complained about laboring conditions, and would show up year after year for the harvest. This attitude created the idea in growers' minds that Mexicans were simply better suited for hard agricultural work than whites.[66] And although particularly strong in Medford, admiration for the working capacity of braceros was nationwide. Raymondo Villa recalls of braceros in Lake Chelan, Washington and El Paso, Texas that they "came to work and that was it. They didn't complain much. They weren't whiners, or anything like that. They were hard workers."[67] Ohio State Representative Delbert Latta concurred with the opinions of farmers and said simply that "our people…are not used to doing it. They will not do it." (Referring to the hard work of harvesting.)[68]

The praise afforded to Mexican immigrants was praise directed towards a population willing to assimilate, and unwilling to advocate for their rights as laborers. Although the Bracero Program was integral in the introduction of Mexican communities to America, it promoted a paternalistic view of Mexican immigrants. In the Pacific

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[63] Gamboa, "Braceros in the Pacific Northwest," 384.
[64] Gamboa, "Braceros in the Pacific Northwest," 393-394.
[65] Cordia, "They Came for the Harvest," 165.
[66] Cordia, "They Came for the Harvest," 161.
[67] Villa, Interview.
[68] Allan H. Ryskind, "End of the 'Bracero' Program."

Northwest, Medford was one of the most desirable destinations for braceros.[69] Braceros were welcomed by the local population and their presence promoted the integration of Mexican culture into the Medford public eye. However even in the best of circumstances, the popular opinion of braceros relied on a narrative of their compliance and humility within the farming system.

The existence of the Bracero Program on paper made it obvious that the program emerged from cultural and economic necessities of the 20th century; the modernization of the Pan-American economy was necessary to support a growing population and the ascent of global capitalism. As such, the Mexican worker was legitimately treated as a commodity--as observed by contemporary AFL-CIO director. Some traditional narratives surrounding the program, such as those of the American left or the Mexican intellectuals, posit that this dynamic was fundamentally degrading to Mexican and American workers. However this more theoretical interpretation risks discounting records of the bracero experience which seldom depict existential misery. More useful is to approach a cultural analysis of the bracero experience from an amoral lens. The absence of Mexican men challenged traditional Mexican culture--Mexican women became more central to the family, entering the workforce and making money while their husbands were abroad. Their capacity to love and long became more public, simply because of the ubiquity of the loneliness caused by the program. In America, braceros shared their cuisine and traditions and established themselves as reliable laborers. Medford, Oregon is a useful case study because of the relative ease of bracero integration.

One bracero *corrido* goes: *Bracero, bracero, he does not like polkas, with the accordions. Now he goes wild, with the rhythm of rock and roll.*[70] This comes from the perspective of a native Mexican, passively observing as American culture permeates their country. The top-down nature of the program conditioned the experience of Americans and Mexicans such that they felt helpless in the face of great economic change, orchestrated far above their reaches. But at the same time, everyday people were the ones constructing a new modernism. The bracero himself was used, yes, to the whim of his government. But simultaneously he *was* the transnational change brought to the Pan-American territory. In analysis, it is essential to recognize both sides of the transnational coin--the imposition of power onto migrants and the active roles that they play in change. Thus the bracero program and the workers which composed it should be remembered as a force which actively shaped the modern Mexican and American identities in the 20th century.

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[69] Cordia, "They Came for the Harvest," 164.

[70] Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience,* 112.

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