

From Ephemeral to Enduring

The Politics of Recording and Exhibiting Bracero Memory

Mireya Loza

ABSTRACT: From 2005 to 2009 the National Museum of American History embarked on one of its most ambitious collecting projects, focused on documenting experiences around the Bracero Program, the largest guest worker program in American History. This article focuses on the dilemmas of documenting memory through oral history for the Bracero History Archive and the reception of the National Museum of American History's exhibit, *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942–1964*. The present day political and social context in which these oral histories were collected left indelible marks on how the program is remembered. The retelling of bracero history also reveals contemporary concerns with the role that Mexican agricultural workers play in American society and sheds light on the national dilemma of immigration reform.

KEY WORDS: oral history, immigration, collection, Bracero Program, National Museum of American History

“Hubo momentos de gusto, alegría, conocimientos, pero también hubo momentos de tristeza y de ser imponente [impotente] por no poder hacer algo para remediar la situación.”

“There were moments of joy, happiness, knowledge but there were also moments of sadness of being impotent because nothing could be done to remedy the situation.”

Felipe Muñoz Pavón¹

“[Memory] has come to resemble the revenge of the underdog or injured party, the outcast, the history of those denied the right to History.”

Pierre Nora²

At the turn of the twenty-first century, President George W. Bush imagined a guest worker program as part of his vision for immigration reform. He set the

¹ Felipe Muñoz Pavón, interview by Alma Carrillo for Bracero History Archive, Chicago, IL, November 8, 2008.

² Pierre Nora, “Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory,” quoted in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 440.

tone for his introduction of a potential program by talking about his experience with Mexican families in Texas who valued faith in God, love of family, hard work, resilience, and military service. With these descriptions, he depicted Mexican migrants as worthy of working in the United States and of benefiting from immigration reform through what he called a “temporary worker program.” Bush argued, “If an American employer is offering a job that American citizens are not willing to take, we ought to welcome into our country a person who will fill that job.”³ In essence, instead of reforming exploitative labor practices or addressing the deplorable wages or work conditions that make these jobs undesirable to begin with, Bush suggested that Mexican workers perform that labor. Mexicans could satisfy capitalist desires for a flexible, deportable workforce with little change to the current labor conditions.⁴ This was not a new idea, of course, though by the time Bush suggested it in 2004, it is likely that many had forgotten its earlier model, the Bracero Program.⁵

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the United States embarked on a massive guest worker program called the Bracero Program based on a series of agreements that allowed Mexican male workers into the United States under short-term agricultural and railroad industry employment contracts due to perceived labor shortages brought on by World War II.⁶ The railroad component was terminated after the war but the agricultural program continued on because of grower dependency on a low-wage workforce. From 1942 to 1964, the Bracero Program facilitated over 4.5 million temporary work contracts, making it the largest guest worker program in the Americas. The workers were called *braceros*, a term that referred to their *brazos*, or arms. Though “bracero” had long been synonymous with “Mexican laborer,” during these years it became the specific designation for Mexicans who had contracts to work in the United States. Despite the distinctions that officials

3 “President Bush Proposes New Temporary Worker Program,” White House Archives, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040107-3.html>.

4 For more on braceros and capitalist desires for a tractable workforce, see Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

5 The 1942–64 Bracero Program was the second US-Mexican guest worker program. The first was created during World War I and terminated after the war’s conclusion. For more on this first program, see Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, *El Primer Programa Bracero y el Gobierno de Mexico, 1917–1918* (San Luis Potosí: Colegio de San Luis, 1999).

6 For more on the Bracero Program, see Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942–1947* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1990); Manuel García y Griego, “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942–1964,” in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, ed. David Gutiérrez (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 45–86; Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming); Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

drew, the line between bracero and undocumented worker quickly blurred as men left contracts to work as undocumented laborers, or as undocumented workers found their way into the program.⁷ In its twenty-two-year trajectory, the program was plagued by a rise in undocumented labor, a drop in Mexico's ability to enforce contract stipulations, and a surge in abuses towards both documented and undocumented agricultural workers.⁸ Further, guest workers did not disappear from the American economy after the termination of the Bracero Program, as agricultural workers found their way into the H-2A visa program.

Just a year after President Bush's speech, the National Museum of American History (NMAH) created a consortium of institutions to preserve the history of bracero communities with a transnational scope. Although the NMAH archive already included a strong collection of images of the Bracero Program taken by the photographer Leonard Nadel in 1956, the museum sought to expand its physical collection while also creating a digital archive of bracero documents and oral histories. The NMAH developed the Bracero History Project (BHP) that resulted in the Bracero History Archive and NMAH's exhibition, *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1946–1964*. The BPH contributed to the national dialogue about labor and immigration. Americans visiting this exhibit encountered the figure of the guest worker as a potential solution for immigration reform in political discourse and simultaneously encountered the "public memory" of Mexican guest workers in the nation's museum. As part of this project, I carried out interviews and trained faculty and students in order to collectively amass over eight hundred oral histories and hundreds of digitized documents from the United States and Mexico for the online Bracero History Archive. These oral histories are the cornerstone of the digital archive, <http://www.braceroarchive.org>, and also became an integral part of the traveling exhibit. As recorded oral histories, both the collective and individual memories of this community entered into a public record and became fixed narratives about the bracero experience. While collecting, I noticed that the political conversations about the contemporary use of guest workers collided with the historical memory produced by bracero communities, as documented by the BHP and commemorated through the exhibition *Bittersweet Harvest*. The NMAH confronted the exploitative labor practices of the program and the exhibit's curator, Peter Liebhold, felt that the title "Bittersweet" reflected the "exploitation but also opportunity" the program presented.⁹

The public memory of the Bracero Program also became reinvigorated as a bracero-centered movement emerged. Bracero communities engaged deeply in a protracted struggle to recuperate pay that had been garnished during the Bracero Program's years. The program withheld 10 percent of braceros' wages earned in

7 María Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience: Elitlore versus Folklore* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1979).

8 Cohen, *Braceros*, 30.

9 "Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942–1964," NMAH website, http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/bracero_project/main.htm.

the United States, which braceros were supposed to have access to once back in 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 return home.¹⁰ The Mexican government, however, failed to establish a bureaucratic mechanism to distribute these funds. Braceros residing in or near the Mexican capital who made inquiries to government officials often received the run-around. For braceros residing in rural 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 percent deduction from their paychecks, confessing they could not read proficiently enough to fully understand the contract.¹¹ It is estimated that the Mexican government collected over \$32 million from wages withheld from braceros.¹² By the early 2000s several bracero organizations emerged. Focused on reparations and back wages, these organizations drew upon the history of the program to educate people about the now aging and elderly bracero communities and their new struggles towards visibility and just compensation. Historian Stephen Pitti refers to the collective efforts of these organizations as the Bracero Justice Movement (BJM).¹³ Although the Mexican government asserts that no wages were withheld after 1948, the BJM rejects this claim and is fighting for what it believes was a 10 percent deduction taken from every bracero paycheck throughout the life of the program.¹⁴

Ultimately, politicians, BJM activists, and NMAH public historians mediated memories about the program and left imprints on the oral histories captured in the Bracero History Archive. The contemporary political context was deeply connected to the efforts to document and archive the ephemeral and changing quality of memory and transform those memories into enduring historical documents captured in an audio recording and transcript. This transformation from the ephemeral to the enduring object solidified differences between migrants in the era of the Bracero Program, as the project drew distinctions between the documented and the undocumented. Despite these harsh lines, some visitors to the exhibit conflated these groups. Their comments, along with the efforts of the BJM, remind us that the ways we remember the past are intimately tied to the present. This is not simply a story of how the BJM, the NMAH, and politicians such as Bush shape the ways we remember this past, but also of how these historical narratives shape the ways people of Mexican origin are viewed in the United States in the present moment.

10 Barbara Driscoll de Alvarado, "The 10% Solution: Bracero Program Savings' Account Controversy," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* (Fall 2003): 52–54.

11 Author's personal conversations with braceros, Salinas, CA, July 28, 2005.

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

13 Stephen Pitti, "Legacies of Mexican Contract Labor" (paper presented at "Repairing the Past: Confronting the Legacies of Slavery, Genocide, & Caste," New Haven, CT, 2005).

14 For more on the Bracero Justice Movement, see chapter 4 in Loza, *Defiant Braceros*.

Bracero Collective Memory Steps to the Fore

In the late 1990s, Ventura Gutierrez, a labor organizer, worked with bracero communities to create Bracero Pro-A, a transnational organization that sought to recuperate back wages. Gutierrez's grandmother, the widow of a former bracero living in Puruándiro, Michoacán, asked her grandson, a migrant-labor organizer based out of Coachella, California, to make inquiries about what she called her husband's "Social Security" entitlement, referring to the American federal insurance program. 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, Gutierrez discovered that his grandmother, although not entitled to Social Security benefits, was instead owed 10 percent of his grandfather's collected wages. By the early 2000s several other ex-bracero organizations emerged, strengthening and broadening the networks of the BJM. Public history efforts coalesced with activist efforts, as the BHP utilized the networks and communities created and reinvigorated by the BJM to access ex-braceros and their families in order to preserve oral histories, digitize documents, and collect objects. In towns across the United States and Mexico, oral historians from the BPH worked with activists from the BJM in order to invite bracero communities to work with the project. The support from these activists, in many cases, led to the success of collection sites.

The BJM became one of the major catalysts for shaping public memory about the program. Sociologist Ronald Mize noted in his own research that prior to the movement, braceros confirmed details about their experience, but stayed "silent" on certain aspects of the program. As the BJM grew, respondents to his research "spoke at length" because the movement had created a space in which ex-braceros could share "some of the more unfavorable and humiliating aspects of the program."¹⁵ These "humiliating" aspects became touchstones for former braceros' collective memory of the program. Because braceros were attempting to demonstrate that they had come to the United States through the official program and not as undocumented laborers, the contracting processes became a focal point of bracero collective memory. Ex-braceros and their families fought to have these workers recognized as a type of "protected class" entitled to back wages and historical recognition. In lieu of documents, many ex-guest workers relied on their memories in order to "prove" they had been braceros. The BJM utilized testimonies not only to move the general public into action but also to shame public officials for their failure to act on behalf of this aging population. Through the movement, public narratives about the program emerged that focused on the exploitative conditions and arduous labor institutionalized throughout the bracero program. Ex-braceros brought to light important experiences and imagery (through the collection of visual evidence such as photos) of dehumanizing moments for

¹⁵ Ronald L. Mize, "Power (In)-Action: State and Agribusiness in the Making of the Bracero Total Institution," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 50 (2006): 76–119.

braceros, important data that would help move the general public and government officials to work towards restitution.

The political discussions that lie at the core of public memory about the bracero program reveal inherent contradictions within the US social and economic system. As historian John Bodnar explains, “public memory is produced from a political discussion that involves not so much specific economic or moral problems but rather fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very meaning of its past and present.”¹⁶ The tension therefore lies in the relationship of the guest worker to that of the nation, manifested in discussions of rights of citizens, human rights, and exploitative labor practices deemed unsuitable for citizens. If, as then-president George W. Bush projected, the temporary worker would take the jobs considered undesirable by citizens, then the real problem with exploitative work and capitalist desire for a “right-less” class or workforce need not be addressed. The Bracero History Project called attention to already existing questions about the role of Mexican immigrants and the limits of a guest worker program in a nation divided on the question of Mexican immigration and the labor rights of noncitizens. It also contributed to the general public a vital understanding that temporary workers were, in fact, distinct from undocumented workers.

Public historians, the BJM, and policy makers engaged in the solidification of a bracero identity purposely divorced from that of the undocumented laborer. They pushed aside older understandings of *bracerismo*, indicating both formal and informal ways Mexican workers arrive and work in the United States to form a flexible, deportable class of workers.¹⁷ Prior to the early 2000s, the term was more frequently used to describe Mexican workers broadly, and some interview subjects affirmed this usage by adopting the label bracero to describe themselves and seeing no inconsistency in also stating, “I was always a wetback. I came in without permission.”¹⁸ Academic Maria Herrera Sobek traced the popular use of the term bracero, through music and literature, which rarely separated documented from undocumented.¹⁹ In this way, she purposely pointed towards the complicated history that grouped the two in both the Mexican American and Mexican imagination. Acknowledging that the flows of Mexican temporary workers are intricately tied to that of undocumented workers, and in addition, the ease of moving in and out of these categories, became a hurdle in creating a cohesive narrative about bracero history.

The interest of public historians in the Bracero History Project involved preserving and displaying the history of the Bracero Program within the limits of the

16 John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14.

17 For more on *bracerismo*, see Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 154.

18 Comment of a bracero, San Jose, CA, July 27, 2005.

19 Herrera-Sobek, *Bracero Experience*.

archive they created and the parameters of a traveling exhibit. The Smithsonian Institution had received heavy criticism in the 1990s from Latinos for its failure to include Latino history in any of its museums' collections. The Bracero History Project quickly became one among many projects attempting to rectify this absence.²⁰ Unlike popular usage of the term, the Bracero Justice Movement drew a much firmer line between undocumented laborers and braceros as a means of strengthening legal claims towards back wages. Policy makers promoted guest worker programs as a way to address both the needs of laborers engaged in undesirable work and immigration reform. In doing so, the collective memory of braceros became shaped by what all of these entities perceived as the legitimate experiences of braceros and separated this experience from that of undocumented workers.

This process has helped form the collective memory of braceros, as braceros interested in recuperating their back wages created a narrative that distinguishes them from undocumented workers. Unlike braceros' individual memories, the collective memory highlights the uniqueness of the guest workers' experiences by focusing on the dehumanizing practices at contracting stations, the limits placed on their mobility, their living conditions, and labor practices within the program. Stories of adventure, desire, pleasure, and differences among braceros stand at the margins. Politically, deviance and pleasure could detract attention from the high degree of exploitation they suffered and the state's complicity in alienating these men. Similarly, the nuances of regional, cultural, racial, and ethnic difference also become less important in the collective memory of braceros. The collective narrative is part of a political project that is attempting to reinsert the bracero into Mexican and American national narratives, but even as it may seem inclusionary, this narrative, like national narratives, has rested on exclusions.

Although the Bracero History Project was committed to documenting the stories of bracero communities through individual oral histories, the collective memory of braceros shaped the contents and tone of the resulting archive. The archive represented the innovative efforts of George Mason University's Center for the Study of History and New Media in producing new platforms in digital humanities, tools that allowed those involved with content to focus on documenting bracero history. Experts at the National Museum of American History, along with the University of Texas at El Paso's Institute of Oral History and Brown University's Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, were charged with creating the content for the archive. Although the archive included digitized documents and photographs, its core was the collection of oral histories.

Many public historians working on the project, myself included, often felt a manic sense of urgency in documenting these oral histories, as many in the bracero community were nearing their twilight years. As individuals who took part

²⁰ Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institutions, 1994).

in the bracero program passed away, the project's oral historians expressed a sense of loss for the archive, as these people's experiences and memories were irreplaceable. Scholar of memory and history Pierre Nora recognizes the significance of this sense of urgency, writing, "The fear that everything is on the verge of disappearing, coupled with anxiety about the precise significance of the present and uncertainty about the future, invests even the humblest testimony, the modest vestige, with the dignity of being potentially memorable."²¹ We all documented as much as possible, often feeling personally connected and responsible, as many oral historians on the team felt a deep sense of belonging to this community and the urgent need to preserve what could be potentially forgotten. Nora explains this sense of responsibility and the resulting exhausting effort by stating, "What we call memory is in fact a gigantic and breathtaking effort to store the material vestiges of what we cannot possibly remember, thereby amassing an unfathomable collection of things that we might someday need to recall."²²

The political climate in certain geographical areas in the United States made it more difficult to collect than in others. For example, in Arizona, oppressive anti-immigrant state laws made collecting in Phoenix and Tucson particularly challenging. In January 2008, potential participants in these areas felt apprehensive about being interviewed, telling site coordinator Alma Carrillo that they feared participation might lead to their deportation.²³ Some potential participants felt uneasy with the project's affiliation with a federal museum and feared that it was a government ploy to find and remove them. Although a portion of ex-braceros returned to Mexico after the program ended, others stayed in the United States as undocumented workers and still others found avenues to residency and citizenship. Those who had lived in the shadows as undocumented workers were skeptical about the intentions of the NMAH and did not want to be made visible through the project. Within the United States, the anti-immigrant climate made it much easier to collect the oral histories of documented, rather than undocumented, bracero communities. Associate curator Stephen Velasquez recalled braceros in Salinas, California, asking him "What are you going to do with the information you gather? Why are you doing this? Will this help our cause (collecting back wages)?" He remembers that this line of questioning made him a "bit tense."²⁴ Most oral historians with the project frequently experienced this line of questioning.

The end result was a digital archive containing oral histories and hundreds of digitized documents that reflected a myriad of contrasting stories. At times, these two types of documentation corroborate information and at other times, they stand in stark contradiction. For example, an ex-bracero might pull an identification card

²¹ Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Krizman, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University, 1996), 8.

²² Ibid.

²³ Author's conversation with Alma Carrillo, Phoenix, AZ, January 10, 2008.

²⁴ L. Stephen Velasquez, "Collecting Bracero History," NMAH blog *O Say Can You See?*, September 10, 2009, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2009/09/collecting-bracero-history.html>.

out of his wallet that contradicted his narrative about a seeming “fact” such as year of entry, address, or even name. Many things might explain these discrepancies. A year of entry or address could easily be collapsed with some other piece of information. A different name than the one commonly used could appear in official documents if a bracero used a family member’s identity to obtain a contract or a typist entered a misspelled version of a guest worker’s name. As I shared my experience with others about collecting these oral histories for the project, I was constantly asked: “How do you know what they say is true?” “How do you know their memories are accurate?” The contents of the archive revealed this dilemma. The only answer that can address this contradiction is that oral history documents one particular performance of memory but there are, in fact, many ways of remembering and expressing those memories. Memories of the program can shift, and a particular oral history only captures one rendition of that memory, shaped by a particular time and place, and interviewees themselves know this. Alessandro Portelli argues, “oral history narrators are aware of this written destination, and bear it in mind as they shape their performance.”²⁵

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor points out the inevitable rift between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practices/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).²⁶ But in the case of oral history, the practice of producing a record (i.e., audio/video recording, transcript) turns the ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice or knowledge into an enduring, unchanging material of record. The interpretation of that material can change but the material itself is unchanging and frozen. Unlike the variable repertoire of performance, oral history is expected to provide a singular text or object, and failing to do so provokes historical suspicions concerning the validity of the knowledge produced in the record of that particular interview.

Although oral history relies on the ability to access and express memory, the act itself resembles the ephemeral nature of performance. As Erika Doss explains, an allure of memory is that it refuses to stand still, as it is elusive, unstable, open-ended, and unresolved. Memory is “embraced as an active agent, that is performative, personal, and presentist.”²⁷ Furthermore, the lived aspect of memory exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it.²⁸ Because memory refuses to be frozen in time, recording oral history is a multivalent act that cannot be duplicated with exactness.²⁹ What interests us about past memories is anchored in present-day concerns and thus shifts with the tides of each day. Many factors shape this performance of

25 Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 5.

26 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

27 Erika Lee Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 49.

28 Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.

29 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172–73.

memory, from the relationship of oral historian and interviewee, place of interview, and time of interview. Beyond the relationship of the oral historian and interviewee, the race, gender, class, and sexual orientation of the interviewer leaves legible marks on the recorded product of oral history. Maurice Halbwachs suggests that the most accurate of memories are communicated between a narrator and listener that share the same social, physical, and historical frame of reference.³⁰ Given that accuracy is not the primary goal of oral history, this ideal of the narrator and listener sharing positionality is rarely achieved, and instead we must think about an oral history interview as one specific performance produced within a particular scenario and acknowledge that a distinct scenario may produce a different oral history. Yet unlike performance understood to be ephemeral, the goal of oral history has always been to produce a singular record.

Why was it so important to so many stakeholders to create a fixed narrative of bracero memory? Historian Allan Megill explains that, “When identity becomes uncertain, memory rises in value . . . memory is oriented *toward* the subject and is concerned with a real or imagined past only because that past is perceived as crucial for the subject, even constitutive of it.”³¹ In the present day, the defining identity of these men is crucial for the Bracero Justice Movement’s claims of back pay, for descendants’ insistence of belonging during a time of debate over immigration reform, and for policy makers’ attempts to address immigration and labor issues. “An identity that solidly exists has little need for an explicit, thematized appeal to memory.”³² The experience of these men could potentially be deployed as a vehicle for understanding all three of these areas. Furthermore, their collective identity as laborers “saving our crops” in a time of war casts them as a subject worthy of being honored at the National Museum of American History.

Ultimately, all of these discussions were rooted in discourses that created a respectable bracero subject in contrast to the undocumented subject, whose entry to the United States was viewed by mainstream America as criminal and thus of disreputable moral character. For public historians, deeming braceros “good” subjects validates their worthiness for commemoration in American history. Their very humanity is framed through their labor and its relationship to family, as if without these they would be considered less valuable. These parameters limit the collective public narratives that can arise from this context. As Lisa Cacho explains, racially undesirable populations are perceived as needing to achieve or earn their humanity.³³ Migrant laborers could earn their place in American public life through “legal” entry and work. Braceros experienced the dehumanization of existing as “arms” of labor, to have their humanity restored in the contemporary period only through

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Allan Megill, Steven Shepard, and Phillip Honenberger, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 48.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 6.

NAMH's narratives that stressed their legal entry to the United States and their "lawful" contribution as laborers. The possibility of replicating the Bracero Program as a solution to immigration reform rests on untangling a vision of the temporary work program from narratives of illegality and its perceived immorality. A new temporary work program would have to be detached from the perceived immorality and criminality of undocumented labor in order to gain wider acceptance. The logic that the NMAH exhibit presented, that lawful entry leads to entry into public life and public history, is false because the Bracero Program was ultimately a guest worker program in which the "guests" were expected to eventually return to their homes. These tensions between the exhibit and the archive reflect the aims of each and the politics of commemoration, which the exhibit cannot escape. Even as deviance did not make its way into the exhibit, public assumptions of deviance and contemporary immigration debates colored the reaction of some visitors.

The Archive Transforms into the Exhibit

On September 9, 2009, the exhibition *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942–1964* opened at the National Museum of American History (NMAH). Peter Liebhold, curator at NMAH, described the exhibit as "modest but powerful."³⁴ It consisted of fifteen freestanding 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 traveling exhibit so that more institutions could afford the shipping and other costs associated with hosting. They suggested that host institutions collect locally relevant objects 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 duplicate to travel simultaneously to additional venues. Institutions in the Southwest, South, Midwest, and East signed on to host the exhibit, which will travel through 2017.

Each of the panels used quotations from the oral histories to support the themes of exploitation and opportunity. The themes and topics of each panel presented the migratory experience of braceros beginning with their homes, then traveling to the border and laboring in the United States. Many of the quotations by braceros and others articulated the reasons why men left their families to enter the United States and illustrated moments of the migratory process and impressions of the program. For example, one panel exploring the "Journey" to the border featured images of a processing center in Monterrey and a quotation from bracero Heriberto Rivas Lugo explaining, "We formed a line, and they interviewed us there, took down our names,

34 Author's informal conversation with Peter Liebhold, Washington, DC, September 30, 2009.



Bittersweet Harvest at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. (Courtesy of The National Museum of American History.)

and later they threw us in a train.”³⁵ In addition to quotations that described the process, curators also included braceros’ critiques of the program, such as Isidoro Ramírez’s description of the contracting process: “In the center they put you up against the wall, and the contractors came like they were coming to buy livestock.”³⁶

Because the oral histories could not visually anchor the exhibit, curators drew on the Leonard Nadel collection in the NMAH archives. Nadel had been deeply moved and inspired by labor leader Ernesto Galarza’s political vision of documenting exploitation in the Bracero Program, which led him to retrace some of Galarza’s research footsteps.³⁷ A grant from the Fund for the Republic allowed him to expand this vision by traveling to Mexico and documenting the journey of braceros, from their sending communities, through contracting sites, field work in the United States, and enjoyment of limited leisure time in labor camps and towns in California. He began his six-month trip in the summer of 1956 as national discussions around the exploitative plight of agricultural workers gained attention.³⁸ Leonard

³⁵ “Bittersweet Harvest: Journey,” NMAH website, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/journey>.

³⁶ “Bittersweet Harvest: Border,” NMAH website, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/border>.

³⁷ Richard Steven Street, *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 373.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Nadel began his journey of illustrating the plight of the Mexican guest worker through photography.³⁹ Nadel's images not only anchored the exhibit but also the digital archive, as they provided a visual representation of bracero experiences.

Although Nadel documented the family lives of braceros, the contracting process, and the work conditions, the most widely circulated images include those that draw visual distinctions between the bracero and undocumented worker by highlighting key aspects of the bracero journey such as conditions in recruitment centers, medical exams, DDT sprayings, and closed work sites. These images provided a visual aspect to central components of the bracero narrative that, as one guest worker argued, "we need[ed] to go through . . . to become braceros."⁴⁰ This process became a rite of passage for migrant workers claiming a bracero identity. During the collection process, many workers pulled out their bracero identifications from their wallets to prove that they in fact at one point entered the United States as guest workers. The exhibit pushes aside the flexible lines between the documented bracero and the undocumented Mexican laborer and hardens the boundaries between how these subjects were imagined. In many ways, the figure of the "legal" bracero becomes a foil to the "undocumented" worker and thus places the guest worker in higher regard. Even if a bracero eventually became an undocumented worker, for the ex-bracero the need for his labor as a guest worker justified his presence and forever marked him as a bracero.

Nadel was clearly fascinated with camp life, though it would not be apparent to someone who only saw his work in the NMAH exhibit. His best-known images and those used in the exhibit are those tied to the contracting process and labor, while largely overlooked are his images depicting braceros in the private homosocial spaces of the camp or at rest. His full collection features dozens of examples of braceros lounging on their beds, playing cards, and smoking cigarettes. These images depict the bracero body, not as arms of labor, but as sexualized subjects with potential desire and participating in acts of rest and pleasure. These images do not entirely support a respectable image of braceros, nor do they tell the story of "exploitation and opportunity" that ended up becoming the theme of the exhibit.

Instead, the exhibit and the public history project's promotional materials featured Nadel's images that both critiqued the Bracero Program's exploitation of these workers and highlighted the opening the program provided for entry into the United States. Curators chose aesthetically appealing images, such as a photograph that depicts one bracero as a content worker casually resting a *cortito*, a short-handled hoe, over his shoulder. His Mexican hat complements his American work jacket as he smiles subtly for the camera. The careful composition of the photograph communicates a type of organization and structure in his labor. Both his attire and his carefully quaffed hair present him in a light of respectable masculinity. He seems content to have the short handle, an object that causes a tremendous

39 Street, *Everyone Had Cameras*, 373.

40 Author's informal conversation with Raúl Canela, San Jose, CA, July 27, 2005.



Bracero holding a short handle hoe. (Courtesy of Leonard Nadel Bracero Photographs, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.)

amount of pain because it requires the user to work harder by bending over. However, field supervisors preferred it because they could look down the row and spot anyone who stood up.⁴¹ Cesar Chavez's expressed his disdain for this tool, proclaiming, "The short hoe is the nail they use to hang us from the cross."⁴²

The aesthetic appeal of Nadel's photograph seems to be his subject's face, framed by the field and the *cortito*. Bound by the parameters of the exhibition, curators juxtaposed that image with an enlarged photograph of men going through DDT sprayings and at contracting centers, which provided an implicit critique of the program and its more dehumanizing aspects. Curators were also committed to highlighting the ex-braceros who put down roots in the United States and became the fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers of a generation of Mexican Americans. Some braceros stayed in the United States as undocumented workers, while others found avenues to obtain residency and even US citizenship. They provided a counternarrative that aimed to challenge perceptions that all contemporary Mexican American immigrant families came to the United States "illegally" by highlighting this period of massive authorized entry into the country.

⁴¹ Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 17.

⁴² Roger Bruns, *Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 92.

Although one of the goals of *Bittersweet Harvest* was to examine the experience of bracero workers and their families in order to provide “rich insight into Mexican American history and historical background to today’s debates on guestworkers programs,”⁴³ the audience seemed less concerned with the contours of the Bracero Program and the differences between guest workers and other groups of migrant workers. According to an NMAH report that analyzed the exhibit comment books, “Quite unexpectedly, the perception of the Bracero Program itself received very little attention from the visitors in their comments.”⁴⁴ Rather, many of the comments reflected current concerns with immigration, to the degree that, “a surprising number of people used the term ‘immigrant’ to address a guest worker.”⁴⁵ They preferred to see these men as “immigrants,” implying a dislike for the term “guest worker,” and a perception that these men came to the United States in order to build permanent lives in this country. Despite the fact that the exhibit featured stories of men who returned to Mexico after the termination of the program, many visitors instead perceived that all settled in the United States. These visitors tied the experience of braceros to contemporary discussions concerning immigration reform, and guests from geographic areas where these debates were most heated were more likely to leave a written response to the exhibit. By and large, the majority of those who chose to record comments about their experience visiting the exhibit in Washington, DC, were from the southwestern United States.

Some who attended the opening of the *Bittersweet Harvest* exhibit felt moved by Leonard Nadel’s images and the objects collected, such as bunk beds obtained from a labor camp that had housed braceros. Then-labor secretary Hilda Solis sobbed during the opening of the exhibit as she stated, “My father was a bracero.”⁴⁶ As the official voice on labor policy in the United States, she was emotionally shaken by the images of exploitation that people like her father faced. She would later overturn many of the Bush-era policies on Mexican guest workers entering the United States with H-2A visas.⁴⁷ Her own family history highlighted the strong ties many Mexican American families have to the Bracero Program. Indeed, the exhibition’s comment books were filled with statements from visitors who, like Hilda Solis, have uncles, fathers, and grandfathers who were braceros.⁴⁸ Those guests saw the NMAH exhibit as legitimating their own family histories. Graduate student Teresa Ramirez, for example, viewed *Bittersweet Harvest* shortly after it opened and was surprised to see an exhibit depicting a controversial topic. The photographs and text moved her, as she thought of her own bracero grandfather working agricultural fields in the United States. As she explained to me, “I kept thinking about my

43 “Bittersweet Harvest,” http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/bracero_project/main.htm.

44 Daniel Ferry, “Bittersweet Harvest Comment Book Analysis” (unpublished report for NMAH, Summer 2010), 7.

45 Ferry, “Bittersweet Harvest Comment Book Analysis,” 11.

46 Wayne G. Clough, “Our Plan,” *Smithsonian*, December 2009.

47 “Forced Labor,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2010.

48 “Bittersweet Harvest Comment Book,” NMAH, September 9, 2009–January 3, 2010.



Ex-bracero Juan Loza visiting *Bittersweet Harvest* at National Museum of American History, Washington, DC. (Courtesy of The National Museum of American History.)

grandfather stooped over in the fields.”⁴⁹ She saved photographs of the exhibit on her camera for months after her visit as a reminder of her grandfather’s struggles as a bracero, which she realized she had known so little about. These familial relations ignited affectual responses that critiqued the exploitation these men endured but also validated their sacrifice through narratives of family uplift and opportunity, embodied by someone like Hilda Solis, who, though the daughter of a bracero, was able to rise to prominence in the US government. Unlike stakeholders in other controversial moments in American history that have been dealt with through public history projects, descendants of braceros by and large were pleased with the museum’s treatment of this period.

A smaller number of visitors incorrectly interpreted the intentions of the exhibit and instead expressed outrage that the NMAH would create an exhibit about “illegal” Mexicans. Despite the carefully chosen words of curators such as Stephen Velasquez, the braceros’ contributions were lost on these visitors when they chose not to read or accept the text, or listen to the audio stations. Braceros became conflated with any and all undocumented migrants from Mexico. To these visitors, the nuances of the guest worker experience were lost. Although many visitors enjoyed the exhibit, there was a small group that felt offended by its very inclusion in the nation’s premier history museum. Nineteen-year-old Samantha, from Montclair, Virginia, wrote, “I do not see the need for this when American citizens need work!! If they will come back as legal americans, then GREAT! Until then lets give

49 Author’s personal conversation with Teresa Ramirez, Irvine, CA, October 16, 2009.



Ex-bracero Luis Avila Ruiz visiting *Bittersweet Harvest* at California State University Channel Islands, Camarillo, California. (Courtesy of Irma Avila.)

the americans work in this economy, tax paying, law abiding americans.”⁵⁰ Her logic assumed that there are only two statuses for Mexican migrants: “illegal” and “American.” Here, “American” implies “legal” but excludes a myriad of possible statuses, such as “resident” and “guest worker.” An anonymous visitor responded to Samantha’s comment by writing directly underneath it, “Are ‘Americans’ willing to do back breaking work? I think not!” Another attendee wrote, “Amen Sista!”⁵¹ This type of comment and response interaction was indicative of broader public discussions taking place concerning Mexican migration. The anonymous visitor ties the labor performed by undocumented workers as labor “Americans” are unwilling to perform, unintentionally reifying President Bush’s sentiments behind a guest worker program that would allow migrants to take jobs that are perceived to be unwanted by the general population. The polemical discussion here says very little about the attendees’ perceptions of the Bracero Program, communicating instead the present-day discussion about the role of Mexican laborers in American society.

Rights bestowed by American citizenship also became central to the conversation, as visitors forgot the lessons of the Bracero Program and viewed Mexican immigrants as unwanted in a land that is not their own. Forty-eight-year-old Joe, of Paradise, California, stated, “I have always had great respect for people who are willing to work hard. I also have a duty to abide by the law. American citizens have

50 “Bittersweet Harvest Comment Book,” NMAH, September 9, 2009–January 3, 2010.

51 Ibid.

rights. People who are not citizens do not have and should not be afforded the rights of citizens. People who break the law should be punished. People who are in this country illegally should be deported. Period.”⁵² According to Joe, undocumented migrants should not be granted any protection under the law, as their very presence in the United States is implicitly “criminal.” Criminalization here abrogates any human rights protections under the law. Others went further and criminalized all Mexicans, regardless of citizenship status, and demanded, “Send all Mexicans back to Mexico Now, Before It’s Too Late!”

The exhibit provoked Helen from Washington to personalize the way Mexican immigration affected her. She wrote, “I think that the US used guest workers because they were cheaper then [sic] paying regular help. The practice has not helped me at all. They should stay in their own country and not hurt our wadges [sic]. It hurt my family because we lost our business.”⁵³ A thirty-two-year-old Iraq veteran echoed Helen’s concerns, “I lost my job, my home and my friends due to low cost labor. . . . I just can’t figure it out anymore. Foreigners can get set up and I lose everything.” Perhaps he viewed the conditions in the labor camps as tolerable or even comfortable, that the experience of braceros was not so bad, or perhaps he was responding to contemporary Mexican immigration, in which case, he feels that he is the one being negatively impacted by this migration. Ultimately, he writes, “I have nothing against anyone of any ethnic background or culture but, I blame the practices of are [sic] government for allowing the labor or jobs [to] go for lower cost and cheap wages.”⁵⁴

The strong reactions of these visitors point to how Latinos have become conflated with larger issues of immigration, perhaps justifying curators’ decision not to acknowledge the complicated nature of documented and undocumented migration during the Bracero Program. The importance of defining the history and role of braceros inadvertently centers on drawing lines of distinction between the “problem” of undocumented immigration and the “solution” that temporary labor programs present, as well as the absolution that fails to call into question the systems of labor exploitation that created both.

Unlike tensions around the public commemoration of racially oppressive moments in American history such as the massacre of Native Americans at Sand Creek or wartime Japanese internment, the Bracero Program elicits no national collective remorse for the conditions these transnational laborers endured. Public history projects have framed these other events in the distant past, but bracero history cannot be so positioned because Mexican guest workers continue to enter the United States.⁵⁵ There is no organized community or public outcry about the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ David Lowenthal argues that public history often positions the past as “a foreign country,” so different from the present it becomes exotic. In the case of public history about the Bracero Program this is not possible because of the United States’ continued dependence on Mexican labor. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xvii.

representation of braceros in the realm of public history because Mexican guest workers and Mexican migrant workers in general have not disappeared. There can be no reconciliation with the state or American reparations for Mexican guest workers because both these acts require recognizing the US government's complicity in the human rights violations and exploitation of braceros, which has consequences for agricultural relations in the present. Beyond the use of guest workers, agribusiness continues to rely on undocumented workers in ways that render the documented and the undocumented indistinguishable for present-day mainstream America. The performative and multivalent nature of the oral history of this community finds itself at odds with the need to provide an enduring and closed public history account of the Bracero Program. The memories of bracero communities signal that this is a shifting history that continues to unfold. Politicians, activists, and public historians stand on these shaky grounds and try to make sense of the past and wield it in service of their present-day concerns. Public historians in the Bracero History Project as well as others across the nation have had to create new dialogues, new tools, and new archives that attempt to reckon with this unfinished history.

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Mireya Loza earned her PhD in American Studies from Brown University. Her areas of research include Mexican American history, labor history, oral history, and public humanities. As a graduate student she spent six years as a collaborator on the National Museum of American History's Bracero History Project. Her research has received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, and the Smithsonian Institution. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Latina/o Studies and the Department of History at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.