Holding A Callused Hand

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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For a kid growing up in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood, the only thing worse than being called a wetback was being called a brazer. Wetback just questioned your US status—but who cared? Brazer, however, insulted your appearance. During the early 80s, if someone wore a light blue guayabera and black shoes with white socks for school pictures, we called him a brazer. If we saw a girl walk down the street with blue jeans and shiny, black pumps, we yelled, “Brazer!”

On 26th Street once, I saw a dark-faced man in jeans, cowboy boots, and a baseball shirt with SUE ironed-on the front; I thought, “Brazer.” None of us knew what the word meant. We just heard it and used it to talk about those who spoke with too much of an accent. It wasn't until college that I learned that the word came from “Bracero:” a Mexican man who was contracted by the US to do agricultural work with his “brazos,” or arms, from 1942 to 1964. My father did this type of work, so he, too, was a Brazer. At that moment, I don't know if I felt more guilt or more shame for thinking that a Brazer was the most humiliating thing a Mexican could be.

The Bracero Program was established during WWII to solve the U.S. agricultural worker shortage by allowing American farmers to contract Mexicans to harvest fields. Both sides saw the rewards: good labor that was cheap and steady work that paid. In 1951, the passing of Public Law 78 allowed the Bracero program to continue. Men from all parts of Mexico came to border towns, signed contracts, and waited for the chance to work. They stood in corrals until they were chosen to undergo a physical exam. If they passed, they were awarded work permits for days or for months depending on the contractor. Once the permit ended, the Bracero was returned to Mexico. The official Bracero agreement, which was written in English, assured “hygienic lodgings, adequate to the physical conditions of the region.” What was “adequate” depended on each contractor. Since the men came from rural towns, many extreme in poverty, the guarantee of at least thirty cents per hour was a fortune. In April 1956, the El Paso Herald Post reported, “More than 80,000 Braceros pass through the El Paso Center annually. They’re part of an army of 350,000 or more that marches across the border each year to help plant, cultivate and harvest cotton and other crops throughout the United States.” Most of the border towns weren't prepared to handle the thousands of men who entered these everyday. Nevertheless, one day during the Korean War, my father walked right in.

My father, Raymundo, left his farmhouse in St. Rita, Coahuila (a tiny town of dust and desert where cactus thrives) on May 11, 1957. His father had sent word that there was work up north. He went to Piedras Negras, border to Eagle Pass, Texas, to meet-up with his father, Ramón. Once there, my 21-year-old father rode the bus to Monterrey to sign the mandatory contract and returned to the border the next day. My father was lucky. Because my grandfather Ramón spoke good English, the U.S. contractors hired him to select workers. On May 15, my grandfather chose my father to ride across the border to Carrizo Springs, Texas. Men who weren't selected, my father remembers, killed their hunger by eating mandarin peels.

A Bracero had to look strong, healthy. Disease or physical limitations excluded him immediately. To prove that they had farm experience, men would rub rocks between their hands to make them rough. Soft hands meant no opportunity. My grandfather would stand above the corral and point “Tú, Tú, Tú” to men who looked up with ambition.

Once my father arrived on the farm, he was given a physical exam. His experience was good. If it was bad, he would not complain. His attitude toward hard work was to do it. Pictures of him in his 20s and 30s show his face firm and arms thick from turning over earth. Without a mustache or a beard, my father looked into the camera calmly, stern and made sure his hair was pushed back, just so. At 5’7” he had a chest broad enough to breathe the Texas air and a back strong enough to transport the onions, lettuce, cauliflower, beets, and eggplant on acres of farm.

Because of the rain that year, my father wasn't able to work the tractor; instead, he harvested melons that first season. A burlap satchel hung across his chest, and
hunched over like a very old man, he searched vine by vine for the melons that were hard or had already fallen off. He held the satchel open with his left hand and scooped up the melon with his right. The rains eventually subsided. By July of that year, he was riding tractors and planting whole crops of beets for fifty cents an hour.

He began his day with a wipe of his brow, admiring the crop's furrows stretching like a well-combed head of hair. He awoke each day at 5:30 in a four-room house he shared with my grandfather and two other men. At 6:30, they were eating breakfast: coffee, beans, tortillas, eggs. At seven, they were at work. They got an hour for lunch and then returned to work until seven that evening. Whatever discomforts my father felt during this time because of the sun or because of the crops' weight on his back, I couldn't know because he wouldn't say. He worked comfortably. Very comfortably. Even after my Texana grandmother, Sara, got him U.S. citizenship, he still worked as a Bracero until the end of the growing season in 1958. “What's the best memory you have of being a Bracero, dad?” I asked. My father bursts out laughing to hide the nostalgia he was afraid would bring him to tears: “I had a lot of girlfriends.”

He never had it bad. He admits he came over to the U.S. “para la aventura,” so I wonder if suffering was something he expected. My father's view of Bracero life, I know, is idealized. In Chicano Lit class in college, I read Tomas Rivera's And the Earth Did Not Devour Him and saw the pain that campesinos felt as they broke their backs with work as they stared into the dirt. There were the children who burned to death inside a chicken coop, the father who suffered seizures from the sun, the men who road the backs of trucks and couldn't wait until they arrived.

My father listens to me in between his sips of tea. He knows the stories, but they never happened to him or to anyone he knew. I ask over and over about illnesses, racism, abuse, or loneliness. He shakes his head. He makes me understand that this life for him was pleasant. He was born on a farm—living on the land and from it meant living for him. Even though he doesn't give me the ugly side to being a Bracero, I know there is one.

Guillermo Rosales, a 61-year-old retired candy factory employee, suffered when he was a Bracero. He left his farm in San Nicolas, Jalisco (a small town like my father's but more fertile) at seventeen, without permission from his father. He completed his military service requirement early and, with his cousin, took a bus to Zacatecas, then rode a train to Chihuahua in March of 1957. Neither one had ever been a Bracero but they had heard that you weren't selected if you couldn't split a banana with your ass. They wouldn't find out until May, anyway, since that's when the contracting started. For two months, Rosales and his cousin rented a room for one peso a night where they slept on cardboard. For another peso, they were fed one egg, some beans and drank a Pepsi. By the time the contracting period came around, they were out of money.

Luckily, more of their cousins arrived who had had experience as Braceros. They had a letter from their mayor that authorized them to work. Step one was getting chosen for a physical exam. In Ciudad Juarez, this decision was made inside a stone building with a high fence and guards. If your name was called, you had a chance, but not a guarantee, to work in the US. The mayor's letter finally got Rosales and his cousin into the corral. White men waited for them with plastic gloves. Men clustered under the sun as dust rose and hats were readjusted to
accommodate the heat. They were told to strip. Then each man was examined. They bent over, then coughed. “Lo querian enteritamente entero,” explains Rosales, emphasizing with his eyes. Following the examination, the men were sprayed with disinfectant or pesticide, like weeds, to kill lice, bacteria, and disease.

Rosales was part of a group of twenty-two men—most were cousins, some were friends. They crossed into El Paso in yellow school buses and were given another physical exam: chest x-rays, blood tests, bending over, coughing, getting sprayed, stretching, peering—proving they were strong. If the man wasn’t farm labor material, he was sent back. If he passed, he was given an army blanket, a cot and permission to sleep in a huge barrack. No one ever slept with all the noise.

At 6 a.m., a bugle sounded for breakfast. Men unwrapped themselves from the comfort of their cots and headed for the line. They ate mashed potatoes (something which Rosales despises to this day), beans, sometimes a piece of chicken, and a slice of bread. They spent their days waiting for the sun to set, listening for jobs announced by loudspeakers. “One hundred men needed for Nebraska; two hundred men for Michigan; a hundred for Pecos, Texas” (only new guys went there, Rosales clarifies, because that was cotton picking work and that was rough).

At their highest, cotton plants reach about four feet high and can’t thrive unless it’s scorching hot. In July and August, Braceros hung sacks over their chest, leaned over and plucked the white dots from the greenness. The crop didn’t weigh much, but the heat took everything out of the men. Phil Ochs, a 60s protest singer, knew this when he sang:

*The sun will hit your body, and 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*

When the right job didn’t come, one of Rosales’ cousins called a former boss in Minnesota to pick them up. The boss arrived, but he wasn’t sure he wanted all of them: Rosales was too skinny. Could he handle working without dying? The boss determined he could not. A cousin’s intervention saved him: “What ever he can’t do,” assured his cousin, “I’ll do!” So Rosales was allowed to work. In Minnesota, they cleared out beet and cabbage crops early in the season. They were sent to harvest carrots. Then onions. Then potatoes. Mornings, late in the summer, they were sent to harvest corn. The dew rested on the leaves like sweat and with every tug, it fell on foreheads, shoulders, hands, and feet. Shortly after starting each morning, the men were soaked. When their contract soon finished and they were sent on a bus back to the border.

Most men who were Braceros are past retirement today—but their stories are still told. Former Braceros compare their border crossings to the present border situation over dinner tables and barbecues with beer. Chance scattered these men in this side of the border and the other. There are legendary aspects to Braceros that they sometimes give themselves. But I consider most stories of coming here and going home sincere. In June of 1999 in Zacatecas, Mexico, a local newspaper *Mi Pueblo*, published another side of the Bracero’s life—crossing the border back home:

It was as if they had fed us to a hungry pack of wolves. The number one enemy for the Bracero—the Mexican immigration officers! These were guys who, for no reason, required a “mordida,” a bite, a bribe. No one was excused. Oh well, that’s how we arrived at our native land. Many of us throwing around our English. [We] just had a few beers, and man! Could [we] speak English. Soon, we’d forget it and we’d go back to borrowing money to come back as Braceros.

(Shortened versions of this piece appeared on Chicago Public Radio's 848 and on National Public Radio's All Things Considered in August 2002)