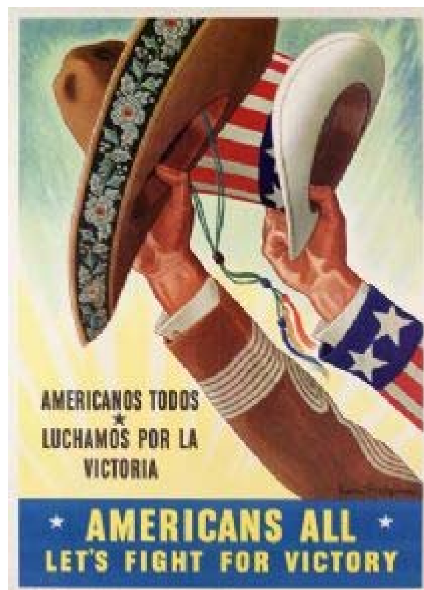
“Bittersweet Harvest:” Collecting and Exhibiting the History of the Bracero Program



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I. Introduction

This World War II Poster stands in the exhibition "Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942-1964."[1] It immediately catches the attention of the visitor familiar with Rosie the Riveter and the mobilization of the female workforce during the War. Yet, the American government designed this banner to assemble a very different group of laborers, a group that was either unknown or later forgotten by the public: the Mexican braceros. Indeed, few realize that the Emergency Farm Labor Program, better known as the Bracero Program, brought millions of Mexicans into the United States as guest workers during and after the war. Many have argued that this program exacerbated immigration problems between the United States and Mexico and that it stands today as a model for a contemporary guest worker program. Recognizing that the age of this generation of men stood as an obstacle to the preservation of its little-known story, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and other academic partners conceived a project of oral history documentation and exhibition in 2005. The Bracero History Project soon collected over 3,000 stories and artifacts associated with the Bracero Program and synthesized the oral histories into an online database. These tales and objects, along with NMAH's collection of Leonard Nadel photographs documenting the Bracero Program, were put on display in "Bittersweet Harvest," a special NMAH exhibition running September 2009 through January 2010.

This paper seeks to explore the value of the oral history project and exhibition in terms of the role of museums in community curation and controversial subjects. More specifically, it

[1] World War II poster by L. Helguera, Courtesy San Diego Historical Society

analyzes the collection and exhibition portions of the project through their ability to collaborate with and display a stigmatized community. I argue that while NMAH curators and partners succeeded in working with the ex-braceros to collect oral histories, the restraints placed on a national museum by public expectations about the exhibitable ultimately prevented the creation of a show which accurately displayed these narratives. This case study raises questions about how far museums—despite the best of intentions—can go in depicting stories contrary to the national narrative. At the same time, it provides a model for the successful approach to working with a minority group. Finally, although visitor data is not available at this time, we can speculate as to the significance of this project and accompanying exhibition in raising the awareness of immigration history through its display at the national level.

II. Research Methods

This project came to fruition after several visits to "Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942-1964" at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. As I wandered between the free standing banners, Leonard Nadel photographs, and artifact cases, I could not help but marvel at the significance of this exhibition. Not only did the show bring to the National Mall an opportunity to reflect on the treatment of a minority group that is often excluded from museums, but it also established an ongoing public history project for preserving the accounts of ex-braceros. I was hooked.

Little academic literature exists on the specific nature of "Bittersweet Harvest" because the special exhibition only opened to the public in September 2009. I determined, therefore, that physically immersing myself in the gallery provided the best method for understanding the visitor experience, curatorial voice, and design process. Throughout the fall, I spent several

mornings in the exhibit. During each visit, I studied the posters filled with bilingual text and telling photographs. I sat on the gallery's benches, listening to others' reactions and following their movements and interactions with the various elements. I participated in the interactive components: a "Quest by Text" message, a computer with a link to the Bracero History Project website, a listening station with recordings of twelve oral histories, and a touch table covered with reproductions of bracero clothing and accessories. A bilingual volunteer always provided an enthusiastic greeting and additional information. Through these visits, I developed an awareness of the layout, background, and purpose of the exhibition.

To learn more about how curators designed the show while working with the community, I contacted NMAH Curators Peter Liebhold and Steve Valasquez. Mr. Valasquez provided information on the process of collecting oral histories and directed me to several blogs on the project. Mr. Liebhold explained some of the outreach components.

Finally, I spend significant time surfing the internet for press releases, exhibition reviews, and other blogs about "Bittersweet Harvest." Francisoco Aragon's *Letras Latinas* blog was particularly helpful in explaining the "Poetics of Labor Reading Series," a public program held at the exhibit which involved readings from the Latino community. The NMAH website displayed an online version of the exhibition. With text identical to that of the exhibition posters, this proved to be a useful reference when working at home.

III. Collecting Information from the Community

The Bracero History Project began in 2005 as a partnership between the George Mason University Center for History and New Media, the Smithsonian National Museum of American

History, Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America at Brown University, and The Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso. Concerned about recent discussions for new guest worker programs and public ignorance, the partners sought to document the history of the Emergency Farm Labor Program (better known as the Bracero Program in reference to the Spanish word for laborer or farmhand). "As a result of labor shortages during [World War II]…the bracero program, begun in 1943, brought 4.8 million Mexican workers across the border between 1943 and 1964."[2] According to the Bracero History Archive website, the partners formulated a common goal to address these needs and issues:

> "The Bracero Program, which brought millions of Mexican guest workers to the United States, ended more than four decades ago. Current debates about immigration policy—including discussions about a new guest worker program—have put the program back in the news and made it all the more important to understand this chapter of American history. Yet while top U.S. and Mexican officials re-examine the Bracero Program as a possible model, most Americans know very little about the program, the nation's largest experiment with guest workers. Indeed, until very recently, this important story has been inadequately documented and studied, even by scholars."[3]

With the identification of this challenge, affiliates of the Bracero History Project undertook the collection of primary accounts and relevant artifacts. In the end, they "collected nearly 3,000 oral history interviews and objects related to the history of the Bracero Program, including photographs, pay stubs, ID cards, and labor contracts."[4] This success may be attributed to their careful navigation of community curation. The following discussion will analyze this portion of the Bracero History Project as an example of an inclusive approach to collecting public history.

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[2] Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 39

[3] "About," *Bracero History Archive,* http://braceroarchive.org/about

[4] Deborah Baum, "Professor, students contribute to Smithsonian exhibition on Mexican 'guest workers,'" *Today at Brown*, September 8, 2009, http://today.brown.edu/articles/2009/09/bracero.

To record the oral histories of ex-braceros, interviewers coordinated town halls in the American southwest and parts of Mexico. At these meetings, they informed "local Mexican communities about the project and invited people to share their stories."[5] During the first few town halls, collectors projected images and distributed postcards of Leonard Nadel photographs to trigger memories and explain the goals of the project. Nadel used photography to document bracero life and its challenges in 1956 and his work became the inspiration for "Bittersweet Harvest."[6] High demand for the photographs and large crowds soon prompted Curator Steve Valasquez to "make large prints out of the images so that ex-braceros could view at their own pace."[7] Indeed, Valasquez initially underestimated the degree of support and attendance for the town halls. Before he finished setting up for his first town hall meeting in San Jose, a young man had arrived with the stained hat and story of his grandfather. "By the middle of [that] day we had to skip lunch to try to accommodate all of the folks who came," and as word spread to neighboring communities, lines soon formed before sessions began.[8]

By traveling to the ex-braceros and their communities, the project partners facilitated a welcoming environment. Associated with large bureaucratic organizations like Smithsonian Institution and elite universities such as Brown, the collectors might have appeared intimidating to this group often excluded from the mainstream. At a restaurant in Salinas, California, some of

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[5] Ibid.

[6] "National Museum of American History Explores Bracero Story in New Exhibition," *Smithsonian National Museum of American History,* http://multivu.prnewswire.com/mnr/americanhistory/39987/.

[7] Mireya Loza, "Putting Names with the Faces of Braceros," *O Say Can You See Blog*, October 28, 2009, http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/osaycanyousee/2009/10/putting-names-with-faces-of-braceros.html.

[8] Steve Valasquez, "Collecting Bracero History," *O Say Can You See Blog,* September 10, 2009, http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/osaycanyousee/2009/09/collecting-bracero-history.html.

the collectors joined a meeting of ex-braceros concerned about securing the remainder of their back pay. Initially, the group was suspicious, asking questions such as "What are you going to do with the information you gather? Why are you doing this? Will this help our cause (collecting back wages)?"[9] By separating themselves from their institutions and instead appearing as respectful and curious individuals, the interviewers earned trust from the ex-braceros.

Many interviewers also shared a common background with those town hall attendees, either as Hispanic Americans or bracero descendants. For example, Brown University doctoral candidate Mireya Loza is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and grew up listening to stories from family members who participated in the bracero program. While interviewing various men, she wanted to convey her appreciation for and identification with their tales: "I want them to know that there is a whole generation of young people who remember them. I want them to understand how they inspired a generation of Latinos – and specifically, a generation of young Latinos at Brown – who are working on projects to ensure that the legacy of the braceros is not forgotten."[10] Even with a common language, NMAH Curator Steve Valasquez worried about connecting with the ex-braceros: "Was my Spanish good enough to have a meaningful conversation with these folks?"[11] Clearly, interviewers desired to establish an open and comforting context for story collecting by expressing deep respect for the ex-braceros.

This welcoming approach mirrors that of the CARA (Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation) Project. To address calls for a national exhibition on the Chicano art movement, the design team needed to collect, document, and display the history of the topic. Task forces of

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Steve Valasquez, "Collecting Bracero History," *O Say Can You See Blog,* September 10, 2009, http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/osaycanyousee/2009/09/collecting-bracero-history.html.

Chicano artists and scholars provided advice during various stages of the project. The result was what Edith Tonelli, director of the Wright Art Gallery, called accommodating the "new insiders." Like Valasquez and Loza, these Chicano professionals complemented the traditional curator by possessing a unique link to the community in question. "The process created with the CARA exhibition did away with the traditional curatorial role that assumes that there is one person or group who is all-knowledgeable about specific phenomena."[12] Curators, community specialists and scholars, and the community itself must work together to produce a successful exhibition.

IV. Displaying Controversial Oral History

Following a successful collection of oral histories and artifacts, curators needed to synthesize their work into a public exhibition. In doing so, they struggled to find a balance between the emotional and the presentable or exhibitable. The majority of oral histories were very personal, drawing on the trauma and discrimination experienced. Mireya Loza found that "women tell me about the difficultly of raising children on their own, and some sob when they talk about the children they buried while their husbands were in the U.S. Of course, there are happy and funny stories, but oftentimes I wished those outweighed the tragic stories."[13] After years of harsh labor, many braceros never received a portion of their salaries that had been promised to them by the Mexican and American governments. "It was very sad because some

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[12] Alicia M. Gonzalez and Edith A. Tonelli, "*Companeros* and Partners: The CARA Project," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steve D. Lavine, Washington, DC (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 283.

[13] Baum, "Professor, students contribute," September 8, 2009.

people lost their hope, their money," said bracero descendant Aurelio Marin.[14] In addition to painful memories, ex-braceros experience isolation, a feeling that their contributions have been ignored or forgotten. In sharing their history, many ex-braceros put their lives on display to the public—a rewarding, but very complicated and sometimes problematic move. "By investing a part of the self and allowing it to be viewed and (one hopes) appreciated and understood by others, there is of course the potential for criticism as well."[15] It is possible that their expectations for the project may not be met as personal stories must be reconciled with a public desire for national unity.

Views on the unexhibitable control the nature in which personal accounts may be displayed in a museum, especially those on the National Mall. The Australian Museum Association's 2006 "Contested Sites" survey of worldwide museum visitors and staff about controversy illustrated that people want to avoid pressure or threats in these institutions. The American audience, in particular, opposes exhibitions confronting ethical or religious beliefs, criticizing the United States, or pushing against a national narrative. Although the bracero story highlights traditional themes of the American dream, its tales of opportunity are often overshadowed by realities of dehumanization at the border, deception by the government, and abuse by employers. A full and accurate display on the story of the bracero would force NMAH visitors to question history and grapple with government sponsored abuse—topics simply unacceptable to the majority of American museum goers. Many curators avoid overly controversial exhibits because of they fear a loss of funding and audiences. At the same time,

[14] Rachel Uranga, "Rooted in the Past Exhibit Explores Nation's Bracero Program," *Daily News (Los Angeles)*, May 15, 2006.

[15] Gonzalez and Tonelli, "*Companeros,*" 383.

some curators with experience in exhibiting Hispanic culture, such as Edith Tonelli, are slowly coming to terms with the duty to present the controversial:

> "I was not, and still am not, comfortable addressing that which is emotional and value-laden; it is considered "unprofessional" and "non-neutral" in most business or scholarly communities. But I am claiming that unless we in museums, and those of us in universities as well, look at our jobs as including this kind of risk taking and confrontation, we will never accomplish the goals we often profess to have concerning the representation and participation of a diverse and multicultural citizenry, and museums and universities will fail once again to be leaders in American cultural life."[16]

At NMAH, curators navigated the conflicting views of ex-braceros and visitors by framing "Bittersweet Harvest" to emphasize the need to learn from the past in light of current immigration debates and proposals for guest worker programs. The introductory banner sets this tone for the exhibition, stating that "Dependence on Mexican labor has been a source of great opportunity as well as great conflict for Mexicans and Americans." It goes on to explain the title of the show: "Both bitter and sweet, the bracero experience tells a story of exploitation but also of opportunity."[17] Although both lines highlight the contrasting experiences of the labor program, the use of the word "opportunity" to open and then close the label appears as an attempt to stress this aspect over conflict and exploitation. In the following banners, this theme continues—a distinction between opportunity and exploitation that seems favor the former in a pattern that mirrors the display of the English and then Spanish texts. In the "Broken Promises" panel, for example, one expects to discover detailed stories of hardship and targets for blame.

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[16] Gonzalez and Tonelli, "*Companeros*," 281.
[17] "Online Exhibition: Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964," *Smithsonian National Museum of American History*, http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=770.

Instead, the label simply notes that contracts “did not *always* deliver.”[18] It lists some of the problems encountered by the braceros—poor housing, discrimination, unsafe transportation—but it fails to direct the audiences’ blame to the American government, farms, or businesses. Finally, it closes on a positive note by affirming that “many braceros endured these conditions, hoping to make more money than they would at home.” With this statement, the curatorial voice pits bracero hardships against Mexican destitution, suggesting that despite exploitation, life was always better in the United States—a affirmation craved by a sensitive American audience in an exhibition that might otherwise challenge their national narrative.

Debate over the presentation of a particular Nadel photograph illustrates the sharp divisions over the exhibitable in “Bittersweet Harvest.” This problematic image features U.S. border agents spraying a group of naked braceros with DDT (See Figure 1). Leonard Nadel cropped the original image from the waist down. At the town halls and in the exhibition, curators chose to display this version of the image for sensitive audiences. This decision

Figure 1. Cropped Photo of DDT Fumigation Station, Hidalgo, TX. Photography by Leonard Nadel, 1956.

provoked criticism from the ex-braceros. “We later learned,” noted Mireya Loza, “that the men wanted and needed to see the photos depicting the most humiliating circumstances. Men in the

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[18] My italics.

audience explained that the sprayings, along with medical inspections, were the most dehumanizing experiences of the contracting process and perhaps of their entire experience as braceros."[19] Museums tend to avoid presenting this concept, what Crane terms "evidence of suffering caused," because of its power to incite feelings of shame contrary to the traditional American memory.[20] Yet, this action unfairly denies the suffering experienced by minority groups. "An ex-bracero angrily explained what had been cropped—that the workers were naked—and argued that people should see the complete image. He felt we were hiding the truth with the cropped photograph and that the truth needed public exposure. 'Where were human rights then? Were we not human?'"[21] Thus, although curators successfully collected evidence from the bracero community, their ability to accurately and fully display these oral histories was negated by requirements for content sensitivity in a national history museum.

V. Conclusion and Significance

On December 5 and 6, 2009, The National Museum of American History presented "Poetics of Labor: Poetry inspired by stories of labor and migration." In the "Bittersweet Harvest" gallery, Puerto Rican native Naomi Ayala and first-generation Mexican-American and gardener John Olivares Espinoza shared their works.[22] The museum hosted a similar public event in September, where Diana Garcia read several poems composed especially for the

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[19] Mireya Loza, "Names with the Faces."

[20] Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *Museum Studies* (2004), 329.

[21] Mireya Loza, "Names with the Faces."

[22] Francisco Aragon, "This Weekend in DC: The Poetics of Labor," *Letras Latinas Blog*, December 4, 2009, http://latinopoetryreview.blogspot.com/.

exhibit.[23] These readings reflect an important goal of the exhibition designers: to promote a full dialogue on exploitation and current immigration issues. Through these public programs, the exhibition introduced additional members connected to the bracero community and created an environment for them to share their stories on a national stage. A traveling version of "Bittersweet Harvest" is also scheduled to tour multiple cities in the United States beginning in February 2010. "SITES [Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service] is deeply gratified to share with the nation a central part of American labor history of which so few are aware," said Anna Cohn, director of SITES. "The story of the bracero is rooted in hope and determination. It is a testament to the enduring contributions that Mexicans and Mexican Americans have made to American life."[24] The traveling exhibition creates opportunities to reach new audiences unable to visit the show in Washington, D.C. Featured in many local museums and Latino cultural centers, these shows will continue to build relationships with the bracero community. Curator Peter Liebhold presented the story of "Bittersweet Harvest" in Italy, expanding the scope of its network to the international stage.[25] Finally, the Bracero History Project website provides a link so that visitors may share their own stories—enabling people across the United States, and indeed throughout the world, to contribute to the formation of a new national memory.

These outreach and community programs ensure that "Bittersweet Harvest" attains and influences a large audience. The traveling exhibition and other events serve as a means to

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[23] Francisco Aragon, email to author, November 9, 2009.

[24] "The 'Bittersweet' Struggle of the Bracero Is Revealed in a New Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition," http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=32108&int_modo=1

[25] Peter Liebhold, email to author, November 9, 2009.

promote ongoing dialogue about the braceros and other guest worker programs. Although statistics on visitors and their reactions are unavailable, it is possible to speculate on the significance of this project as an example of working with a minority community and of highlighting a forgotten chapter of not only the lives of a stigmatized group, but also of the nation as a whole. Without a nationally designated museum for Latinos in Washington, DC, the NMAH opened its doors to create a space for reflection on history and debate over the contemporary. Curators did have to compromise some of the harsh realities of the bracero story in order to placate a sensitive audience, but even without the full story, the simple act of acknowledging this past and securing its display is a valuable step. "The *Bittersweet Harvest* exhibition and the oral history project are important because they will inform the public about the nearly-forgotten Bracero Program. The project provides a foundation for the Mexican American community to look into its past and its contributions to American history, giving a voice and a space within the national museum," noted Curator Steve Valazquez. "I'm proud that our work encourages visitors to reflect on the contributions made by Mexicans and Mexican Americans to the history of U.S. labor, economy, and culture."[26] It is hoped that this project will set an example for museums as the first of many to acknowledge the presence and power of Latinos in the narrative of the United States.

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[26] Steve Valasquez, "Collecting Bracero History," September 10, 2009.

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