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Tracing Race Through the Narrative of a Oaxacan Ex-Bracero

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SIT Mexico: Migration, Borders, and Transnational Communities

Independent Study Project

May 16, 2019

Introduction

On March 21st, 2019, I was at a birthday lunch for my host mother at her parents' house in Oaxaca de Juárez, Mexico, where I was studying abroad. Her father began to ask me about the normal meal times in the United States, and shared that he had witnessed this cultural difference firsthand during his time as a migrant worker in the United States. I asked him more questions and learned that he had first gone to Chesterfield, Missouri as a participant in the bracero program in 1953 and later to Los Angeles as an undocumented migrant in the 1980s. I was intrigued. Last fall, I had traveled with the Latin American Studies department at Davidson College to see Bittersweet Harvest, the Smithsonian's traveling exhibition about the Bracero Program. There, we listened to a lecture by Dr. Mireya Loza about the Bracero History Archive. It was the first time I learned about the bracero program in any detail, and I was fascinated by the snippets of participant's stories shared through photos, documents and quotations. Less than a year later and 2,188 miles away, I had stumbled upon a person in my own host family who had lived this experience and was eager to share his story with me. I listened as he recounted his memories of the program, asking a few questions along the way. Eventually, he told me about a supervisor who was malicious toward himself several other Mexican braceros and I began to wonder to what extent race colored his experience on the program. I decided to conduct a case study to answer that question, hypothesizing that he confronted both systemic racism and personal prejudice throughout his time as a bracero the United States, and that these shaped his work experiences more than his social life.

Literature Review

It is essential to identify and analyze the dimensions of race and racism when studying a migratory phenomenon. Race plays a part in every stage of the migratory process: it shapes who

feels the need to leave their country of origin, who is given the legal sanction to enter their country of destination and who is not, and who is embraced and who is rejected in that country upon arrival. To be able to understand how race impacted my research subject's migratory experience as a bracero, it's important to enter this study with both a conceptual framework around race and a general understanding of the history and context of the bracero program. In the following 11 paragraphs, I will first establish a theoretical schema to be able to analyze the racial dynamics in my subject's account, and then create an overview of the bracero program to allow readers to approach his story informed.

Sociologist Ann Morning (2009) explains how individual and collective "racial conceptualizations," or understandings of race, vary according to time, geographical space, political leanings, and myriad other factors. Perspectives on the roots of race have historically fallen into three categories: those who see race as biological (essentialists or determinists), those who see race as a sociocultural creation (constructionists), and those who see race as some combination of the two.¹ In the 19th century, anthropologists applied Darwin's theory of natural selection to order groups of humans on a scale from savage to barbaric to civilized, using pseudoscience to argue for the biological superiority of Europeans and inferiority of everyone else.² This biological determinist understanding of race has been broadly refuted over the past one hundred-some years, by research spanning from Franz Boas' 1912 study to the findings of evolutionary biologists R. C. Lewontin in 1972 and Yu et al. in 2002. Boas demonstrated that from one generation to the next, newly arrived immigrant families could experience major shifts in core physical characteristics such as height, weight, and cranial shape due to improved

¹ Morning, 1168-169.

² Moses, 96-97.

nutrition, access to health care and other environmental factors.³ Lewontin's 1972 study and Yu and others' 2002 study both revealed that there is as much or more biological variation among members of what is considered to be a 'racial group' as there is between members of different 'racial groups.'⁴ Lewontin says, "Since racial classification is... of virtually no genetic or taxonomic significance either, no justification can be offered for its significance."

Anthropologists and sociologists today broadly agree that race is not a biologically-defined category, but a sociocultural construct.⁵ They owe this view, at least in part, to W. E. B. DuBois, who as early as 1897 argued that race is constructed by social and historical factors in his address-turned-essay "The Conservation of Races."⁶ Recognizing that the social constructs like race have biological implications because they regulate processes of sexuality and reproduction, some anthropologists such as Yolanda Moses (2011) now advocate for a biocultural approach to race that rejects biological determinism and seeks to discover the processes through which "American socially constructed racial categories [have] become phenotypically marked and culturally real in our world."⁷

All of these racial conceptualizations are transmitted through "racial discourse," a society's oral and written words about race, which serve as its ideological battleground.⁸ On this battleground, meanings of racism are contested as well. Woody Doane (2006) argues that the principal division between competing definitions of racism is its framing as either individual or systemic. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) explains who is on each side of the divide, saying "whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or

³ Boas, 530-533.

⁴ Lewontin, 397, Yu et al. 273.

⁵ Wagner et al., 324 and Golash-Boza, 130-131.

⁶ Gooding Williams.

⁷ Moses, 101.

⁸ Doane, 256.

institutionalized.”⁹ The former definition frames racism as individual, and usually overt or blatant.¹⁰ Systemic definitions, such as that of Ramon Grosfoguel (2016), show how racism has been entrenched worldwide. He says, “Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial worldsystem.”¹¹ Racism against indigenous people is a good example of this systemic definition of racism. Yin Paradies (2016) notes that it has been shaped by a history of settler-colonialism, which was comprised of practices such as “war, displacement, forced labour, removal of children, relocation, ecological destruction, massacres, genocide, slavery, (un)intentional spread of deadly diseases, banning of indigenous languages, regulation of marriage, assimilation and eradication of social, cultural and spiritual practices.”¹² In a process beginning the moment settlers came to the New World and continuing through the present day, racism against indigenous peoples has been “normalized and institutionally legitimized, thereby rendering it invisible,” according to Dwanna Robertson (2015).¹³ While Doane and Bonilla-Silva explain the individual and systemic as competing definitions of racism, other scholars such as Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer (2009) frame them as two of the many different types of a broader category of racism.¹⁴

Types of racism include (but are not limited to) individual, interpersonal, internalized, cultural, institutional, and systemic. *Individual racism* can be understood as personal bias and prejudice based on race.¹⁵ When those biases and prejudices manifest, covertly or overtly, in

⁹ Cited in Noel, 326.

¹⁰ Henry and Tator, 3.

¹¹ Grosfoguel, 10.

¹² Paradies, 84.

¹³ Robertson, 115.

¹⁴ Desmond and Emirbayer.

¹⁵ Scott, 2.

everyday interactions, it is referred to as *interpersonal racism*.¹⁶ When the biases and prejudices are force-fed to the groups they harm, subjecting the “victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them” it is *internalized racism*.¹⁷ Desmond and Emirbayer call internalized racism “symbolic violence” to portray how people of color unconsciously take in the ideas that contribute to their own oppression.¹⁸ Internalized racism is closely tied to *cultural racism*, which Chaunda Scott (2007) defines as “not only a preference for the culture, heritage, and values of one’s own group (ethnocentrism), but the imposition of this culture on other groups.”¹⁹ In 1967, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton coined the term *institutional racism*, and used it to refer to racially discriminatory practices within institutions.²⁰ Since that time, the term has come to connote “the differential effects of policies, practices, and laws on members of certain racial groups,” which still fits within the original definition as policies, practices, and laws are created, enacted, and enforced by institutions.²¹ One can also look at institutional racism by posing the question: Which racial groups have easier and greater access to material resources and power and why?²² In answering the “why” part of that question, one may encounter evidence of both institutional racism and systemic racism, as there is considerable overlap between the two. Wendy Leo Moore (2012) defines *systemic racism* as “the dynamics of white supremacy that characterize and organize social practices, interactions, institutions and structures.”²³ This term *systemic racism* is often used

¹⁶ Teeger, 227.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall cited in Pyke, 552.

¹⁸ Desmond and Emirbayer, 347.

¹⁹ Scott, 4.

²⁰ González, 331.

²¹ Scott, 4.

²² Came and Humphries, 98.

²³ Leo Moore, 614.

interchangeably with *structural racism*. All of these forms of racism are interconnected, and feed into each other.

These forms of racism do not operate in an isolated vacuum, however. They combine with sexism, classism, nativism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and other types of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw created the concept of *intersectionality* in 1989 to discuss the unique and heightened types of oppression Black women face due to their race-and-gender identity, and since then other scholars have applied it to examine how the other social categories are weaponized in conjunction with each other.²⁴ Another term applied to discuss both gender and race is *horizontal hostility*. Originally used by second wave feminists such as Florynce Kennedy to talk about infighting within the women's movement in the 1970s, *horizontal hostility* now refers to when one oppressed group shows or acts on prejudice against another oppressed group, detracting energy from the fight against the systems of oppression maintained by those in power.²⁵ Although Desmond and Emirbayer do not use the term, they encapsulate *horizontal hostility* as they state people of color "can help to reinforce the white power structure by lashing out against other non-White groups."²⁶ Another detrimental phenomenon within and among minority communities is *colorism*, which Meghan Burke (2008) explains as "the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin."²⁷

Unfortunately, race is often a specter in migration studies, impacting the research topic but underemployed or underdeveloped as a theoretical framework of analysis. David Moffette and William Walters (2018) conducted a survey of the literature on the governmentality of migration and borders and found three framings of race: the first, called *the absent presence of*

²⁴ See Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays and Tomlinson.

²⁵ White and Langer, 537-538.

²⁶ Desmond and Emirbayer.

²⁷ Burke, 17.

race, where works are informed by race but rarely name it; another where race and racialization are mentioned, but not analyzed in their specific contexts; and a third where works do track the historical shifts in racial discourse and systems.²⁸ In the literature on the Mexico-U.S. migration, the *absent presence of race* is visible in Donato (1999), Rosenblum et al (2012), Massey and Espinoza (1997), and others. Each reviews the factors motivating northward migration from Mexico over time, and not one mentions race. However, in Mexico and across the world, *systemic racism* and *colorism* have historically put nonwhite, especially darker-skinned individuals at a socioeconomic disadvantage, which contributes to their decision to migrate. Then, once migrants arrive in their host country, they are subject to what George J. Sanchez (1999) calls “racialized nativism,” anti-immigrant sentiment that is fundamentally tied to race.²⁹ In a similar vein, Hurriyet Babacan (2010) discusses how ideas of race, culture and ethnicity impact the social exclusion/inclusion migrants experience and notions of their (un)belonging within the context of the host nation-state.³⁰ Given that race impacts every facet of migration, my study will attempt to use race as an analytical lens to understand the migratory experience of one Mexican man who participated in the Bracero program in 1953.

The bracero program was a bilateral arrangement that permitted able-bodied Mexican men to enter the agricultural fields and railways of the United States as temporary guest workers. Using Peter Kok’s (1997) definition of migration, “the crossing of a boundary of a predefined spatial unit involved in a change of residence,”³¹ regardless of permanence, Braceros qualify as migrants, albeit temporary ones. Although it was formally named “The Mexican Farm Labor Supply Program and the Mexican Labor Agreement,” it soon became known by the Spanish

²⁸ Moffette and Walters, 94.

²⁹ Sánchez, 371.

³⁰ Babacan, 7-23.

³¹ Kok, 20.

word for its participants: “braceros,” which a term derived from *brazos*, which means arms. This near-metonymy is fitting as growers often saw the braceros as expendable field hands. Although the program was originally framed as a wartime emergency measure, it continued for almost two decades after the end of the Second World War as growers and both nations sought to combat new labor deficits and curb undocumented migration. As Catherine Vézina (2016) summarizes, throughout its 22-year run, the program “allowed the two countries to regulate the migratory flow in accordance with their own needs and interests.”³²

The motivation behind the program’s creation is often condensed like this: at the same time as there was a deficit of U.S. American workers, there was a surplus of available Mexican workers. Although this explanation is simplistic and not all-encompassing, it is true. Before the United States’ entry into World War II, growers and governmental agencies alike voiced their concerns about the imminent loss of farmhands to the draft and to wartime industrial production. To avoid loss in crop yield, growers advocated for the importation of Mexican workers.³³ This proposition appealed to Mexico for various reasons. First, factors such as land reform, water and seed scarcity, drought and limited credit had decreased crop yields and increased unemployment in rural Mexico.³⁴ Poverty was rampant in the Mexican countryside.³⁵ However, Mexico did not only see the bracero program as a means to reduce unemployment. Deborah Cohen (2011) points out that upper-class Mexicans and politicians had long scapegoated *campesinos* for Mexico’s underdevelopment, and hoped that the bracero program would modernize them. In their minds, it would teach the *braceros* the latest and greatest agricultural methods and instill in them the value

³² Vézina, 215.

³³ Grove, 309.

³⁴ Mandeel, 171.

³⁵ Garcia, 34-35.

of hard work, both of which they would then implement back home.³⁶ However, Cohen fails to mention that the idea of *campesinos*' backwardness and need for modernization is racially charged, as in Mexico there is some association between rural *pueblos* or *municipios*, poverty, and indigeneity. Mireya Loza (2016) hits the mark as she states that the "Mexican state and U.S. growers viewed indigeneity as a form of racial deviancy that could be corrected through modernization and mestizaje."³⁷

From a political economy standpoint, Joon Kim (2004) breaks the bracero program into three periods: legitimization, crisis, and normalization.³⁸ Historian Manuel García y Griego (1996) also formulates a tripartite periodization; wartime cooperation, turbulence and transition, and apogee and demise.³⁹ In Kim's *legitimization* phase from 1942-1947, the U.S. government sought to justify its foreign labor program, which violated prior immigration laws. Kim argues that the U.S. government also sought to protect the rights of domestic workers competing with the braceros, at the same time as the Mexican government sought to protect the rights of braceros.⁴⁰ García y Griego refers to this phase simply as "wartime cooperation."⁴¹ During this phase, several U.S. railroad companies reported a lack of railway maintenance workers, and over 80,000 braceros were sent to work on the tracks. With the return of U.S. soldiers in 1945, the demand for railroad braceros decreased and the last of them returned home in April 1946.⁴² The *crisis* phase, or the "turbulence and transition," began a year later when a law passed ending the entire bracero program; the war was over and so the "wartime emergency" program was no

³⁶ Cohen, 6.

³⁷ Loza, 10.

³⁸ Kim, 14.

³⁹ García y Griego cited in Loza, 3-4.

⁴⁰ Ana Elizabeth Rosas disagrees, saying "Neither the U.S. nor the Mexican government advocated or protected the interests of Mexican immigrant men or their families" (7).

⁴¹ García y Griego cited in Loza, 3-4.

⁴² Mandeel, 172.

longer justified.⁴³ However, growers did not stop hiring Mexican workers; instead they worked with Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS henceforth) who authorized undocumented workers to enter the United States.⁴⁴ The two governments rushed to restart the bracero program, hoping that reopening the legal pathway would curb the spike in undocumented migration.

Economist Wayne A. Grove (1996) notes that the beginning of the Korean War in 1950 prompted the program's reboot as well, as growers anticipated a higher demand for cotton products and a reduction in their workforce due to the draft.⁴⁵ The 1950s also marked another mass exodus of rural inhabitants, especially Black farmworkers, causing a loss of labor larger than that of the war mobilization period. This, Grove argues, left growers with a less productive workforce that mainly consisted of women, children, and older folks, pushing them to call for a steady supply of seasonal labor from Mexico once again.⁴⁶ More than 3 million braceros were hired from 1952-1964, a much larger amount than during the Second World War.⁴⁷ García y Griego highlights how the increase in braceros corresponded to an increase in the degree of exploitation during this period, which was brought to national attention with the Farmworkers Movement and which eventually led to the demise of the program.⁴⁸ Kim interprets the increase in braceros as the result of an intentional effort by INS to discourage growers from hiring undocumented workers.⁴⁹ At the same time, the undocumented workers who were hired were rounded up and deported en masse in INS's 1954 Operation Wetback.⁵⁰ Unlike the undocumented workers, braceros were safe from the INS' nationalist deportation project, but

⁴³ Kim, 15 and García y Griego cited in Loza, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Kim, 15.

⁴⁵ Grove, 309.

⁴⁶ Grove, 308.

⁴⁷ Kim, 15.

⁴⁸ García y Griego cited in Loza, 3-4.

⁴⁹ Kim, 15.

⁵⁰ Kim, 15.

they were not safe from the “nationalist, often xenophobic anxieties” of other agencies nor of the general public.⁵¹

Braceros were subject to many abuses of power: invasive medical examinations, low wages, poor working and living conditions, segregation, dehumanizing treatment and racial hostility. Matt Garcia (2011) argues that Braceros “more closely resembled colonial subjects” than immigrants; their labor was exploited for an “emerging American empire.”⁵² Don Mitchell (2012) reminds readers that this exploitation is situated in an “entrenched landscape of agrarian capitalist accumulation” where profit came at the expense of all else.⁵³ Officially, braceros were paid the hourly and piece rates established in their contract according to a “prevailing wage,” but this prevailing wage was set by the growers with no influence from worker’s organizations.⁵⁴ Also, the growers had full freedom to decide whether to pay the braceros by the piece or by the hour. Often, when the work was the most difficult, the grower would choose to pay by the piece, even if a bracero pushed himself as hard as he could for eight hours, he would not earn the minimum “prevailing wage.” Conversely, when the work was easier, and a piece rate might advantage the bracero, the growers would pay them by the hour.⁵⁵ In terms of working conditions, many farmers required braceros to use the short-handled hoe, which forced them to be constantly hunched over, causing debilitating back strain.⁵⁶ Safety protocols were not always followed to the letter, which could lead to accidents. Often, braceros were housed in unsanitary or dilapidated facilities, they were only provided one blanket in the winter, and the food they were served was of low quality and not sufficient to sustain them.⁵⁷ Yet, before they even began

⁵¹ Cohen, 3.

⁵² Garcia, 35.

⁵³ Mitchell, 6.

⁵⁴ Mandeel, 175.

⁵⁵ Mandeel, 175.

⁵⁶ Mandeel, 175.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, 6 and Mandeel, 176.

work, braceros were mistreated. Medical examinations at the border required braceros to strip naked, pass through to the medical area in groups, and have their prostates grabbed and squeezed by doctors checking for hernias.⁵⁸ The governments also forced braceros to undress in order to be sprayed with pesticides.⁵⁹ These state-mandated processes have racial undertones, as they operate on underlying assumptions that affiliate Mexicans with disease, parasites, and contamination. Braceros also had to confront more overt, interpersonal racism that could manifest in violence and even murder.⁶⁰

Braceros did not take these injustices lying down. Mireya Loza discusses the activism of *Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados Unidos*, a bracero organization that aligned itself with labor unions, petitioned the Mexican Government to take action and protect their rights, and criticized it when it failed to do so.⁶¹ Erasmo Gamboa (1990) talks about how braceros in the Northwest frequently went on strike to protest low and discriminatory wages. They disrupted production even in the face of violence and intimidation, threats of prosecution, and the withholding of food. Although more often than not, the braceros were unsuccessful in obtaining higher wages, they continued to resist unfair payment practices.⁶² Don Mitchell notes that that braceros in California also protested living conditions, work hours, some companies' practice of obligating braceros to eat on site (which violated the terms of the program), and the quantity and quality of food served there.⁶³ Another way the braceros resisted was breaking their contracts and going to other companies to sow and harvest crops that had higher piece rates.⁶⁴ In incidents of racial discrimination or racial violence, braceros often called upon the Mexican

⁵⁸ Interview with ex-bracero don Francisco conducted on 4.26.19.

⁵⁹ Loza, 1.

⁶⁰ Garcia, 35.

⁶¹ Loza, chapter three.

⁶² Gamboa, chapter 4.

⁶³ Mitchell, 8.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, 8.

consulate to intervene.⁶⁵ This strategy of resistance is exemplified in the account of my research subject.

Methodology

According to Joe R. Feagin, Anthony M. Orum, and Gideon Sjoberg, a case study is an “in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail.”⁶⁶ John Gerring frames it as an “in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar’s aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena.”⁶⁷ My research qualifies as a case study because I am examining the account of one ex-bracero in depth and in great detail in order to illuminate aspects of the broader bracero experience. Since ethnography and case studies have some elements in common, I think it’s important to clarify that my case study is not ethnographic. According to Gail Robinson, “Ethnography is a method of describing a culture... from the ‘emic’ or native’s point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the cultural actor.”⁶⁸ Unlike an ethnography, my research does not endeavor to describe or understand a different culture, but rather a historical phenomenon. Also, in my study, I share my research subject’s experiences and opinions, but I analyze those from my own positionality or point of view rather than from his. Finally, ethnographers often use the technique of participant observation, while I relied completely on open-ended interviews. I stand by my decision to conduct a case study, because it allowed me to trace and deconstruct elements of race throughout the entirety of don Martín’s time as a bracero, with a level of specificity and profundity that I otherwise would not have been able to reach.

⁶⁵ García, 35 and Gamboa, chapter 4.

⁶⁶ Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 2.

⁶⁷ Gerring, 341.

⁶⁸ Robinson, 73.

However, about halfway through my interview process, I started to doubt that examining one ex-bracero's experiences would truly be enough of a basis to form conclusions. I wondered if people would take my work seriously given that my arguments were constructed around and depended on the words of one person. Through my study abroad program's connections, I was able to find another ex-bracero willing to participate in my research. Don José Francisco had gone to work as a bracero in California three times between 1962 and 1964 for intervals of a few months. This context made his experience very different from that of don Martín, who was in Missouri in 1953 for ten months straight. One of the most fascinating parts of the hour-long interview we conducted was his account of being subjected to probing medical examinations both on the Mexican and the U.S. sides of the border. He talked about using the short-handled hoe and being forced to be hunched over all day. He also discussed helping illiterate braceros read letters from and write letters to their girlfriends and wives. In the end, I realized that due to time constraints, I would not be able to conduct a deep and thorough analysis of the accounts of both individuals. I decided to continue forward with don Martín for multiple reasons. One was that don José Francisco lived farther away in a fairly isolated section of a neighborhood that taxi drivers have trouble finding. Another was that he had nothing to say without race, which is totally valid but did not align with my interest as a researcher. Finally, I had already conducted, transcribed, and analyzed two interviews with don Martín; I was halfway through our interview process and I wanted to build on that work.

I felt comfortable continuing with only one research subject after reading Bent Flyvbjerg's article "Five Misunderstandings About Case Study Research," because I realized that looking closely at one person's experience allows for unique discoveries that advance our collective understanding of a topic, even if the circumstances of and conclusions based on that

individual's experience may not apply to other people or groups. First, Flyvberg quotes W.I.B. Beveridge, who stated "Most breakthroughs have arisen from intense observation than from statistics applied to large groups."⁶⁹ He then argues that it is indeed possible to generalize based on a single case, but that information from a case study can still be useful without generalization.⁷⁰ He says, "A purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in this process [of knowledge accumulation.]"⁷¹ After only two interviews with don Martín, I knew his story needed to be shared, and I still firmly believe there is a lot we can learn from it.

To provide myself with both a conceptual framework for analysis and the historical background necessary to contextualize don Martín's story, I first did a review of scholarly literature on race, racism, and the bracero program. Many studies about the bracero program have focused on economics, nationality, labor rights, and social life, while ignoring race or only mentioning it in passing. Yet, race and class are at play in every phase of the migratory experience, shaping the interactions between migrants and non-migrants (often to the detriment of the former) and even those between migrants and other migrants. For these reasons, I chose race and class as my primary lenses of analysis; I hope that through this study we come to better understanding of historical practices that continue through today, and the oppressive forces behind them. I believe that the way we frame migration and our discourse around it, in academic studies as well as in the media, has a real impact on policy and practice. Thus, I also hope this work helps to transform the discourse around the bracero program and migration in general such

⁶⁹ Flyvberg, 226.

⁷⁰ Flyvberg, 225.

⁷¹ Flyvberg, 227.

that we as scholars and as a society are more cognizant of and honest about the covert and overt ways social categories such as race influence the migratory experience.

Equipped with the knowledge from my literature review and my analytical schema, I could enter into the interview process. I planned to conduct one interview a week for four weeks, because I figured it was not too much to ask of my research subject, and it would give me time to organize and begin to analyze the information from one interview before conducting the next one. After each interview with don Martín, I would listen to the audio recording, note down moments that stood out, and try to analyze them, especially through my theoretical lenses of race and class. I was attentive to elements besides those two; I paid attention to key words and strove to identify recurring themes in order to form a set of questions to guide the following interview. Thus, many of these questions were follow up questions based on information my subject had already provided. They asked for specific clarifications and served to fill in the gaps. With other questions, I sought to explore previously undiscussed topics and discover new facets of his experience. In the process, I discovered an incredible breadth of information, one so extensive that I knew I would not be able to explore many aspects fully within the confines of this paper. Because of this, and for reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, I chose to focus on how race colored don Martín's experience. This focus was part of what led me to take a slightly different approach in my third interview. In order to better understand the interactions that take place in don Martín's narrative and the dimensions of power that shaped them, I asked him to help me fill out a chart with physical and personality traits of the key actors he had told me about. The chart had spaces for the approximate age, height/build, skin color, hair color, clothing, and personality of each person. I chose to ask don Martín to fill in these details using a chart instead of through an oral question-and-answer process to provide focus. After completing

this chart, we resumed our normal interview process. I hoped that through our work together, we could document and preserve his story, co-constructing a narrative that would show the ways personal prejudice, systemic barriers, and power dynamics interacted to shape one former bracero's experience.

Positionality

The way I have conducted this research and any conclusions I may reach through it are inextricable from my positionality. I am a 21-year-old cisgender, bisexual white woman from a middle-class, Protestant home in the suburbs of Chicago. I am a U.S. citizen and English is my first language. I study Latin American Studies at a private liberal arts college in the Southeastern U.S. and have had the opportunity to study abroad in Argentina and now in Mexico. I have grown up in a nation that tries to bury and forget its history of genocide, slavery, colonialism and imperialism; claims not to see race while perpetuating ideas of white supremacy and actively oppressing people of color; and intervenes in the governments and exploits the people, natural resources, and economies of Global South countries under the pretexts of "development" and "democracy." This is why engaging in migration studies through the lens of race is so important; ignoring the racial dynamics behind the exploitation of migrant workers historically allows the U.S. government and other social agents to use the same strategies of marginalization and oppression against migrants of color today. The racist policies and practices that were part of the bracero program cannot be hidden; they must be exposed and analyzed so that they will not be repeated. I believe that calling out prejudice and injustice in academic research and revealing the way they have operated can be transformative, and that has motivated me to do this work.

Obviously, my identity, and thus, my positionality is quite different from that of my research subject, who is an 87-year-old cisgender, straight male from a working-class, Catholic

home in a rural town outside of Oaxaca, Mexico. He is a Mexican citizen and a native Spanish-speaker. He only had the opportunity to study through the 6th grade. He has temporarily migrated to the United States two times for principally economic reasons; once as a guest agricultural worker and another time as an undocumented restaurant worker. Throughout this process, I have tried to be conscious of the differences in our levels of power and privilege and how they may impact our interactions. I have also endeavored to respect my research subject and his ideas (especially when they do not align with my own), while interrogating the assumptions that both he and I make as a result of our positionalities.

Case Study

Martín Hernández García⁷² was born in 1931 in a town approximately 45 km south of Oaxaca de Juarez, Oaxaca. His father owned a small store and his mother was a housewife. He was the oldest of five siblings. In that time, the town's school was only officially certified to teach through fourth grade. Martín liked school, however, and his teacher let him and a classmate do two years' worth of work in one year. So, by the end of fourth grade, he had finished studies at a sixth-grade level. He was lucky: according to the 1950 census, 64.70% of the population over 5 years old in Martín's town did not know how to read.⁷³ Once Martín finished primary school, he went to work in his father's store. Martín commented: "My father was a very conformist person. He said, 'People who know a lot eat just as much as people who don't. So, throw yourself into your work!'" When Martín was fifteen years old, his mother became sick with what he now believes is rheumatoid arthritis. Her condition steadily worsened until she became bed-ridden, and Martín took over all cooking and housekeeping duties in addition to his work at the store. In his spare time, he would see his girlfriend, whom he had met in primary

⁷² I have changed his name and the names of all other people he mentioned to protect their identities.

⁷³ INEGI, 1950.

school. When he turned 18, the two of them got married. That same year, his mother passed away and his father got remarried. Martín's new step-family did not like him. He said:

This family, they were ambitious people and they were very interested in what other people had. Whatever they could have, but without working for it. So, it started seem like a certain thing wasn't there, of the store products. Like, "Well, it was here before, it was here before, but now it isn't there." And so, since these people wanted to be able to take advantage of the situation to get what they could out of my father's house, and because I was getting in the way of that, they started to tell my father that in the evenings, after work, I was getting drunk with my friends and wasting his money, trying to get me on his bad side. They insisted on this so much that one day he called me in to talk. I said "How many years have I been working with you? And in the time that I've been here, and I'm still here, has anything gone missing?" And he said, "No, that's what's weird about this." And I told him, "We have to figure out what's going on." But as he had recently married his new wife, he took her word over mine.⁷⁴

On the day of his mother's birthday, young Martín was overwhelmed with grief and did not show up to work on time. Under pressure from his new wife, Martín's father used his tardiness as an excuse to fire him, saying, "I no longer need your help." In grief, Martín resigned himself to his father's decision. He told his father that he was not the one taking the products, and encouraged him to investigate the matter: "But if you believe them, no problem," he said. He had a wife and two kids to support. Martín thought about looking for work, but the wages in town were miserable: they paid 1.5 pesos per day. Then, he had the idea of starting his own store. The question was, how? As a newly married young person, he did not have any assets. Nor did he have any property that he could use as collateral to get a loan large enough to start his own business. The "jacal" (shack or hut) that he and his wife were living in belonged to his father.

⁷⁴ Y la familia, eran gentes muy ambiciosas, muy interesadas a lo ajeno. Lo que pudieran, ¿no? Pero sin trabajar. Y, es de, Y entonces empezó a parecer que tal cosa no estaba, que, de los productos de la tienda, Pues aquí estaba, aquí estaba, pero no está allí. Es de ya, entonces como estas personas querían, como yo les estorbaba, para poder aprovechar de sacar de la casa de mi papá lo que pudieran, empezaron a decir a mi papá que en la noche, después de que yo salía del trabajo, me lleno de borrachera con mis amigos y que andaba malgastando su dinero, poniéndome mal con mi papá. Entonces, pues, ya, yo creo que tanto le insistían hasta que un día me llamó la atención él. Le digo, "¿Cuántos años tengo de estar trabajando con usted? ¿Se perdió alguna cosa en el tiempo que yo estaba aquí, y que sigo estando?" "Pues no, es lo raro." 'Pues hay que ver lo que está pasando.' Pero como él estaba recién casado con la nueva esposa, pues, le daba mas veracidad a lo que ella le decía."

Martín felt trapped. That is when he decided to participate in the bracero program. He borrowed 500 pesos from his cousin and he sold a pair of young bulls for 700 pesos. “I gave them to her cheap, but because of the need.”⁷⁵ He left the 700 pesos from the sale with his wife and went off with the other 500 to try to make it to the U.S.

He and four other young men from his town went to the government of their municipality to obtain a certificate “of good conduct” that said you were “an honorable person, a hardworking person.”⁷⁶ Then, they had to travel to the city of Oaxaca to receive a second certificate from the state government. With their two certificates in hand, they headed to Mexico City to the bracero recruitment center. When they arrived, however, they found the office closed. They spent three days there, hoping the offices would open, but finally someone walked by and informed them that the bracero program was no longer hiring in Mexico City. The offices had moved to Irapuato, Guanajuato. When they arrived, there were *thousands* of people waiting to be hired. First, they had to turn in the certificate of good conduct from the state. Then, they had to wait for their state to be called, so they could be asked questions about their hometown, and whether or not they were a *campesino*. Two days passed, and Oaxaca still had not been called. Martín and his four companions were running out of the money they’d brought. On the third day, just as they were trying to decide who should travel back to the *pueblo* to bring more money for them, another kind person came by and gave them a tip. Martín says the interaction went like this:

“What are you guys doing?”

“Well, um...”

“Are you sure you want to be braceros?”

“Well, yes,” we said

“What’s your plan? How are you going to do it?”

“Well they told us that the recruitment center is here in Guanajuato, but there’s a ton of people.”

“Do you have a certificate or something?”

⁷⁵ “Que las di barato, pero por la necesidad”

⁷⁶ “de buena conducta,” “una persona honrada, una persona trabajadora”

“Yes, we’ve brought one from the municipality and the state.”

“Ah, good, well, look over there.” And he showed us a house. A simple house, because in that time Irapuato was a small town. He said, “That’s where the person in charge of hiring is staying. But he arrives between 11 and 12 o’clock at night. He’s light-skinned, he wears a trench coat and a Texan cowboy hat.” He explained to us everything about what the man looked like. “And he doesn’t go in through the main door of the hotel... he uses a secret door.” He told us where the secret door was. “Wait for him there from 10 to 12 at night. He’ll come alone.... All you have to do is put a little money in the envelope that the certificate’s in, because the man’s going to want to get something more.”⁷⁷

“And how much should we give him?”

“How many of you are there, five? Fifty pesos per person.”

So, they stuffed five fifty-peso bills in the envelope, went to the house at 10 p.m., and sat down to wait. When a man matching the description came around, they approached him and asked if he was the hiring manager. He was indeed. After a short conversation, the manager took the envelope, felt the bills inside it, and told them to be ready, because the following day around 10 am or 12 p.m., they might be hired. Martín said, “A lot of people there were telling us they had been waiting for a month, but just like that, nothing more! And that was the thing, a kickback.”⁷⁸

With that, Martín and his companions got their foot in the door.

⁷⁷ —¿Qué hacen, muchachos? —

—¿No, pues, es de—¿

—¿Seguro que quieren irse de braceros?—

—Pues, sí — le dijimos.

—¿Y cómo está su idea? ¿Cómo lo van a hacer? —

—Pues nos dijeron que aquí en Guanajuato está el centro de contratación. Y sí hay muchísima gente. —

—¿Y traen algún certificado o así? —

—Y sí, traemos del municipio y del estado.—

—Ah bueno, pues, mírense allí— Y ya nos señaló una casa. Casas sencillas que, en ese tiempo Irapuato era un pueblito. Y ya. Dice, —Allí, es donde se hospeda la persona que está enfrente de la contratación. Pero ese señor llega entre once y doce de la noche. El señor es güerito, lleva una chamarra de gabardina y un sombrero tipo tejano—ya nos explicó todo de cómo era la persona. —Y no entra en la puerta principal, del hotel... entra por una puerta secreta.— Ya nos dijo dónde estaba la Puerta secreta. —Allí espérenlo de diez a doce de la noche. Él solito llega... Nada más que échenle un dinerito en el sobre que trae con el certificado, porque el señor luego va a parecerle recibir algo más—dice.

—¿Y cuánto se le pueda dar? —

—¿Cuántos son, cinco? Cincuenta pesos por persona.—

⁷⁸ “Y allí nos decían muchas personas que ya tenían un mes esperando, pero así, nada más, ¿no? Y allí la cosa, la mordida, como dice uno.”

One important element of this first stage of the hiring process as revealed in Martín's narrative is the systemic barriers in place. Many people who wanted to participate in the bracero program were motivated by economic need. They hoped to earn capital in the United States, but in order to get that capital, they had to find enough money to support the costs of the hiring process. To get money, they needed money, and there were people who could not scrape up enough to even apply for the program. Those who did not have money saved up, assets to sell, or connections to family or friends who might give them a loan were likely unable to afford the costs of the hiring process and thus could not participate. The costs were significant; they needed enough for transportation to the hiring center and for food and water for all the days they would wait to be called. And because the government moved the recruitment center from the capital to a city hours away, some prospective braceros like Martín and his friends needed to pay for two bus trips. Then, the braceros either needed to have access to privileged, insider information about how to bribe the hiring officer and the funds to do so, or they had to wait at the hiring center for longer than a month, paying for sustenance all the while. Meanwhile, their families back home were left without their main source of income, or at least with one less source of income. It is probable that some prospective braceros spent money to travel to the hiring office, but ran out before their name was called and had to return home in an even worse financial state than when they had left. Or perhaps some never even made it to the hiring center in Irapuato because of the change in the office location. These financial barriers disproportionately impacted the indigenous population, who has historically suffered from much higher rates of poverty than the general population and still does to this day.⁷⁹ It is also telling that the hiring officer, the man in a position of power and privilege, was light-skinned. This is evidence of *colorism*, which he

⁷⁹ Aguilar Ortega, 150, 155.

himself may or may not have perpetuated as he selected who would be hired and who would not be. Another aspect to note is the requirement of obtaining certificate of good conduct. This points to the existence of doubt as to whether or not the *campesinos* trying to participate would be hardworking, honorable people, a doubt rooted in racist and classist stereotypes of *campesinos* as backward and lazy.⁸⁰ Some might argue that this requirement was merely red tape, but the assumptions underlying this measure indicate it may have been intended to filter out undesirable individuals.

Having made it through the Mexican hiring center, they boarded a bus to San Luis Potosí, where they were to await a train to Reynosa, the location of the customs office. At customs, they were given a talk about how they “should behave in the United States.”⁸¹ This, too, reveals some anxieties about the *campesinos*’ moral character and work ethic. Indeed, Martín says they were told “not to be immoral, going out to clubs and things like that.”⁸² After this conduct talk, they crossed a bridge to another location, where a commission of U.S. Americans was waiting to “disinfect them.” The braceros were forced to undress. Martín says, they “sprayed us like dogs,” highlighting the imbruting, dehumanizing nature of the fumigation. That the United States foreign service felt the need to cover the braceros in insecticide clearly reveals their racist and perhaps classist assumption that Mexican farmworkers were unhygienic and contaminated. This horrifying practice could only be allowed to happen if the United States saw them as less than human, as somehow unworthy of better treatment. No doubt they saw the *campesinos* as carriers of bedbugs, lice, or other parasites which, if left untreated, would be passed to innocent U.S. Americans undeserving of such a plague. Having doused the braceros and their clothing in

⁸⁰ Cohen and Loza.

⁸¹ “de cómo deberíamos comportarnos en los Estados Unidos”

⁸² “que no fuéramos viciosos de irnos a antros y cosas así”

chemicals to prevent just that, the commission put the braceros on a bus to Harlingen, Texas, where they could be hired to work in American fields. At the center in Harlingen, a bell would ring every time contractors would arrive, and the aspiring braceros would have to form two lines. The contractors would pass through the middle, selecting the braceros they wanted to hire. They would take two or ten or however many they needed. Martín says he believed they chose based on stature; because the majority of Mexicans are short, the tallest ones were chosen first. As most of the indigenous people in Mexico are below the national average height (Porrás et al.), this selection criterion may have disproportionately disadvantaged indigenous braceros. However, after three or four days of contractors taking small groups of braceros, another arrived and picked up all eighty of those who remained at Harlingen, so in the end, everyone there at that time was hired. Still, the selection process that the first contractors had, based on physical characteristics, seems dehumanizing, like choosing produce at the grocery store, or choosing a pig to slaughter. One might even say it is reminiscent of slave markets, without implying that the bracero experience was similar or equivalent to slavery.

On March 22nd, 1953, Martín and his companions boarded a bus to Chesterfield, Missouri, outside of St. Louis. Passing the Mississippi River, I can imagine they were feeling exhausted, excited, nervous, and perhaps hopeful. Yet, the dehumanization did not end once the braceros were hired. Upon arrival at the farms, they signed their first contract and were each given a company ID number, which supervisors would use to refer to them in place of their name. Being stripped of their identities must have had an impact on the bracero's mental health and emotional well-being, especially as they found themselves in a foreign culture. Maria Wangqvist and Ann Frisen demonstrate how "identity distress" is "associated with higher levels

of psychological symptoms.”⁸³ Ana Maria Ferreira Barcelos highlights how “identity and emotion are closely related”⁸⁴ Thus, the violent divestiture of such an important part of the bracero’s identities was not without effect. Instead of a person, a bracero was now a number of no special import, an easily replaceable cog in the agribusiness machine. In the mornings, they would work in the fields: sowing, watering, and harvesting the crops, which included beets, radishes, carrots, lettuce, cabbage, and other vegetables. One of the worst jobs you could be assigned was watering, because it was incredibly difficult to move the heavy piping system. They would have to trudge through thick mud which would pull at their feet, and then, with the water pressure, the piping would get stuck in the mud at the joints between two tubes. It would take an enormous effort to pull it out, and all of this required careful maneuvering to avoid crushing the plants. Additionally, the plants were covered in pesticides, and because they were wearing shorts, their bare legs would rub against the fumigated plants “with every single step,” Martín said.⁸⁵ “Afterwards, we had a burning, stinging sensation on our legs.”⁸⁶ Obviously, this was a health hazard, because the toxins in the pesticides would seep into their skin. Harvesting was also an extremely taxing and hazardous job, because the braceros had to bend over constantly. Then at the end of the day, they would have to carry the “fifty or more wooden boxes” they had packed to the tractors parked several meters away.⁸⁷ In the afternoons, between 4 and 6 p.m., they would head to the factory to pack the vegetables they had harvested. When the braceros first arrived, they were tasked with taking out the impure pieces, a job that was paid 60 cents an hour. In time, they would be moved to packing positions, which were paid by the bag.

⁸³ Wangqvist and Frisen, 93.

⁸⁴ Ferreira Barcelos, 312.

⁸⁵ “Tiene que estar rozando la planta cada paso que uno va dando”

⁸⁶ “Después teníamos unos ardores en las canillas, en las piernas, pues.”

⁸⁷ “Para pasar, cargar esas cajas al trailer, cuando ya eran 50 o más cajas, pues, estaba pesado”

Before each shift, they would be given packets of 100 one-pound bags to pack, and they would scramble to fill them as the conveyor belt passed. In the factory and in the field, the violence of being referred to by a number was sometimes reproduced by the braceros themselves, who, unless they personally knew each other, had no other option but to call out to a fellow bracero using their ID number. However, the power imbalance between supervisors and braceros made the former's use of the numbers in place of the latter's names far more disturbing, especially when combined with egregious and racially-motivated abuses of power.

Such abuses occurred frequently with one supervisor whom Martín explicitly identified as “racist.” His name was Ramón, and he was a Texan descended from Mexicans who had become Americans when the U.S.-Mexico border shifted in the early to mid-19th century. Martín said, “there are many people of the same race who don't love their own race and they behave badly,”⁸⁸ and Ramón was one of them. It seems that he as a Mexican American had some internalized racism that he took out on Mexican braceros. Or perhaps it could be interpreted as horizontal hostility. Martín put it this way: “He didn't like Mexicans. And there was always a difference, well, between his treatment of everyone else and his treatment of Mexicans.”⁸⁹ He was malicious and discriminatory; he often “tried to send workers he didn't like to do the heaviest jobs, or to not give them the same work as everyone else, but to make the Mexican he didn't like suffer.”⁹⁰ He also had the habit of ordering braceros to go to the store to buy him a pack of cigarettes whenever he wanted to, and especially when the braceros were earning high piece rates. The store was about two miles away, and so it would take them an hour to go there and back, and in that errand, they would lose the money that they would otherwise have earned

⁸⁸ “Hay muchos que de la misma raza, pero no quieren a la misma raza y se portan mal.”

⁸⁹ “Y siempre había diferencia, pues, en su trato con los demás que como para mexicanos.”

⁹⁰ “El que no le caía bien pues trataba de estar mandándolo a trabajos más pesados, o no darle el trabajo que los demás, sino que, hacer sufrir, pues, al mexicano que no le caía bien.”

in that time. And Ramón never sent the few white or Black farmhands to fetch his smokes. “It didn’t seem right to me,” Martín said. “But since it wasn’t happening to me, I kept my mouth shut.” However, before too long, Ramón decided to pick on him. One day in December, Martín was cutting parsley, minding his own business when Ramón came by up and said:

“Hey, 314, go bring me a pack of cigarettes.”⁹¹

Martín responded, “I would be happy to go, but let me finish cutting. Because we’re getting paid by the piece.”⁹²

“No,” Ramón replied, “I want you to bring them to me right now!”⁹³

“Well, no. I’m sorry, but no. No, I can’t accept. You won’t pay me for the time I’m going to lose.”⁹⁴

And Ramón walked away. Martín felt triumphant. His father had taught him to defend his rights, and he had done just that.⁹⁵ He had stood up for himself instead of giving into Ramón’s pressure. It was over; he would not lose a single dollar going on an unjust errand. That afternoon, he headed to his position on the packing line. He looked around, but the supervisor had not given him any bags to pack. Everyone else around him started to work, but he could not do the same without the bags. Ramón was walking around upstairs, supervising people, and Martín said:

“Ramón, would you give me bags so I can pack?”

“There will be no packing for you,” he responded. Martín thought it must be revenge because he hadn’t gone to bring Ramón cigarettes.

“Why?” Martín asked him, but he didn’t respond. He left.

A few minutes later, one of the owners came by and asked Martín why he was not packing. Martín told him that Ramón had not given him any bags, and the owner talked to Ramón in English. Martín did not understand what was said, but the owner left without making Ramón give Martín the bags, so clearly, he sided with Ramón. Once the owner walked away,

⁹¹ “Y me dice, ey 314, ve a traerme una cajetilla de cigarros.”

⁹² “Con todo gusto voy yo, le digo, pero déjame terminar el corte. Porque estamos trabajando por destajo.”

⁹³ “No, dice, ahorita, quiero que vayas a traer.”

⁹⁴ “No, pues, discúlpame, pero no. No, no le puedo aceptar. No me da usted para el tiempo que voy a perder.”

⁹⁵ “Porque a mí, mi padre me enseñó a ser responsable en mis actos y también me enseñó a saber defender mis derechos.”

Martín asked Ramón once again why he would not give him any bags. Ramón responded: “Because I don’t feel like it.”⁹⁶ Martín was angry, and responded with an insult. Ramón did not like that. He came down the stairs and walked towards the place Martín stood. “When he was getting to where I was, he tried to grab me by the neck. But I was young, I was still agile, and I got out,”⁹⁷ Martín said. “I felt like I was burning inside with fury, and he was too because I laid into him out of anger.”⁹⁸ Martín had used an insult to hit him where it hurt, and Ramón had escalated the situation by attempting to choke him.⁹⁹ Narrowly escaping this physical attack, Martín ran outside and picked up some pieces of debris. “I was blinded by rage. I thought the worst, I thought I might go to jail!” Martín commented. But he did not care about the consequences.¹⁰⁰ With the chunks of cement in his hands, he called out to Ramón, telling him to come outside. “Órale, salte.” But Ramón never came.

Martín left the factory and headed back to his dormitory. Word got around, and when the factory shift ended, his friends and coworkers came around to ask if it was true. After hearing the story, one of his coworkers had a proposal. “Let’s go to Chicago,” he said. “I have some friends there, and they say the pay is better.”¹⁰¹ Martín turned him down, knowing that if INS found him, he would be detained and deported “like a criminal.” Instead, he turned to the Mexican consul for support. “Because he’s the representative of the Mexican government, I have to let him know what happened,” Martín told the others. Three days later, he paid \$5 for a ride to the consulate in St. Louis, explained the situation, and pleaded for safe passage back to Mexico. Martín knew he would not feel comfortable at that factory anymore. The consul promised that he

⁹⁶ “Porque no se me antoja.”

⁹⁷ “Cuando iba llegando donde estaba yo, me quiso agarrar del cuello. Y estaba yo joven, todavía era ágil y salí.”

⁹⁸ “Yo sentía que ardía yo por adentro, por el coraje, y él también porque le menté la mamá porque ya me enojó”

⁹⁹ “Algo que le doliera.”

¹⁰⁰ “Me cegué yo, del coraje. Pensé lo peor. Hasta pensé que iba a ir a la cárcel... pero no importa, me dije.”

¹⁰¹ “Vámonos a Chicago. Allí tengo unos amigos, y dicen que allí pagan mejor.”

would come to the factory office the following day to meet with him and the factory owners. The next morning at the factory, the consul arrived, and Martín was called into the office. A few other braceros who'd experienced similar problems with the supervisor wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to air their concerns, and accompanied him there. The consul asked Martín to explain, once more what had happened. First, Martín tried to establish his credibility, good character and work ethic. He emphasized how in the nine months he had been with the company, he had never any issues previously, he had only missed two days of work due to illness, and unlike many other workers, he did not go out to the city on the weekends to drink, because he came here to save money to start his own business. Then, he explained to the owners how Ramón would send the braceros to bring him cigarettes "at whatever time he feels like it, and especially when we're working a job where we might earn more," and told them what Ramón had done three days ago. Finally, he posed the question,

"Whom should I be serving, the company, or this supervisor?"

"The company, of course," they answered.

"That's exactly what I considered," he said, "and that is why I told him I would perform the service he wanted, but only after I had finished my shift. I believe that the one who pays, is the one who's in charge. And only if he's just. Because if he's unjust, even if he's the boss, he shouldn't be able to mistreat workers."¹⁰²

He explained that he did not want to have any more issues with Ramón, and that he hoped to be able to go back to Mexico. After this exchange, the owners and the bosses spoke with the consul in English. The company had two factories; the part-time one, where Martín had been working with Ramón as a supervisor, and a full-time one, under the management of a man called Mr. Wally. The owners wanted Martín to finish out his contract, so they asked him to transition to the

¹⁰² —¿A quién debo servirle, al mayordomo o a la empresa?—

—Claro que a la empresa— dice —aquí estamos, jefes, dueños—

—Pues yo ese mismo consideré— le digo —y por eso le dije al mayordomo que yo iba a hacer su servicio que quería, pero cuando yo terminara. Yo creo que el que paga es el que manda. Y también si es justo. Porque si es injusto, aunque sea el patrón o el jefe, no tiene por qué maltratar a los trabajadores.—

full-time factory. They reassured him that, with Mr. Wally at the head of the factory, he would not have any issues. Martín agreed to go.

Throughout this series of events, we see enormous imbalances of power. Before Martín's refusal, Ramón had treated dozens of braceros like his servants or personal assistants, and he was able to get away with it because the braceros were afraid of losing their jobs. And because bracero contracts were limited to the specific company that hired them, losing their jobs would mean losing their legal status. They would either have to return to Mexico or try to find a job under the table, with the ever-present threat of detention and deportation. The braceros had a lot at stake; economic need had driven many of them to participate in this program, they had already invested a significant amount of time and money to be able to earn these wages, and their families depended on the income they would generate. We can also trace imbalances of power through the use of English; whenever it was spoken, it put Martín at a disadvantage. He did not know what was being said when the owners, the bosses, and the consul conferred after he told his story in the factory office. Earlier on, he could not understand the conversation between Ramón and the owner who walked by and saw that Martín was not packing. The power imbalance between Martín and Ramón and the owner is not only evident in the latter two's use of English, but also physically illustrated through the levels where they stood; Ramón and the owner were at the railing above the factory floor, looking down on Martín, whose income was at their mercy. Also, the fact that the owner did not intervene when he saw that Martín was being kept from doing his job shows how those on the upper rungs of the hierarchy were unwilling to hold each other accountable when one of them mistreated the braceros; the owner uncritically accepted whatever explanation Ramón offered him and ignored Martín's plight. The fact that Martín had to get the Mexican consul involved in order to be able to truly get an audience with a

boss or an owner of the company shows their lack of concern for the braceros. And even once Martín was able to get in front of these executives and explain what happened, to explain that Ramón had tried to choke him, there is no indication that Ramón suffered any consequence for his actions. It seems the company simply moved Martín to a different spot, and, with the troublemaker out of the way, they let Ramón conduct business as usual.

It is important to note how, while many times (as above) braceros like Martín were the targets of the aforementioned, they themselves could harbor, perpetuate, and act on racist and colorist views. Examining what Martín said about his Black and dark-skinned coworkers is telling. First, I must provide some context. At the company Martín worked at, Black men also drove the tractors and trailers for the company. Black American men and women also worked alongside the braceros in the fields. Although they were mixed together at work, they lived and socialized separately. In terms of their social lives, they self-segregated, which Martín explained as a function of their speaking different languages. He said, “they almost always got together amongst themselves, because they understood each other. And we did as well, separately, because we understood each other in Spanish.”¹⁰³ The company put them in segregated housing, keeping the two groups in different buildings. Martín shared with me an observation he’d made about the Black workers’ dormitories, and about Black people in general:

But, it’s that, but I would say, yes, it’s that, although, well, I don’t know, no, but like this race, yes, of Black people, they don’t really like hygiene over there. I’m not sure if it’s general, in general, all those of the Black race, or only the ones who are working in the fields as peons. But we saw that they were, for example, one would just walk by their rooms, and there would be a smell, like when it’s a lion’s den, something like that. Well, I don’t know if they don’t really like hygiene, or if some of them do, and some of them don’t, who knows.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ “Ellos casi siempre se juntaban dentro de ellos porque se entendían. Y nosotros también aparte porque nos entendíamos en español.”

¹⁰⁴ “Pero es de, pero ya digo, si es de, aunque pues no sé, no, pero como que esta raza, sí, de negritos, no les gustan muy bien la higiene allá. No se si sea general, en general, todos los de raza negra, o no más los que andan de peones en el *field* trabajando. Pero veíamos que eran, por ejemplo, no más pasaba uno en sus cuartos y salía un olor de

From the amount of filler words and vacillation in the first line, it's clear that Martín was hesitant to say this, probably because he was aware it would come across as racist. He not only generalizes that Black people have bad hygiene, but he compares them to lions, perhaps relying on racist conceptions of Black people as savage, subhuman, and beastlike. It's important to note that in Mexico, "huele a león" ("it smells like lions") is a common idiom that means "apesta" ("it stinks.") So perhaps his invocation of lions had more to do with the olfactory experience he remembers than anything else. However, it is likely that his usage of this phrase was at least partially, and perhaps subconsciously, rooted in racist associations between of Blackness and animalistic savagery. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon discusses how in the eyes of white men, "negroes are savages, brutes."¹⁰⁵ He says, "The white man is convinced that the negro is a beast."¹⁰⁶ Martín may have been operating on these racist controlling images.¹⁰⁷ Either way, this statement casts doubt on his earlier explanation that the reason the Black American farmhands and braceros working for the same company did not mingle was purely a matter of language; racism was almost certainly involved.

Questions of hygiene and skin color seem to be linked in Martín's view of the residents of his own bracero dormitory as well. When Martín and the four other men from his town arrived, they were assigned to a bunkhouse with three bunk beds, one blanket and set of pajamas each, a table for four, and a gas stove. They decided to divide the housekeeping tasks amongst themselves. However, according to Martín, two of the roommates, Antonio and Juan Carlos, were not pulling their weight, and the other three had to pick up the slack. After a while, they'd

como cuando es una cueva de leones, algo así. Pues no sé si no les gustan muy bien la higiene, o hay parte que sí les gusta la higiene o parte que no, quién sabe."

¹⁰⁵ Fanon, 88.

¹⁰⁶ Fanon, 131.

¹⁰⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, 69.

had enough. Martín said, “One day, we told them, either you all stay here and we’ll ask to see where they move us to, or we stay and you guys leave. We practically ran them out of there.”¹⁰⁸

On the surface, this seems like a typical conflict between roommates. Yet, what I found interesting is that the two roommates they kicked out were the only ones Martín described as having a “dark brown”¹⁰⁹ skin color. In contrast, the three who stayed in the room had either “light brown”¹¹⁰ skin (Martín and Gabriel) or “very light”¹¹¹ or “white”¹¹² skin (Sergio). In addition, the words Martín used to describe the personalities of his darker-skinned roommates Antonio and Juan Carlos are very negative in comparison to those he used to describe Gabriel. Martín said that Antonio was “unsociable”¹¹³ and “apathetic”¹¹⁴ and that Juan Carlos was “inexpert”¹¹⁵ and “irresponsible.”¹¹⁶ He described both of them as “lazy”¹¹⁷ and “a bit sloppy.”¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, he described Gabriel as “understanding”¹¹⁹ and “willing,” and Sergio as “good people” and “very hardworking.”¹²⁰ This leads me to wonder if Martín’s impressions of his roommates were subconsciously shaped by their skin color. Given that Martín also saw Black Americans as unhygienic and uncleanly, it is hard to ignore that the roommates Martín saw as messy similarly had darker skin. Were Antonio and Juan Carlos actually less tidy, or did Martín only perceive them that way? And even if they were actually less tidy, I wonder whether Martín, Gabriel and Sergio’s decision to kick them out was purely about cleanliness. Martín’s

¹⁰⁸ “Un día dijimos, o se quedan acá ustedes y nosotros pedimos a ver dónde nos cambia, o nos quedamos nosotros y ustedes van. Prácticamente los corrimos.”

¹⁰⁹ “Moreno oscuro.”

¹¹⁰ “Moreno claro”

¹¹¹ “Claro.”

¹¹² “Güero, blanco.”

¹¹³ “Poco sociable”

¹¹⁴ “Apático.”

¹¹⁵ “Inexperto.”

¹¹⁶ “Irresponsable.”

¹¹⁷ “Flojos”

¹¹⁸ “Un poco dejados.”

¹¹⁹ “Comprensivo.”

¹²⁰ “Se prestaba”

explanation for why the three lighter-skinned roommates stuck together and split apart from the other two, “we understood each other better,”¹²¹ is hauntingly reminiscent of his explanation for why the Mexican braceros did not hang out with the Black farmworkers: “they almost always got together amongst themselves, because *they understood each other*. And we did as well, separately, because *we understood each other* in Spanish” [emphasis mine.]¹²² He used the exact same phrase in both situations. I must acknowledge the possibility that everything in this paragraph is entirely coincidental, and that Martín’s impressions of Antonio and Juan Carlos and the decision to kick them out had absolutely nothing to do with the color of their skin. Correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Yet, it is important to consider the possibility that *colorism* was an influencing factor in Martín’s relationships with his roommates.

Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

The original goal of this project was to identify the ways in which race colored the bracero experience as demonstrated in the narrative of one bracero. While recognizing the limitations of my analysis, I believe I have largely achieved this goal. Throughout don Martín’s narrative, we can trace five main ways race and class colored the experience of braceros in the United States. First, we counted the many systemic barriers in the bracero hiring process that impeded poor *campesinos* from participating in the program. We noted how these barriers disproportionately affected the indigenous population, which has historically experienced higher rates of poverty than the general population. Then, we observed how racist and classist anxieties about braceros’ work ethic, moral character, and hygiene are visible through the required certificates from the municipality and the state, the conduct talk given to the braceros in customs,

¹²¹ “Nos entendíamos mejor.”

¹²² “Ellos casi siempre se juntaban dentro de ellos porque se entendían. Y nosotros también aparte porque nos entendíamos en español.”

and the forcible fumigation of the braceros. Through this fumigation, through the contractors' selection process at the hiring centers, and through the replacement of braceros' names with ID numbers, we were able to see how racism and classism manifested in dehumanizing practices at the border and on the farms. In Martín's story of Ramón, we witnessed how one supervisor's internalized racism led him to discriminate against and mistreat Mexican braceros, and how the imbalance of power between him and the braceros permitted him to get away with his abuse for a long time. We also saw Martín's resistance to Ramón's abuse through his refusal to bring Ramón cigarettes and his decision to involve the Mexican consul in order to denounce Ramón's actions and to negotiate with his employers. Finally, in explicating Martín's comment about black agricultural workers and hygiene and in analyzing his descriptions of his roommates and the conflict they had, we discovered that braceros like Martín could hold racist and colorist ideas and we recognized how these prejudices informed the social decisions they made. Future research could investigate these themes in the accounts of other former braceros to see if they apply.

Since my case study is based on the narrative of one research subject, its findings are not necessarily generalizable to encompass the entire bracero program. Thus, while my extremely small sample size permitted a high level of detail and analysis, it also limits the applicability or universality of my conclusions. Another limitation is the timing; I conducted my interviews 65 years after my research subject had participated in the bracero program. Thus, it is probable that he misremembered some details and completely forgot about others, impacting my data, which was completely influenced by the way his brain stored and retrieved information. Another limiting factor was the time. I had one month to choose my research topic, conduct a literature review, collect my data through oral interviews, analyze it, and organize it into this paper. A longer time frame would have permitted me to discuss and interpret other aspects of Martín's

experience as a bracero, or even find more ex-braceros and conduct interviews with them, analyzing their accounts and incorporating them into my research. Some other fascinating themes that appeared in don Martín's account that I was unable to analyze due to time constraints included bracero migration as a means for upward mobility, the lateral economy that profited off of braceros by offering them goods and services, and the development of lasting social relationships and networks among braceros. Future research could focus on these themes. A final limitation was the language and cultural barrier; my lack of complete fluency in Spanish and cultural understanding likely constrained my interpretation of don Martín's account. Future studies on this topic ideally would be conducted by a native Spanish speaker from Mexico with multiple research participants and ample time to synthesize their data. They would also incorporate the accounts of braceros from different regions of Mexico, not just from Oaxaca.

When I set out to conduct this study, I believed I would see race at play in primarily in the work environments of former braceros, underestimating the impact it had on their social lives. This thought partially stemmed from my view of braceros principally as targets of racism and discrimination, not as perpetrators of them. I had correctly hypothesized that don Martín's bracero narrative would reveal instances of both systemic racism and racial prejudice, but what I did not expect to find, however, was evidence of his own racial prejudice and colorism. The scholarly literature I reviewed about the bracero program that mentioned race had focused on how braceros were subject to racism, not on how they perpetuated it, which meant the latter was not initially on my radar. Building off of my finding, and responding to this gap in the literature, future studies should examine on a larger scale to what extent and in what ways braceros held racist and colorist views and acted upon them, both amongst themselves and in relation to other marginalized social groups such as black workers.

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