

Ana Elizabeth Rosas. *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. Pp. 244. Paper \$34.95.

In her new monograph, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*, Ana Elizabeth Rosas provides a sensitive and provocative retelling of the Bracero Program, focusing not on the men who worked in the program but on the women and families left behind in Mexico. Initiated in 1942 and formally ended in December 1964, the Bracero Program recruited Mexican men who migrated for months or years at a time from Northern and Central Mexico to agricultural centers in the United States, in large part to California. By conducting and using oral history interviews combined with photographs, diaries, letters, and popular songs, Rosas, Associate Professor of Chicano/Latino Studies and History at the University of California, Irvine, reveals a history of the program that is both transnational and “distinctly gendered.” Women’s responses to their husbands, fathers, boyfriends and other family members leaving for uncertain working conditions in the United States have been overlooked until now, and the unofficial records of the program discovered through the oral histories is what sets *Abrazando el Espíritu* apart.

The book is divided thematically and follows a loose chronology from the beginning to the end of the Bracero Program, focusing mostly on the rural town of San Martin de Hidalgo in central western Mexico, not far from Guadalajara. Rosas first addresses enrollment efforts throughout the Mexican countryside from 1942-1947 in which local village Presidents or Mayors refashioned the national rhetoric espoused by Mexican President Camacho. While Camacho embraced the Bracero Program as a way to modernize backwards rural Mexicans, local recruiters appealed to middle class workers to go the U.S., learn the advanced technologies there, return to Mexico, and elevate local economies. Regardless of economic class, men with families were considered ideal; their family ties would bring them back to Mexico and discourage long-term or illegal settlement in the United States. Though families were an acknowledged component of both nations’ recruitment, neither Mexico nor the United States created any support plan for families torn apart by the loss of their men. The women, children, and elderly who were left behind had to cope with the situation as best they could. The strategies these families devised would ultimately reshape women’s roles not just in the nuclear family unit but within extended household networks, social groups, and civic organizations as well.

Rosas devotes much attention to cultural artifacts such as photographs, translating them in a way for readers to appreciate the depth of meaning; from the inspiration to take the photo itself, the setting and costume to the intent of the giver and the meaning ascribed by the recipient. Photographs were not ubiquitous like they are now and were costly. Taking and giving a photograph was deeply personal and meaningful, especially in the context of maintaining a long-distance love affair as many of the photographs described in the book. Although men and women both exchanged photographs, it was Mexican women who created support groups for one another. These groups helped to ease the emotional suffering and exhaustion of managing homes and businesses they experienced in the absence of their men.

Needing physical space in which to address their problems and vulnerabilities, these same women created what came to be known as *Casas Despiertas*, or Awake Houses. Called “consciousness-raising collectives” by Rosas, Awake Houses were spaces where women confided in one another their feelings of frustration and loss. Sharing these feelings was socially prohibited outside of the Awake House and thus helped women forge strong bonds with one another. This space was also where they learned from other women who had successfully

navigated similar situations in their relationships with braceros. Known as *intermediaras* (intermediaries), these more experienced women helped to open dialogue between those who came to the Awake Houses as well as between family members, with a focus on restoring the physical and emotional reserves of exhausted women.

Abrazando el Espíritu is a fine example of how oral history can uncover hidden histories that change a well-rehearsed narrative. The Bracero Program is about the men who left Mexico to work in the United States, and now it is finally also about the women, children, and families that worked just as hard. This book appeals to a wide audience and is appropriate for graduate as well as undergraduate students of Mexican and U.S. labor history, border studies, as well as Chicano and Latin American studies. Even the general public with an interest in transnational love affairs will find *Abrazando el Espíritu* engaging to read.

Megan Lange