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# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Roundtable Review

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Introduction by Geraldo Cadava

**Deborah Cohen. *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*.** Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3359-9 (cloth, \$39.95); 978-1-4696-0974-4 (paperback, August 2013, \$27.95).

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Introduction by Geraldo Cadava, Northwestern University

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Deborah Cohen's award-winning book, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*, offers the perfect opportunity to gather this distinguished roundtable of experts to discuss not only the Bracero Program itself—the series of bi-national accords between Mexico and the United States that, from 1942 to 1964, facilitated the migration to the United States of millions of Mexican guest-workers—but also a wide range of topics including mid-twentieth-century modernization projects on both sides of the border; the nexus between anthropology and history; the cultural politics of the guest-worker program; and transnational history in general.

Attention to the Bracero Program has waxed since the beginning of the century, I believe, for at least three reasons. First, the United States has debated immigration reform for the past quarter century—ever since the last time Congress passed a comprehensive bill, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986—and, as part of the debate, every so often a legislator will say something like, “we really need another Bracero Program.” In response, a growing number of historians have detailed the program's exploitations in order to argue that it is not such a good idea. Second, as *bracero* workers have aged, historians have become increasingly interested in collecting their oral histories and archiving them with the Smithsonian Institution, the University of Texas, El Paso's Institute of Oral History, and other repositories. In addition to her own ethnographic fieldwork, Cohen used these oral histories to great effect. Finally, in the first few years of the century, the movement for *bracero* justice has fought to recoup the earnings still owed to former *braceros* according to their contracts. Slowly and incompletely, the Mexican government has begun to pay back wages. For all of these reasons, each of the participants in this roundtable has stated that Cohen's book is extremely ‘timely.’

Cohen's book is the *avant-garde* of a rush of scholarship that is about to appear on the Bracero Program, including forthcoming books by Lori Flores (SUNY Stonybrook), Mireya Loza (University of Illinois), Ana Rosas (UC Irvine), and Julie Weise (University of Oregon).<sup>1</sup> Together these scholars will revolutionize an earlier generation of histories of the Bracero Program that narrated its basic chronologies and characteristics, documented the kinds of work *bracero* workers performed in particular places, and only began to address its social and cultural consequences for *braceros* and the United States and Mexico in general. A new generation of scholars moves beyond this earlier work by focusing on the Bracero Program's impact on family dynamics, its commemoration in the half century since its termination, and the little-known history of the program in the U.S. South. What

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Flores, *Fields of Division* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, forthcoming); Mireya Loza, “Braceros on the Boundaries: Activism, Race, Masculinity, and the Legacies of the Bracero Program” (Ph.D. Diss., Brown University, 2011); Ana Elizabeth Rosas, “Flexible Families: Bracero Families' Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942-1964” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Southern California, 2006); and Julie Weise, *Corazón de Dixie: Mexico and Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).

distinguishes Cohen's work, as all of the participants in this roundtable attest, is her focus on modernity, gender, and transnationalism.

The reviewers here all approach Cohen's work from the perspectives of their own disciplines and subfields—anthropology, Latin American history, and North American borderlands history, for example—and, as a result, much of their criticism and praise reflects certain biases. Sometimes disciplinary perspectives lead to disagreement about particular aspects of Cohen's work; one reader appreciated her inclusion of the ethnographic "I," while another did not. Yet it is a testament to how richly provocative *Braceros* is that it brought together scholars from different backgrounds, who nevertheless articulated many overlapping themes for debate.

With a single voice, the reviewers praise Cohen's archival research in Mexico and the United States and her ethnographic fieldwork, if not her insertion of self into the text. Casey Walsh praises the wide range of characters Cohen introduces, including U.S. and Mexican officials, priests, pastors, intellectuals, journalists, business people, growers, labor organizers, and, of course, *bracero* workers themselves. John Dwyer notes how Cohen "brings to life" the experiences of dozens of *braceros*. Sterling Evans praises how Cohen helps us "meet" the *braceros*, "hear their voices," and "appreciate their recollections" of participation in the program. Walsh states that Cohen's writing about the workers conveys an "emotional and intellectual immediacy." For her part, Julie Prieto—even if she skips over other oral history and ethnography projects—considers Cohen's work to be "singular in the field." Most of the participants in this roundtable, including myself, consider the middle chapters of *Braceros* to be the book's strongest because they offer the most detailed insight into the lives and experiences of individual *braceros*. Prieto called this granular account of the *bracero* experience Cohen's "micro-level" approach to the Mexican migrants and their interactions with U.S. and Mexican nation states.

Indeed, the reviewers note, Cohen's most astonishing insights stem from her ethnographic and archival fieldwork. The stories she collected led her to conclude that many *braceros* viewed their participation in the Bracero Program as a great personal and financial opportunity, despite their experience of exploitation. They also enabled her nuanced interpretations of how *braceros* manipulated the program to their advantage. In order to gain a contract, for example, some who were not agricultural workers in Mexico soiled their hands to appear, as Dwyer put it, more "peasant-like" when they entered the *bracero* processing centers. At other moments, they displayed their masculinity as a way of demonstrating their standing as modern Mexican citizens. Through such performances of "modernity" or "primitivism," according to Prieto, *braceros* demonstrated their own role in accomplishing national and international objectives, made claims to citizenship, and adhered to the "scripts of nationhood," which determined how "others at home and abroad" viewed them. It was their journeys from hometowns in Mexico to the United States and back, as well as their experience crossing the international border itself, which transformed *braceros* into modern Mexican citizens.

For all of their praise, the reviewers offer important criticisms of Cohen's book, some on methodological grounds, and others on points of interpretation. While Walsh appreciated

Cohen's combination of historical and anthropological approaches, he argues that her description of culture was primarily symbolic, and did not offer a full analysis of the intertwinement of culture and political economy. Prieto, meanwhile, suggests that Cohen offered a fairly static portrayal of change over time. Instead of chronologically, Cohen organized the book around the process of migration and return, which leaves open the interpretation that all moments during the existence of the program were comparable. Dwyer's main critique, on the other hand, is that Cohen might have included a fuller analysis of the program's consequences for families left behind in Mexico. I suspect she did not do this because that subject has been the subject of several other books, including ones that Dwyer lists in a footnote, in addition to the book that Ana Rosas will publish soon. Still, perhaps Cohen might have nodded more to the literature on this topic.

Finally, the review by Evans is the most critical one by far. I agree with him on several counts. For example, even though Cohen shows us the view from Mexico City and Washington, D.C., her book is essentially about the sending state of Durango and the receiving state of California. We learn little about Arizona, Texas, and the many other places that *braceros* worked, or the other places to which they returned. Would her arguments about modernity and gender also apply in these places? I also agreed with Evans that Cohen perhaps over-reaches a bit in her interpretations of the cultural meaning of some aspects of the *bracero* experience. However, I do not agree with his argument that Cohen doesn't provide evidence that *braceros* shaped modernity in Mexico, or that Mexican modernity came about because of the Bracero Program. As I read it, that is not her argument. Instead, I took her argument to be that national and transnational ideas about modernism shaped the context in which *braceros* migrated back and forth between Mexico and the United States, and that *bracero* workers internalized the program's rhetoric about progress and modernity. That argument she demonstrates conclusively, I think. And strangely, I thought, Evans seems to distinguish between North American transnational history and the history of Mexican immigration to the United States, as though they are mutually exclusive, or that it is necessary to do so.

But readers should judge for themselves. Cohen's book and the participants in this roundtable certainly give us plenty of food for thought, demonstrating again how transnational histories of the United States and Mexico, borderlands history, and immigration history are some of the richest areas of inquiry into the continent's past.

### Participants:

**Deborah Cohen** holds a Ph.D. in History (2001) from the University of Chicago and is an Associate Professor at the University of Missouri—St. Louis. In addition to *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in Postwar United States and Mexico*, she has published in the *Journal of American Ethnic Studies*, *Clio* (a French Feminist journal), *Hispanic American Historical Review*, and *Estudios Sociologicos* (Mexico City). She and Lessie Jo Frazier co-edited *Gender and Sexuality in 1968: Transformative Politics in the Cultural Imagination*, a volume about gender in the many social movements occurring in 1968 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and are completing *Beyond '68: Gender, Social Movements, and Political Culture in the 1968 Mexican Student Movement and its Legacies* (under contract at

University of Illinois Press), a book that uses women's participation in the 1968 movement as a unique window onto the broader social, political, and cultural tensions and shifts occurring since the 1940's.

**Geraldo Cadava** (Ph.D. Yale University, 2008) specializes in United States history, with emphases on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and Latino populations. His first book, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland* (Harvard University Press, Fall 2013), is about the shared cultural and commercial ties between Arizona and Sonora that demonstrate how the United States and Mexico continue to shape one another, despite their political and ethnic divisions. He is beginning a project on Latino Conservatism, and other research interests include the U.S.-Mexico border; memories of the U.S.-Mexico War between 1846 and 1916; and the movement of Mexican and Mexican American artists between Mexico and the United States, from 1920 to 2000.

**John (Jay) Dwyer** (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is an Associate Professor of History at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA. He is the author of *The Agrarian Dispute: The Expropriation of American-Owned Rural Land in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Duke 2008), which received the Alfred B. Thomas Book Prize from the Southeastern Council on Latin American Studies and an Honorable Mention for the Thomas McGann Book Prize awarded by the Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies. He is currently researching environmental degradation along the Tijuana-San Diego border which stemmed from the region's rapid industrialization and urbanization since the mid-1960s.

**Sterling Evans** holds the Louise Welsh Chair in Oklahoma, Southern Plains, and Borderlands History at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (2007), and editor of *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (2006). He is currently finishing a monograph project to be entitled *Damming Sonora: Water, Agriculture, and Environmental Transformations in Northwest Mexico*.

**Julie Irene Prieto** received her Ph.D. in History at Stanford University in March 2013. Her dissertation is titled, *The Borders of Culture: Public Diplomacy in United States-Mexico Relations, 1920-1945*. She has contributed chapters to books and has an article forthcoming in the journal *Book History* titled "The Sword and the Book: The Benjamin Franklin Library and U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1936-1962."

**Casey Walsh** holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the New School for Social Research (2001) and is in the Department of Anthropology at UC Santa Barbara. Much of his early research focused on the political ecology and political economy of irrigated agriculture in the Mexico/U.S. borderlands during the twentieth century. Recent Publications include: *Building the Borderlands: A Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton along the Mexico-Texas Border* (Texas A&M University Press, 2008); "Managing Urban Water Demand in Neoliberal Northern Mexico," *Human Organization* 70(1) (2011): 54-62; "Introduction." Special Section: Mexican Water Studies in the Mexico-US Borderlands *Journal of Political Ecology* 19 (2012): 50-56; and "Water Infrastructures in the Mexico/U.S. Borderlands" *Ecosphere*.

4(1):8 (2013). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1890/ES12-00268.1> He is currently writing a book about mineral springs in Mexico.

The guest worker migratory labor agreements that were negotiated between the United States (U.S.) and Mexico from 1942 to 1964, which are commonly referred to as the Bracero Program, have long been the source of both scholarly and public attention. Numerous books, articles, documentaries, photographic and museum exhibits, oral history projects, and even individual archives have been produced regarding the Program. Although one would expect that it may be difficult to find something new to say about the Bracero Program, Deborah Cohen's rich and multifaceted book demonstrates that its complex history has not been fully told. Moreover, Cohen advances our theoretical understanding of the Program by addressing its broadly transnational nature, its modernist agenda, and its gendered propulsion. She also puts a human face on the migrants and rightly describes the individual agency which they held.

The Bracero Program came into existence in August 1942 as a result of the increasing U.S. demand for manual labor that stemmed from the country's entrance into the Second World War. Initially Mexican rural workers were sent to labor in California's agricultural fields. Later they were employed throughout the United States not only in agriculture, but also in transportation (primarily railroads). Over the Program's twenty-two-year history, nearly two million Mexican workers were awarded contract employment in the United States, while an even greater number labored as undocumented workers. The monetary remittances sent by the Braceros back to their families -- who were located mostly in the Mexican countryside -- were so significant that they quickly became one of the largest sources of foreign exchange south of the border. Such a significant influx of capital enabled most Mexican governments during the post-war era to minimize the rural sector in their budgets and instead allocate limited federal revenue toward the development of Mexican industry.

Unlike many earlier studies that cover the well-worn breadth of the Bracero Program,<sup>1</sup> Cohen focuses on a few distinct periods and just two geographical regions, namely the eastern sections of Durango (as a source of migrant labor) and southern California's Imperial Valley (as a place of agricultural employment for Mexican immigrants). Despite what initially appears to be a limited account of the Program, Cohen's study is refreshingly multi-vocal. One of the greatest strengths of her book is how she weaves together regional, national, and international history, while also examining the important roles played by both the elite and the subaltern classes. The author smartly focuses on most of the key actors in the contract labor process, including the U.S. and Mexican officials who negotiated the terms of the labor agreements, the Mexican working poor who migrated to and from the United States, the American farmers who employed the Braceros, and the union leaders

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Pope Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); George C. Kiser, *The Bracero Program: A Case Study of Its Development, Termination, and Political Aftermath* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973).

who either assisted or marginalized Mexican laborers. In her examination of these groups - whose levels of economic and political power varied greatly -- Cohen characterizes all of them, and the program which they shaped, as 'transnational.' Unfortunately, other important transnational agents are left out of her analysis, most notably the families that remained behind in Mexico. If we are to consider an American grower who employed Braceros as transnational, surely we should also consider the family that lost its primary bread winner as transnational too. How did Mexican families survive the departure of the heads of households? What economic role, if any, did mothers and elder children take on when their husbands, fathers, or older siblings were in the United States for six or more months at a time? Had Cohen addressed these, as well as other socioeconomic issues that were relevant to the sending communities -- which are well documented in more recent studies of contemporary Mexican migration to the United States<sup>2</sup> -- she would have provided a more holistic account and filled in some gaps in her transnational story.

While I agree that it makes sense to refer to the migrants, growers, government officials, and union leaders as transnational actors, where does one draw the line? If the growers who hired Braceros are transnational, are not the bar owners who served them drinks, property owners who rented them housing, store owners who sold them commodities, and ultimately the tens-of-millions of consumers nation-wide who purchased the products which they produced transnational too? And, if that is true, does Cohen's argument regarding the transnational lose some of its theoretical relevance? In other words, if we label every person transnational who was involved in (and I would add, affected by) international migratory labor, how interpretively helpful is it?

The author rightly points out that Mexican officials supported the Bracero Program because they expected migrants to use the advanced agricultural skills that they gained north of the border in the Mexican countryside once they returned home. Mexico City hoped this return migration would help to modernize Mexican agricultural production and enable the country to feed its growing industrial workforce and rely less on food imports. While this logic was certainly true at the beginning of the Bracero Program, Cohen never states when, or if ever, after twenty-two years, Mexican officials gave up on this ephemeral goal. As the author herself repeatedly illustrates, it was obvious early on, and throughout the Program's long history, that while working in the United States, Braceros did not learn how to use agricultural machinery since they mostly engaged in stoop labor. Likewise, as Cohen often shows, it was clear that they did not earn enough income to purchase expensive equipment like tractors after returning to Durango. So how did Mexico City keep justifying the Program's continuation on the basis of promoting Mexican modernization when it repeatedly failed to do so? Unfortunately, Cohen never addresses this contradiction

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Cornelius and Juan Diez-Canedo Ruiz, *Mexican Migration to the United States: The View from Rural Sending Communities* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1976); Wayne Cornelius and Jessa Lewis, eds., *Impact of Border Enforcement on Mexican Migration: The View from Sending Communities* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007); Ina R. Dinerman, *Migrants and Stay-at-Homes: A Comparative Study of Rural Migration from Michoacán, Mexico* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1982); Fernando Lozano Ascencio, *Bringing It Back Home: Remittances to Mexico from Migrant Workers in the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).



in her book. My guess is that by 1950 Mexican officials were well aware of the Program's inability to modernize rural Mexico. Nevertheless they kept spouting the empty modernization rhetoric for domestic political consumption and because of the economic and political benefits (i.e., the so-called "safety valve") that the Program delivered. In short, the Bracero Program helped Mexico's corrupt one-party system -- that was established by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) -- to keep social unrest in the countryside in check, which, in turn, enabled the official party to remain in power. While the safety valve argument is widely accepted by scholars who study Mexico City's position on migratory labor, Cohen gives it little attention.<sup>3</sup>

The author also uses the construct of modernization to explain why Mexican migrants sought U.S. labor contracts. These men quickly realized the limits of their purchasing power and rather than buy high tech agricultural equipment that they could not afford, they usually purchased various consumer goods. These included commodities that were identified as modern technology, such as radios, and items that were seen as culturally modern (i.e., identified with the United States), such as Stetson hats. As Cohen demonstrates, one trip north was never enough. Rather, to further improve their still meager living standards, former Braceros were impelled to return to the United States again and again, just to buy a few more modern material items and save some money to get them through the hard economic times that their families still faced in Durango.

It is the middle section of Cohen's book -- where she focuses on the Braceros experiences on both sides of the border -- that the author makes her most significant and poignant contribution to the literature. Through rich ethnographic fieldwork Cohen brings to life the stories of dozens of Braceros whom she personally interviewed and discovered in the archives. What we learn here is quite revealing. Unlike much of the scholarship on the Bracero Program, which posits a false black and white dichotomy of migrant opportunity versus exploitation, Cohen's book paints a more complex picture, based on the accounts of the many men whom she interviewed. For most of them, opportunity and exploitation co-existed at various points in time. Additionally, many migrants remain proud of their participation in the Program and believe they gained from it in both economic and personal ways -- in spite of various instances of degrading and exploitative treatment at the hands of employers and state officials.

Cohen rightly shows that migrants were not simply tools of the growers or state agents -- including those who illegally sold labor contracts or tried to fleece Braceros as they returned home. Rather, migrants were adept in manipulating the Program in order to obtain a contract. Most, for instance, soiled their hands and clothes to appear more peasant-like (i.e., experienced in farming). Additionally, while in the United States, many

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<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Bach, *Mexican Workers in the United States: A Study of Migration and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978); Jorge A. Bustamante, *Migración de indocumentados de México a Estados Unidos* (Tijuana: Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1988); Wayne Cornelius, *Building the Cactus Curtain: Mexican Migration and U.S. Responses, from Wilson to Carter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, eds., *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006);

Braceros had to engage in ‘women’s work’ and did their own shopping, cooking and cleaning. Despite this challenge to their masculinity, Cohen argues that most Mexican laborers sought contracts in order to reclaim their manhood. According to the author, Mexican men had their manhood undermined due to rural Mexico’s high levels of unemployment, which made it difficult for them to uphold societal norms that expected men to provide for their families. While this argument has much merit, surely there is more to how men saw and defined themselves, especially biologically, than the learned cultural values that pertain to income and which are associated with the economic expectations that derive from being labeled head of household.

Finally, like her points on the transnational and modern, Cohen’s argument on manhood gets redundant. In fact, the words “modern” and “transnational” appear more than 100 times in her introduction and all three key theoretical concepts are cited at least 370 times in her 228-page narrative. Such repetitiveness, along with a good amount of jargon, makes Cohen’s book a somewhat tiresome read. These minor points aside, Deborah Cohen has produced a very important work that advances our understanding and humanizes the story of mid-twentieth century Mexican contract labor at a time when immigration reform is once again a topic of heated political debate in Washington and around the country. Scholars who study Mexican migration and bilateral relations, along with pundits who claim to be experts on these issues, should read this book.

Review by Sterling Evans, University of Oklahoma

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It's a tough call: Is Deborah Cohen's *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* another book to be added to the long and growing list of histories of Mexican immigration to the United States, or is it rather a work to be included in the more recent, but also growing, literature of North American transnational history? I think Cohen set out to research and write a book that would be both, and she works hard to convince readers that *braceros* (manual laborers) were "transnational subjects" (5). However, in the end, I find this important new book on *braceros* to fit more into the former category and far less into the latter.

To begin, Cohen's definition of 'transnational'—that which "connotes a mutually constitutive process, not a relationship that merely extends its roots or ties beyond the nation" (3) makes perfect sense and does indeed apply well here. But instead of tying this process into a commodity-web history, Cohen argues that readers should view the *bracero* (manual labor) workers through the same kind of transnational lens as other scholars have used to define trade or natural resource flows. Labor is without question a resource, and that immigrant workers traversed national boundaries makes them international subjects. But does their border crossing make them, as Cohen writes, part of a mutually constitutive process? Did they then, or would they now, define themselves in that way? Despite Cohen's words that "such sociopolitical persons recognize themselves as participants in multiple national communities" (5), the book does not convince that these peoples would identify as such -- then or now.

Several points need to be discussed in this light. First, Cohen argues that part of this process was the Mexican government's interest in supporting the *Bracero* Program as a way of modernizing agricultural productivity in Mexico. This newer understanding of the *bracero* agreement is based on Cohen's research that discovered language in Mexican documents that suggested that when the workers returned to Mexico from the United States they would bring with them the knowledge of new and modernized agricultural techniques that would help keep the country apace in the world and continue Mexico's venture into modernity. But three important points assuredly preclude that thesis from being proven in the book. First, the footnotes in which she cites these documents do not really corroborate the assertion. The context is that the "Mexican government recognized the benefits to be had from sending men north" who would then "promote the purchase and use of machinery" (31). But footnote 57 citing that section refers only to a newspaper story that dealt with agricultural modernization in general. The government link is not proven there. Second, there is no evidence that the workers themselves self-identified as agents of modernization, and I cannot imagine that they would have. The *Bracero* Program came at the end of the Great Depression and during World War II when Mexicans were doing all that they possibly could to find and keep work and provide for their families. It came soon after the brutal repatriation of Mexicans from California who were ousted from agricultural work to make way for *Grapes of Wrath*-style 'Okies' and 'Arkie'—poor, Anglo-American, workers fleeing economic malaise in the southern Plains who were favored by large-scale growers in California. Thus, Mexicans needed work, and doubtfully tapped into

a nebulous government agenda of becoming *braceros* to help the country with schemes of modernization.

Third, this supposed goal of Mexican agricultural modernization did not materialize upon the return of *braceros* from the United States or upon official completion of the Program. Large-scale agricultural modernization in Mexico occurred only where foreign investors could supply capital for intensive production (often for exporting crops to the United States and Canada) or where the Mexican government infused great amounts of capital for projects like dams, irrigation canals, and groundwater pumping. Wealthy landowners (often foreigners) invested in expensive farm implements, harvesting machinery, and great amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to 'modernize' agriculture in certain parts of the country. But we do not read in Cohen's book evidence of successful modernization techniques flowing back into Mexico with returning *braceros*.

So, at this point it would be more useful to consider this book as helping to add to and broaden scholars' current understanding of the *Bracero* Program itself, perhaps from cultural points of view. A peek into Cohen's methodology suggests that there is merit to this angle of the story. She is dependent on a good number of oral interviews with former *bracero* workers that provide important insights into their thoughts, reactions, and memories of their experience as farmhands in the United States. It is indeed worthwhile to 'meet' these individuals, to hear their voices, to appreciate their recollections of the experience from years ago. I consider this to be the book's greatest strength. However, one aspect of these interviews is seriously overplayed in the book: the informal dialogue with men at the barbershop. Cohen often starts chapters from these conversations and in many parts of the book becomes reliant on them as if they were sources to prove her points. I think she is putting too much stock in those chats as evidence. She never shows how they are reflective of broader research, how they significantly reflect a majority opinion, how pertinent they are, or how representative they might be of the larger, national *bracero* experience. I don't often scream for quantification, but here I must because without it the barbershop chats are purely anecdotal.

And this raises an even larger critique of the research methodology in this book: Cohen's limited geography of the *Bracero* Program, which significantly lessens the scope of her study, and of our understanding of its overall history. That she chose to focus only on *braceros* from Durango is puzzling. Why limit the scope in this way, and why not mention this fact from the book's subtitle? There is an increasing scholarly inquiry into *regional* Mexican identity that I in no uncertain terms applaud.<sup>1</sup> The old thesis of 'many Mexicos' is

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Edward D. Terry, Ben W. Fallaw, Gilbert Joseph, and Edward H. Moseley, eds. *Peripheral Visions: Politics, Society, and the Challenges of Modernity in Yucatan* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010); Gilbert Joseph, *Rediscovering the Past at Mexico's Periphery: Essays on Modern Yucatán* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Cynthia Radding, *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700-1850* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Adrian Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and*

alive and well today, as it indeed should be. This book could have been cast as such without taking away any of its significance. But this book has instead been marketed as something that would concern migrant citizens in 'postwar Mexico,' and readers do not get that larger, overall picture. We are left instead wondering if the *duranguense* experience was unique, and if Mexican *braceros* from other parts of the country had similar or different experiences. Cohen's attempts to address this 'why Durango?' question fall a bit flat, especially when she asserts that "the area had an earlier and more complete history of integration into a U.S. sphere of influence than other regions of Mexico" (8). It's difficult not to think that Mexican states that actually border the United States would better fall into that category.

There are other concerns that I think readers will share regarding the material included in the text. For example, there is a heavy heavy amount of first-person discourse in a historical monograph. Readers learn a great deal of information about Deborah Cohen and how she conducted her research through first-person information, instead of that being woven more seamlessly into the narrative. We read of her trouble stretching a laptop power cord over the legs of other archives users to reach an electrical outlet (9), and about her Honda car--even its nickname (68)—that she drove around to various sites in Durango. Many of the subjects she met and interviewed might not be able to afford such luxuries. And more important, one wonders why the manuscript reviewers (external and in-house) did not excise this kind of extraneous and distracting material.

The same editing trouble arises with Cohen's overuse of jargony language and theoretical analysis. She casts her thesis in modernization theory as such: "the theory of how nations and peoples achieved the modern, defeated eugenicist models of national development that strictly correlated the modern with the whiteness of a nation's citizenry" (3). We read that *braceros*' as "modern businessmen" made them "legible to an increasingly urban, modern populace and entitled them to a cachet that being modern conferred in the postwar world," and that they "entered a contested narrative terrain that grounded their metamorphosis into transnational subjects" (48). Not only does this render the text suggestive of a dissertation (a characteristic that most universities publishing houses are rightfully eschewing these days), but it's also far from how the workers would ever describe themselves. I also question Cohen's argument of "gendered transgressions" (138) when discussing how some *braceros* might have felt doing domestic work. "How could men recuperate that manhood?," she wonders (139), but without providing evidence if she ever asked former *braceros* that kind of question directly, or only speculated about the question from gender and masculinity theory. This kind of theoretical jargon, which is overused throughout the book, made me wonder what kind of limited audience she wanted to target, and I fault the University of North Carolina Press for not weeding much of that out. As mentioned above, this is an important study, but the good in it is often tough to pull out.

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*the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1998); Stephen E. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); and Suzanne B. Pasztor, *The Spirit of Hidalgo: The Mexican Revolution in Coahuila* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002) to name but a few of the titles in this stream of historiography.

But speaking of good, *Braceros* shines best in the last couple of chapters. Here, Cohen offers some of her best analysis, especially in explaining the end of the *Bracero* Program. We learn in Chapter Eight that tension between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Labor, as well as labor activism that opposed the Program, signaled its demise. Further, the mechanization of cotton harvests and the abuses in the system by large agricultural corporations were important contributing factors to its eventual end. Given these considerations, Cohen asks in conclusion whether we “should we view the Program as exploitation or opportunity.” And in many ways, as this book shows, it was both, but with the understanding that “migrants acted on their own behalf” (221).

Finally, the Epilogue of *Braceros* is equally useful in considering how the *bracero* experience was part of a larger borderlands, immigration, and migrant worker trajectory between Mexico and the United States. We can appreciate the *bracero* years as being very relevant and important in this pattern; especially by hearing Program participants recall their memories of it. How it applies to present-day border issues such as U.S. immigration policy and border walls is pertinent, as Cohen reminds us in this concluding section. But it should also remind us to be more critical of those things, remembering that the current Democratic administration has supported racist policies, like the border wall (with both then-Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton joining arch-conservative Republicans in voting in its favor back in 2006, and with their continued support of it in the Obama White House since). *Braceros* reminds us of the people involved in such policy-making, and how there is always both opportunity and exploitation at stake.

Deborah Cohen's *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United* begins by outlining a dilemma inherent in the *Bracero* Program. She points out that in California's Imperial Valley, *braceros* (manual laborers) were imported primarily in order to perform stoop labor. Mexican migrants stood in fields, hunched over, picking vegetables near the soil by hand for hours with simple hand tools, just as agricultural workers might have harvested food for hundreds of years or more. At the same time, both Mexican and U.S. government rhetoric surrounding the Program portrayed it as being a tool for modernization. *Braceros* were supposed to become modern subjects through their exposure to U.S. values and technology and then spread their newfound modernity to their families and home communities. The *Bracero* Program was therefore at least in part a nation-building project meant to transform Mexico through migration. In exploring this seeming contradiction, Cohen comes to the conclusion that rather than being cynical, the rhetoric surrounding the Program reflected real hopes for the potential of migration to transform peasants into modern citizens. Even so, the Program ultimately created subjects that were not national but transnational in orientation. This argument has great value, but Cohen's work becomes far more original and stunning when it describes the process by which migrants became both national and transnational. In *Braceros*, Cohen takes pains to read the stages of migration as civic ceremonies in which citizens are called upon to act out their nationhood. At various times, *braceros* performed national rhetoric and competing narratives of modernity. Despite Cohen's interest in transnationalism and modernization, it is her discussion of these micro-level interactions that is the book's most original and important contribution to diplomatic history, in part by highlighting some of the ways that individual identity and foreign relations connect.

Cohen opens her analysis with a discussion of the political context in Mexico that made the agreement to regulate the migration of temporary workers to the U.S. attractive. She makes a strong case that Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho believed that migration to the U.S. would complement Mexico's other nation building and modernization projects by providing agricultural workers with knowledge and capital. In particular, Cohen argues that the *Bracero* Program was part of the same modernizing impulse that led Mexico to construct massive irrigation and dam projects in the La Laguna region in northern Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s. Camacho expected that *braceros* would either return with enough money to establish small, modern farms that would further modernize agriculture in the north or work on the large cotton farms of La Laguna. Cohen takes seriously Camacho's statement in reference to the *Bracero* Program that "Mexicans are not in the United States just to pick lemons" (26). Viewed from this perspective, the *Bracero* Program seems like a diplomatic coup for the Mexican government, especially given the added benefit of potentially improving U.S.-Mexican relations in wartime. It is more difficult to ascertain whether U.S. officials truly envisioned it as a modernization project rather than a labor program, but even so, Cohen's analysis shows how the Program remained attractive for the Mexican government beyond the obvious monetary benefits.

In arguing for the position of *braceros* as agents of modernization, Cohen's work has more in common with studies on the establishment of the public education system in Mexico after the Mexican Revolution than some studies on migration. *Braceros* recalls Stephen Lewis' *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945* and Mary Kay Vaughn's *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940*, both excellent works that analyze the Mexican government's attempts to establish schools in rural areas through educational 'missions' meant to spread modern ideas of social hygiene in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> The idea that migration and education policy sprung from the same modernizing impulse is valuable even if Cohen does not quite make this connection herself in the text. Her argument still adds complexity to the question of whom the Mexican state considered to be ready for modernization and what this meant for not only its domestic but its foreign policy.

At the same time, Cohen manages to demonstrate the tremendous impact that large agribusiness had on the construction of narratives of modernity in terms of both U.S. and Mexican laborers. Big business has entered before into previous studies of the *Bracero* Program, but Cohen's discussion of the ways in which agribusiness led the way in defining *braceros* as biologically suited for stoop labor, yet prime for modernization, deserves more attention.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true in that agribusinesses seemed to adapt their rhetoric to that of the U.S. government only in part. On one hand, agribusiness seemed to accept that modernization for *braceros* meant that former stoop laborers would become small farmers upon their return to Mexico. On the other, they derided small farmers and white workers in the U.S. as pre-modern. This contradiction formed one of the central problems not only for *braceros* but for white workers in the Imperial Valley in their struggle for better wages and working conditions, and Cohen's exploration of competing narratives of modernization provides an entry into understanding where and how government rhetoric about migration broke down on the local level.

The recognition of this fundamental contradiction also forms the basis of Cohen's most valuable and original arguments about the importance of *braceros* themselves in acting out narratives of nation, citizenship, manhood, and modernity. The central chapters of *Braceros* comprise a series of close readings of the "evaluative rituals that symbolically recreate the border in quotidian ways as incommensurable differences" (90). In other words, Cohen describes how at various points in the process of migration, prospective *braceros* were forced to perform either their modernity or their primitivism in ways that corresponded to competing sets of narratives held by a series of different gatekeepers. In Mexico, men performed their potential for modernity in civil ceremonies held at new stadiums, while in the U.S. they acted out backwardness by adopting dress and by

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen E. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Mary Kay Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in the Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> In particular, I would point to Barbara Driscoll, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), and Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).



modifying their bodies in ways that would prove pre-modern ruralism. Cohen makes it clear that successful *braceros* understood that they were expected to enact these rituals of performance. This discussion of the micro-level interactions that reinforced and ‘proved’ larger narratives is important and should draw historians to think more about how civic ceremonies, large and small, reinforce not only domestic anxieties but visions of the nation meant for external consumption. In a sense, Cohen presents diplomacy as being a process of establishing scripts of nationhood that can be used by individual citizens to shape how they are viewed by others at home and abroad. Even more important, Cohen shows the consequences to those who do not follow national scripts when they present themselves to others abroad and what happens when the rituals are not performed correctly. Looking at these interactions connects various levels of analysis—transnational, national, local, and individual—and suggests how we might connect these scales outside of the study of migration.

Cohen connects her discussion of these civil rituals to an analysis of gender. For Cohen, these performances of modernity either reaffirmed or undermined ideas of masculinity, but even more I appreciated how gender entered into the discussion of why the men themselves found migration to be attractive. Cohen argues that migration was a means for these men to establish their masculinity at home by establishing themselves as patriarchs with the means of supporting families. Meanwhile, social life around bars in the U.S. allowed them to express masculinity even as migrants of few economic means. The idea that borders are gendered is, of course, not entirely new, but Cohen’s work adds to a growing sense in which both formal and informal borders reinforce ideas of masculinity in transnational and national subjects.

*Braceros* is also well-researched and makes good use of a methodologically diverse approach. Cohen uses ethnographic field data collected through several years of interviews with former *braceros* in Durango, Mexico as well as archival sources from both Mexico and the U.S. Cohen recognizes that she was fortunate enough to do both traditional interviews and longer group conversations in which former *braceros* talked about the Program in part with her and in part with each other in a barbershop in Santa Angelica, Durango. Presumably, this allowed her to gather more intimate and detailed information than she might otherwise have collected. Of course, this also means that Cohen’s data is colored by tales meant to impress the peers of former *braceros*, but the easy conversations bred by familiarity give her a base of sources that is probably singular in the field.

One of the few aspects of this otherwise remarkable book that left me unsatisfied was the sense in which change over time is sometimes missing from Cohen’s analysis. In particular, the rituals in which *braceros* were forced to perform their ‘Mexicanness’ or their status as farmers or as proletarian labor seem to be relatively static. The ritual of selection provides a good example of how these long-term changes are sometimes minimized in the text. Throughout the twenty-year history of the Program, Cohen shows how *braceros* were selected in public spaces and how this act constituted a sort of civic ceremony in Mexico that was meant to affirm their national identity and celebrate the beginning of a process of personal modernization. Her analysis of the space in which these ceremonies took place is engaging and original, pointing to the association of modern spaces, such as stadiums, with

the production of modern citizens. At the same time, Cohen indicates that as the *Bracero* Program grew in the years after WWII, graft increasingly entered into every level of the selection process as Mexican officials demanded bribes from prospective *braceros* for papers, certifications, and, ultimately, for contracts. This suggests that the ceremony of selection became less important to the actual process of choosing *braceros* over time. *Braceros* may have continued to participate in the ritual of selection, but the selection itself became more of a private process, conducted in back rooms and through semi-secret exchanges. Cohen's analysis of the selection ritual may have benefited from some more discussion of how the symbolism of the public ceremony changed over time in light of the increasing importance of deals made in private spaces.

In addition, I wanted to know more about how Mexican perceptions of the spaces of selection and of civic ritual changed over time. Stadiums were modern spaces of celebration and citizenship in the 1940s and 1950s, but were they seen the same way by *braceros* and their families later in the Program once the buildings were older? What about the spaces of informal selection, such as the offices, plazas, and temporary campsites where men awaited their paperwork in Mexico? These are questions that might be minor to Cohen's overall argument, but these absences point to Cohen's tendency to minimize how changes occurring within the Mexican government altered the Program over time.

My final critique of Cohen's analysis concerns her discussion of the return of *braceros* to Durango. Cohen's discussion of the experiences that these men had once they were home in attempting to navigate webs of patronage and reestablish themselves as patriarchs is perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of the book to our understanding of the *Bracero* Program. Still, I wanted her to discuss more directly how the lives of the women and children these men left behind changed after these men returned. Specifically, I wanted to know how they negotiated the transition from relative poverty to suddenly having access to consumer goods that were otherwise absent from the community. These family members, particularly women, made their own transition to modernity even in the absence of direct migration, but their stories are told only indirectly. Presumably, this is the result of Cohen's decision to concentrate on interviewing men who migrated during the *Bracero* Program in her fieldwork, rather than families who received the benefits and suffered the privations of migration. Perhaps this is less a fault of Cohen's work than an opportunity for her or for other scholars to build on this analysis by looking at the impact of temporary migration across the border on families left behind in Mexico. Future work might also connect women, migration, and the expansion of citizenship rights to women in Mexico during the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in the right to vote in all national elections, which was only granted in 1953.

These criticisms of Cohen's work are all relatively minor in comparison to the value of the scholarship that she has produced in *Braceros*. The book's use of ethnographic fieldwork and archival resources from both the U.S. and Mexico makes for a richly sourced analysis that allows Cohen to redefine borders as places that are both regionally defined and as symbolic spaces that are imbued with almost an almost totemic power to transform the individuals who cross them. Cohen's view of modernity not as a state but as a performance also enriches the study of the history of both migration and diplomacy. Above all, Cohen's

decision to take seriously the rituals of diplomacy performed by Mexican citizens and the state breaks new ground, showing how micro-level interactions create and recreate the nation and shift our understanding of what it means to be transnational.

Ultimately, Cohen also provides us with new tools to understand how transnational actors are created and how we can understand those who inhabit the “third way” (229) between the U.S. and Mexico. She points out that people who exist in this transnational state may not assimilate when they migrate but neither do they retain an unchanged relationship with their nation of origin or with the local sphere. Instead, individual identity is connected to the seemingly rarefied air of high politics and of national and transnational narratives created by both sending and receiving governments. *Braceros* may have found their own personal ways to interpret and live within the limits imposed by their migration, but in presenting themselves and their experiences to others on both sides of the border, they relied on scripts and narratives that came from the U.S. and Mexican governments and from large planters in the Imperial Valley. These scripts may have been written outside of the *bracero* community, but *braceros* themselves negotiated how and when to use different symbols and presentations of self. Cohen’s analysis therefore presents a picture of transnationalism that reveals its deep connection to national anxieties.

Deborah Cohen's *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* is a timely and thorough treatment of the famous guest-worker program that facilitated the movement of nearly two million Mexican men to the agricultural fields of the United States between 1942 and 1964. It is timely because guest worker programs are once again on the negotiation table in the U.S. as the federal government attempts to regulate its enormous undocumented migrant population. It is thorough because Cohen integrates many aspects of this story – from diplomatic relations to cultural subjectivities – and brings a wide array of sources to bear on the topic. Using social scientific literature from the time, archival sources, secondary literature, and a rich collection of oral histories, *Braceros* develops a complex story about a numerous cast of historical characters – government officials of both countries, large growers in the US, priests and pastors, intellectuals and journalists, and most importantly, the *braceros* themselves. It is a book that engages with discussions across history and the humanistic social sciences about how to conduct research on topics that cross social, national, thematic and disciplinary boundaries. Transnationalism; interdisciplinarity; borderlands: these are the concepts that oriented the research and writing of this book. Its achievements, and limits, derive from the narrative and theoretical capabilities of the author, and the ambitious scope of these arguments and data.

The *Bracero* Program, or rather the series of programs that go by that name, is part and parcel of the history of agrarian capitalism in north America, and in particular, California, a state that has been famous since the nineteenth century for its industrial form of agriculture marked by large landholdings, massive government hydraulic works, and mechanization. Karl Marx, for example, mentioned in 1880 that capitalist enterprise in California was concentrated like nowhere else<sup>1</sup>; perhaps the first in a line of notable critics that include Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck and Carey McWilliams.<sup>2</sup> A major problem of agrarian capitalism anywhere is the provision of labor: how can labor be supplied for specific moments in the productive process, and maintained while not employed? In much of the modern world the imagined solution was to promote farms of a size that a family could work and thus the chimerical small farmer or petty agrarian capitalist. Since statehood at least, rural California was never defined by small farms, but as Cohen tells us, in the twentieth century the mythic figure of the small farm played a central ideological role in efforts by large California growers to thwart unions and control production. In one of many very interesting insights into transnational agrarian history,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Marx to Friedrich Sorge, November 5, 1880. Originally published in *Science and Society* Volume II, No. 2, Spring 1938. Translated and Edited by Leonard E. Mins. Downloaded from the internet at [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/letters/80\\_11\\_05.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/letters/80_11_05.htm) on 3/15/13.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1901); Upton Sinclair, *The EPIC Plan for California* (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1934); John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1936); Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939).

she shows that the ideal of the small farmer was also important to Mexican government officials who were imagining and building a new rural society after the Revolution of 1910-1920. Regardless of the Jeffersonian vision of small farmer society, large industrial capitalist farms grew up in both countries that depended on the seasonal labor of peasants who, during the rest of the year, farmed and resided on their own land. In the southwest United States, where there was no sizeable peasantry to provide this labor, the workers came from far away: China, Japan, the Philippines, Oklahoma, and, of course, Mexico.

This understanding of agrarian capitalism lurks like an old mole beneath Cohen's discussion of the political dynamics of organizing and managing migrant labor during and after World War Two, due in large part to the fact that the actors and initiatives she studies were often informed and motivated by it. As the author mentions, Manuel Gamio and other state intellectuals who had been forged in the fire of the Mexican revolution were sensitive to historical and class analysis of the 'agrarian problem,' and the institutions they created – collective farms; smallholder agricultural colonies, agrarian banks, the *Bracero* guest-worker Program – were designed to ameliorate what were seen as the negative social dimensions of rural capitalism. The same perspective was held by radical intellectuals and union organizers who lived in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century, when these sorts of ideas were familiar to many. The contemporaneous sources on *braceros* and the *Bracero* Program used by Cohen bring to the text this submerged analysis, but the author herself takes it rather as a point of departure. The substantial corpus of Marxian work on land, labor, and agriculture, so important to historians and social scientists working in Latin America from the 1960s to the 1980s, does not appear in the bibliography, having been displaced, it seems, by a set of newer concerns.<sup>3</sup>

Culture is the most expansive of these concerns. Cohen identifies a central discourse shared by most people in the U.S. and Mexico during the early and mid-twentieth century – 'the modern' – and she concentrates the analytical dimensions of her book on understanding this culture of the modern. It is the guiding analytical framework for understanding the connections between state formation, popular action, diplomacy, work, economic development, gender, race and more. She conceives of the modern as "a wider logic of that moment . . . a broad worldview or ideology, a commonsense" (10-11). The modern (or rather, as I would prefer to say, the "idea of the modern," or "modernism") is vast and multifaceted, and includes temporal and social concepts such as progress, masculinity, whiteness, the nation, etc. It is what Raymond Williams would call a "structure of feeling", that orients action and filters understandings of the world and one's place in it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Palerm, Angel. 1980. *Antropología y marxismo*. México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Centro de Investigaciones Superiores; Roseberry, William. 1983. *Coffee and Capitalism in the Venezuelan Andes* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press; Smith, Gavin. 1991. *Livelihood and Resistance: Peasants and the Politics of Land in Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Warman, Arturo. 1980. *"We Come to Object": The Peasants of Morelos and the National State*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Bartra, Armando. 2006. *El capital en su laberinto: De la renta de la tierra a la renta de la vida*. México: Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Influenced, perhaps unconsciously, by Marxist analyses of political culture such as Williams', Cohen shows through a discussion of texts, declarations, documents and other concrete evidence that 'the modern' is also the terrain of social and cultural struggle, as actors make moves and defend competing positions in that shared language. Some of Cohen's most illuminating moments pivot on this discourse and practice of 'the modern,' and how the experience of transnational migration – 'the border' in her words – was shaped by it.

This is clearly cultural history, in a mode characteristic of Mexican history which couples culture and politics to shed light on the subjective dimensions of political projects. And it is well done. Culture takes center stage in Part II of the book, the middle chapters which are organized to follow the movement of *braceros* from home to field in the U.S. and back home again. For example, Chapter Four, "Rites of Movement, Technologies of Power", deals with the selection of *braceros* by the Mexican government. Chapter Five discusses the racial and gendered dimensions of work in the United States; Chapter Six treats labor struggles in the U.S.; and Chapter Seven closes the circle by analyzing the transnational subjectivity of workers that was realized upon their return to Mexico. It is a smart way to organize the material, and follows the organizational logic of *bracero* memories by introducing each chapter with fragments of conversations recorded in the field. Chapter Four, for example, opens with an ethnographic snippet relating how one former *bracero* described the pride he felt when he was selected to participate in the Program, and learned of his role as an ambassador of modernity; Chapter 5 discusses daily life in the fields and barracks of California industrial farms, and begins with *bracero* memories of hard work. These are thickly descriptive chapters written around *bracero* testimonies that provide emotional and intellectual immediacy to the reader as he or she reads stories of train rides, border inspections, unsatisfying meals, cruel foremen, playing music, listening to radios, bars, and girlfriends. Cohen displays remarkable sensitivity and courage in placing the intimate particularities of migrant masculinity at the heart of her book, and her success at doing so is even more impressive considering the difficulties of crossing the sex/gender divide and conducting fieldwork exclusively with men. All in all, the ethnography in this book is very good and deeply revealing.

All books achieve some things at the expense of others. *Braceros* relies on a notion of culture that is principally symbolic, and while this is not in itself wrong, it does end up restricting her analysis in identifiable ways. Take, for example, the long description of political ritual and performance in the *bracero* selection process. Cohen builds an argument that the selection process was a highly choreographed event in which government officials made strategic symbolic use of stadiums to achieve effects of power. "The circularity of the arena", she writes, "represents democracy, nonhierarchical divisions, and unity between people . . . symbolizing a transparency of action and clarity of motive, freedom, and liberty.... Transformed from mere procedure into national ceremony, the selection process became part of the state's arsenal of revolutionary rituals celebrating democracy and the arrival of the modern" (95). She borrows from literary theory, and describes her analysis of space and culture as "a reading of the stadium setting" (94). Tellingly, none of the rich testimonies by *braceros* or state officials that are so important to the book are provided to substantiate this "reading". While this is not the mode that

prevails in her book, which is rigorous in its use of documents and testimonies, it does signal a conception of culture as political text, subjectivity, and discourse which seems to abandon the materiality of ethnography data and which is, to be sure, the dominant framework for understanding culture in U.S. cultural studies and anthropology. Other more 'material,' or 'economic' formulations of the culture concept – hinted at by her early reference to Antonio Gramsci – are not engaged. This symbolic conceptualization of culture pushes the book away from grappling fully with the dynamics of postwar accumulation (ISI, Fordism, urbanization and de-peasantization in Mexico, for example), which scholars interested in political economy would see as important for understanding discourses, practices, and experiences of 'the modern.' The consumption by *braceros* of commodities such as cowboy hats and radios, for example, is discussed in terms of subjectivity: patriarchal responsibility to the family; belonging to the nation; or the tension between individualism and collectivism. The gulf between cultural and economic history, which is defined so clearly in Latin American history in the 1990s, comes out clearly in this book.<sup>5</sup>

The thematic and theoretical focus of *Braceros* on culture, together with the ethnographic quality of the book's narrative, situates the book and its readers at the disciplinary borders of history and anthropology. During the 1970s and 1980s a number of encounters were established between anthropology and history that produced rich insights and benefitted both disciplines. Anthropologists studying peasants in Latin America, for example, benefitted from the work of historians who dealt with feudalism. Historians seeking to integrate culture into their analyses adopted insights that had been generated by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz; some anthropologists borrowed the other direction from historians such as E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams. Both disciplines shared an interest in language, discourse, and texts, as well as an attention to politics and power informed by Gramsci and Michel Foucault. Cultural Studies, especially the variant which grew in Birmingham, England, was another potent influence shared by scholars at the intersection of these two disciplines. Important institutional spaces for the encounter of anthropology and history were forged in the University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Michigan, the New School for Social Research, Carnegie Mellon, and others, and a few generations of students produced books at the confluence of these disciplines. Cohen's book is one of them.

Like the *bracero* subjects of her study, Cohen does not cross the disciplinary border forever: she begins and ends in history. Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does shape the analysis in the book. Key concepts such as 'patrimony' and 'social indebtedness' could have been bolstered by a deeper engagement with anthropology, a discipline that has long focused on local, community and household dynamics. Even the big issues – 'modernity', 'transnationalism' – have been discussed extensively by

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Deans-Smith and Joseph Gilbert, editors. "Mexico's New Cultural History: Una Lucha Libre?" Special Issue of the *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79(2) 1999.

anthropologists, and their contributions could have enriched the book.<sup>6</sup> Of course, an author cannot, and should not attempt to, include everything in a book, and focusing more on anthropology might have taken away from the dialogue with historians. *Braceros* is a very rich, full text, and the author has certainly done her best to not leave out anything important. One concluding comment about the particular encounter between history and anthropology in this book could be, then, that crossing disciplinary borders reinforces disciplines; a paradoxical and mutually constitutive relationship much like the one between the transnational and the national that Cohen so keenly understands. An alternative, perhaps more exciting conclusion, would be that there is much to be recovered from the corpus of work that constitutes the historical anthropological discussion of political economy and culture, a discussion that is far from being exhausted. Regardless of which way the encounter moves, Deborah Cohen has written a truly impressive history of migration and modernity in the postwar Mexico/U.S. borderlands.

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<sup>6</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press; Alvarez, Robert. 2005. *Mangos, Chiles and Truckers: the Business of Transnationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



I thank the members of this roundtable for the thoughtfulness with which they have reviewed my book, *Braceros*. They gave my work careful consideration and engaged seriously with its aims and arguments.

Of importance for diplomatic history scholars, the book shows not just the ways in which the already-fraught power relationship between the United States and Mexico (due to the U.S. response to the Mexican Revolution, to the Mexican state's 1938 nationalization of the country's oil fields, and to U.S. intervention in Latin America as a whole) was realigned through the Bracero Program, but that the actions of *bracero* migrants had much to do with that realignment. As such, I (like others in the field) continue the push for a transnational and multi-level approach to diplomatic history that suggests that the arenas of state-to-state action are not always the most influential diplomatic ones, nor that the scope of our field is limited to interactions between the state actors.

Situating diplomatic history's usual suspects—state agents—vis-à-vis other actors, *Braceros*, as members of this roundtable note, examines three key sets of relationships: those between the two states; between the state and its citizens and the state and its non-citizens; and between citizens and non-citizens. Foregrounding these imbricated sets of relationships elucidates the profound multi-level transformations that the program engendered.

The book positions the central arena of diplomatic history—the state-level international—in relation to other arenas and relationships with non-state actors. In so doing, it explores how this program of regulated migration transformed not just state-to-state arrangements, but also domestic ones. These are most obvious in the growing demands that *braceros* (and those who aspired to be *bracero* migrants) made on the Mexican government, both at home and in the United States. However, we also see transformations within the United States, especially in the California fields that I examine, and how, for example, notions of national belonging superseded class connections as domestic farmworkers at times rejected support from *bracero* class co-equals in their union organizing struggles. Undergirding these transnational and domestic rearrangements was the increasing importance of a new development ideology: modernization. Modernization, as a theory and ideology inscribing the supposed truth of its own logic, was ostensibly more inclusive (racially and otherwise) than Eugenics, its predecessor. However, it too argued that there was only one true policy path to progress: properly gained (a contrast to Communism) through the expansion of democratic institutions, capitalist industrial development, education, and technological advancement. As I show in the book, this ideology did not merely structure the discussions between the United States and Mexico over the format and goals of the Bracero Program; it also shaped what the migrants themselves sought to learn and accomplish. The latter were ideas they acted on both in the United States—in the claims they made for better food, for access to women, for relief from some of the excess constraints of work, for recognition of the importance of their work to the United States—and also in Mexico, as they insisted on the value of their new knowledge and the U.S.-made commodities with which they returned.

In this response, I do not highlight the numerous positive attributes of the book that are pointed out by the reviewers, nor do I refute all of the concerns that were raised. I instead address some key issues and the questions and issues to which they call attention.

The roundtable comments by John Dwyer, Sterling Evans, and Casey Walsh all touch on what they see as underlying dualities in the book's framing and methodology—the economic vs. the cultural; the transnational vs. the national and the regional; history vs. anthropology, to name a few—that they wish would have been more fully and directly addressed. To Walsh's suggestion that I might have better integrated the anthropological literature on culture and modernity into both my historical practice and *Braceros'* framing, I fully concur. I was trained at a university (University of Chicago) that did not discipline the disciplines and, as such, encouraged students to read broadly and outside their discipline and areas and time periods of interest. While I may not have cited all the anthropological work I used to formulate my working concepts of culture or modernity—there is a politics and pragmatics of citation—this work (i.e., Arjun Appaduri, Jean and John Comaroff, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Claudio Lomnitz, to name but a few) grounds my understanding and framing of these, and other, concepts.<sup>1</sup> In writing a “thick” (to evoke Clifford Geertz) history that looks broadly at actors and arenas, the book necessarily evokes issues and implications the full exploration of which—even with the already generous space allowed by my publisher—one volume could not possibly encompass.<sup>2</sup>

In a related vein, Dwyer suggests that I might have more fully incorporated an economic perspective, rather than focusing on the cultural. It is interesting that he would call attention to this divide. In graduate school I rebelled a bit against the economic orientation of one of my dissertation advisors, John Coatsworth, in favor of a more cultural one.<sup>3</sup> Yet in the process of preparing the book manuscript, I began to better recognize the critical connections between the two—that is, the material in the cultural; I was, after all, a Friedrich Katz, Mae Ngai, and Leora Auslander student.<sup>4</sup> While I concede that I might not

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others of their works, Arjun Appaduri, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996); John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997); *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Claudio Lomnitz, *Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in the Mexican National Space* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> John H. Coatsworth and Alan M. Taylor, *Latin America and the World Economy since 1800* (David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

have explored the central economic issues in the ways that Dwyer might have appreciated, I do spin out the materiality of the cultural in ways that reveal the cultural aspects of the political economy of the program, of agricultural production, and of the relationship between Mexico and the United States. Interweaving the cultural with the economic helped me see not just how the wartime land-grab in California combined with the flexibilization of a large pool of cheap labor to create California agro-business as we now know it. This cultural-economic interweaving also showed the ways in which the wartime economy and international constraints initially put Mexico on par with the United States and in a position to advocate for *braceros'* labor rights. It also revealed how, over the course of the program, Mexico's bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States was not only undercut by the latter's solidified post-war economic and political power. It was, maybe more importantly, constrained by the efforts of desperate and determined migrants, whose will to migrate undermined any hope of limiting labor supply at a time of growing agricultural demand for it.

In response to Julie Prieto's disappointment that I did not foreground more strongly the change over time in a program that lasted twenty-two years, I acknowledge this as a limitation of the book. I did consider different narrative structures for the book that might have better highlighted change over time (e.g., focusing less on the men's journeys and more on the changes that in the bi-national agreements and their implementation and abrogation). However, my core research questions—the transformation of *braceros* through journeys between Mexico and the United States, the changing relationship between the two states brought on by the program, and the place of the ideology of modernization in organizing these changes—made doing so cumbersome at best and nearly impossible at worst.

Ultimately, while no book satisfies every reader, I suspect that undergirding the central concerns of members of this roundtable are issues related to my approach to history and historical analysis. Dwyer questions whether the analytical frame of the book, with its three key concepts—modern/modernization, manhood/masculinity, and transnational—were my analytical overlay on evidence or if perhaps I had imposed these ideas on evidence that did not warrant them. Evans' calls for quantification of responses from my oral histories, for the book's re-conception as a regional (as opposed to transnational) history, and for the removal from the text of any self-references are similar challenges to my historical interpretation. I can assure them both that this framing and the book's general analytical vocabulary emerged directly out of the oral histories I conducted with former *braceros*. I, too, was surprised that *braceros* did not automatically describe their experience in the program as degrading or humiliating or through any number of other negative attributes used by previous researchers. I had already read this literature and came to my investigation with that frame. In trying to figure out why men were not discussing their experiences in the terms other researchers had used—that is, what I was doing wrong—I spoke with Coatsworth. He suggested that the space between the scholarly work on the program and what former migrants were telling me offered an important window onto how the men had understood their experiences. Thinking through in a serious way what men were telling me, he said, would provide critical clues onto an often otherwise hidden migrant world. And I did. I listened to how they constructed their stories, the words they

used to describe their experiences, and the emotions that came to the fore in the retelling. Though skeptical at first, I became aware of the consistency in the narratives of men who did not know each and who often recounted experiences to me in different kinds of situations: in the barbershop, at home, and on street corners. That is, this frame came through in their words and ideas repeatedly and clearly.

Regarding quantification, I challenge the notion that a certain percentage of my informants needed to have used the identical term for it to be considered representative. Instead, as I listened carefully to my informants, I took the sentiments conveyed in these conversations as ideas to be explored, as a possible lens onto the deep ideological contestations of the historical moment I was studying—I did not take these sentiments at face value; I analyzed them. I followed the approach of prominent oral historians, such as Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini, and Mabel Berezin, who have all called for locating oral history sources within a dense range of other sources (e.g., documentary, visual, material, etc.) and triangulating, as historians should do, all evidence to provide convincing support.<sup>5</sup> Their approach, plus Coatsworth’s wise council, helped me to see the schemas undergirding the former migrants’ narratives in the newspaper articles and state-level documents that I read. Though men did not always use the term “modern,” they did rely heavily on then-associated terms—“progress,” “advanced,” “technology,” and “industrial”—as well as on other longstanding dichotomies assumed to distinguish the United States from Mexico. For them, the United States was modern and Mexico backward. Thus, though former *braceros* did not always share the explicit program goals of state players and saw many problems—in particular, racism, corruption, anti-Mexican statements and opinions—that these state agents ignored, they still were willing to invest in these national distinctions and in a logic deemed critical to the progress whose rewards they sought for themselves, their families, communities, and Mexico.

As to Evan’s question of my place in the narrative itself, I clearly, but mistakenly, presumed that historians recognized the constructed and politically-interested nature of narrative, an understanding that emerged from heated debates in Anthropology and Cultural Studies. As Bernard Cohn has said, the divide between ethnographic subject and ethnographer that structures the ethnography of particular places plays out for historians in terms of time.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, historians since the 1980s (such as Harry Hartoonian, Geoff Eley, Chakrabarty, and others) have insisted that the past is a different cultural, economic, social, and political moment, one we can never fully know, even if we could be the proverbial fly on the long-

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<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990); Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); and Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

gone wall.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I see the discipline of history as constituting a big tent with room—indeed, a secure place—for varied approaches to historical practice. Diplomatic historians definitely recognize this. In so doing, we push the discipline and the subfield in critical ways that make relevant, both within and beyond the academy, our topics and concerns.

In sum, *Braceros* contributes in three ways to diplomatic history. First, it shows scholars the benefits of re-conceiving the field as the history of the United States in the World, broadening the actors who are seen as being involved in shaping state-to-state relationships and political projects. Second, it interweaves the cultural with the economic and the political to show the changes in these state projects and relationships. Last, it defines the transnational in a way that makes the concept more concrete and workable for diplomatic historians. This last point, I think, further invigorates the field for it builds on diplomatic history's already-established strengths—knowledge of state-to-state relationships and of a methodology and sets of archives that enable the construction of these relationships—to illuminate the ways that diplomatic relations and projects are grounded in the mutual constitutional of national boundaries and divisions—a logic and process that I define as the transnational.

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Hartoonian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Chakrabarty, see fn 1.