

The Story of Eliceo Zamora Caballero

Storygathering Transcript

Reported by Elizabeth Cobacho and Marta Popadiak, February 21, 2003

In 2003, a desire to explore the “honor of work” led APTP to interview the day laborers who congregated every morning just four blocks from our theater. Predominantly immigrants from Central America, South America, and Mexico, exclusively male, the Albany Park “jornaleros” wait each day for contractors and individuals to drive up and offer them a day of work.

APTP ensemble members Elizabeth Cobacho and Marta Popadiak, both seventeen at the time, took leadership of the ethnographic project to build relationships with and interview day laborers. From January to March, 2003, Liz and Marta made a half dozen visits to “la parada,” the corner where the jornaleros wait for work. APTP turned the stories that Liz and Marta collected into the original theater piece, *Amor de Lejos*. The following are excerpts from one of their reports to the ensemble.



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Laura Wiley: Can you explain to people how you approached getting these stories from day laborers?

Marta: The first time we interviewed them, Laura dropped Elizabeth and me off at the Aldi parking lot [at Pulaski and Argyle], and we walked across the street. Cause a lot of day laborers stand in front of GT's [a diner]. And so we went over there, and all of a sudden, they all start crowding around us and asking us if we have work for them. And we're like, "No." We started explaining that we do theater and we're part of a theater company of teenagers. I'd say it was about 10 to 15 guys. After that, Elizabeth and I went our separate ways to find people to talk to.

And so this guy named Francisco, I started talking to him. He was here for five years and he was from Guatemala. And he came here because there was a civil war being fought there. And his grandma didn't want him to fight in the war, so she sent him here. He taught Physics in Guatemala. He was a teacher. And now he's a day-laborer....And then a few times later when we went, I found Eliceo.

...I also talked about my story. I thought because I am light-skinned I wanted to let them know that we don't work for the government and we don't have any kind of affiliation with la migra or anything like that. So the way that I would get myself comfortable with them is by letting them know that my Mom is kind of a jornalero, too. Because even though she doesn't wait on corners or anything, I tell them that I sympathize a lot with them because my Mom is a maid and a worker like them....

Elizabeth: Today we're going to focus on the day laborer that we interviewed on Monday. His name is Eliceo Zamora Caballero, and he's 48 years old.

...He says that his voyage from Honduras to the United States, it's a dangerous one for immigrants. It's really difficult. He says that, he started off saying that the media here in the United States doesn't really portray the entire story. They only focus on immigrants running away from police officers or crossing the border. He says that they don't focus on the other side of the border.

He says that he left Honduras without money. He did this physical gesture where he crosses his arms across chest, like you have nothing. You know? So he made that movement to show that you don't have anything. That you don't have

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transportation, that you don't have a place to sleep. You don't have money for food. And he has to beg. You just knock on someone's house and you say, "Desculpame. Regale-me algo." Which is, "Excuse me, can you please give me something." You know? Give me food. Just like a beggar. And that's the life of an immigrant.

If you're traveling, the night will catch up with you in a place where there are no houses. I really like the way he said it, "The night will catch up with you." It'll be like six or seven at night and it's too dark to keep going. And it's really cold and it's been raining a lot. And you don't have a place to take a bath. You smell bad because you haven't been able to change your clothes. So you have to sleep like in a barn or at a place where they store cows or livestock.

And he said that the most difficult thing for an immigrant is "the bridge." That is what he called Mexico. And he says that that is the most grave situation for an immigrant. For the Mexican, they'll just grab him at the border and just throw him back. And he doesn't suffer because the next day he's just at the border again. But a South American or a Central American suffers so much more. And he says, "And so Mexico is hell to cross." He told us about the people that ride the trains to cross Mexico. Like he says that there's some of them that lose their legs. That they lose their lives. And that some of them lose their arms. And he says that along the way you'll find people that'll assault you. And he says that there's good people and there's bad people. But there's always people who are trying to take advantage of the circumstance that you're in. And that, he says that he's never seen on TV.

...And he was saying that tons of people die and people just never find out whatever happened to them. And he says that if you're gone for however many months, your family's going to be really worried about you. And it's just a relief for a family to hear the other person on the line saying, "Mira, aquí estoy." Like saying, "Hey, look. I'm here." Or to your wife, "Aquí estoy." Or to your mother, "Aquí estoy."

...And then he says a little bit about the work that they do. He says that the work that they do is 'pasado.' Almost like tedious. 'Pasado' means 'heavy.' You know? And he's saying that they don't have like insurance. And especially if they have to work on a roof, it's really high and it's very—he made like this sign—it's very slanted. And he says that you don't have any benefits. So if you break your leg, you're screwed. And they pay you really cheap. And he said that you're gonna do all this stuff. You're gonna do walls and dry-board and plaster. And he says that a lot of times when you're working on like painting and stuff like that, they won't give you a mask to put over your mouth. So you're breathing all that stuff into your lungs and at the end of the day, your lungs will hurt or eyes will be really red and really irritated. But he keeps saying, "What can you do?" You have to live with it. He was saying that they work so hard but the authorities don't see them as hard workers. They see them as criminals or delinquents or drug dealers or drug addicts or just drunks. Or lazy people. Like the policemen or Immigration or just people in general will see them that way. Will just have like this misconception about them. Will have like their prejudices and they'll just have this negative image about them.

...And he says that it's really hard because he's had to make the voyage out of necessity. Like he doesn't want to leave his family. Obligation has caused that separation. He says that his family, he adores, he loves his sons, he loves his wife. And he says that it's really hard to have long-distance love because after a while you kind of lose that love.