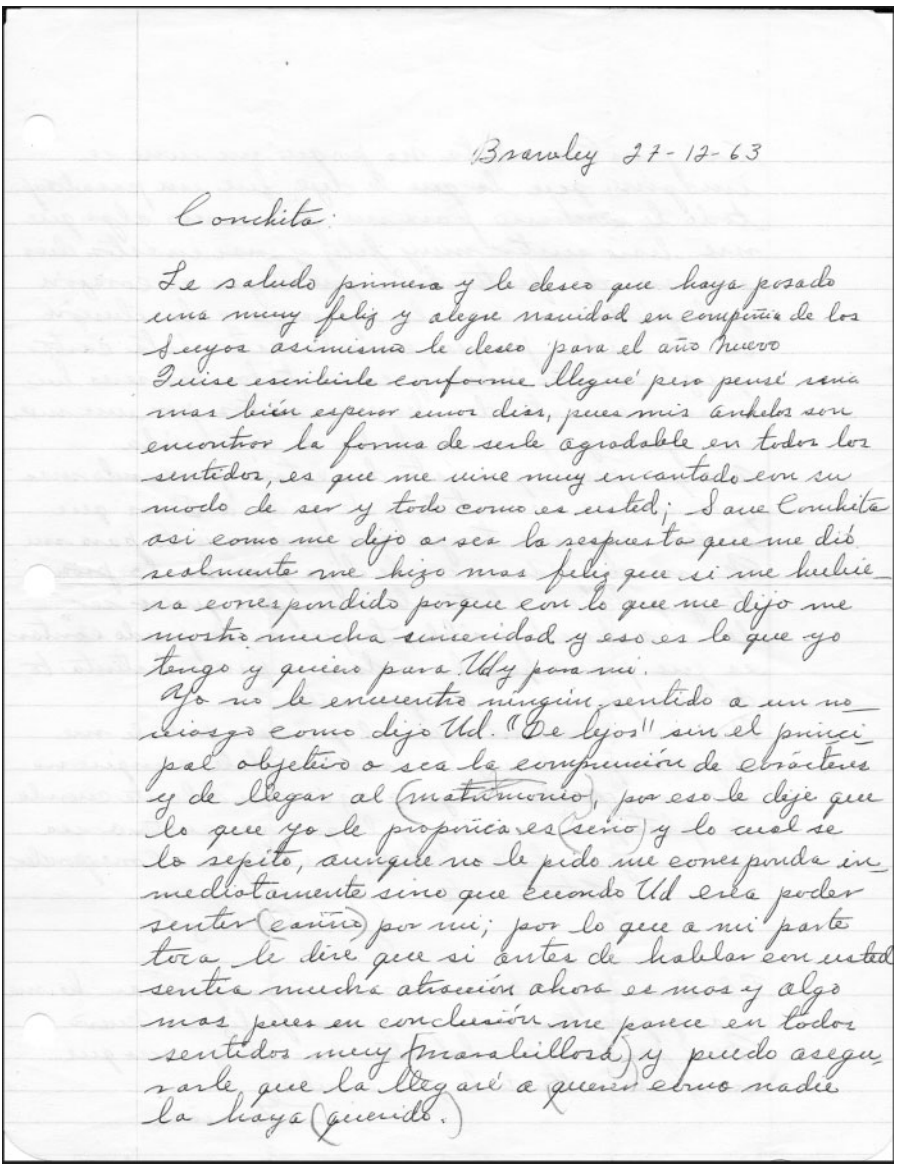


Braw[illegible]ley 27-12-63

Conchita:

Le saludo primera y le deseo que haya pasado una muy feliz y alegre navidad en compañía de los Suyos asimisma le deseo para el año nuevo
Quise escribirle conforme llegué pero pensé esperar unos días, pues mis anhelos son encontrar la forma de serle agradable en todos los sentidos, es que me vine muy encantado con su modo de ser y todo como es usted; Sabe Conchita así como me dejo o sea la respuesta que me dió realmente me hizo mas feliz que si me hubiera correspondido porque con lo que me dijo me mostro mucha sinceridad y eso es lo que yo tengo y quiero para Uds y para mi.
Yo no le encuentro ningún sentido a un noviasgo como dijo Ud. "De lejos" sin el principal objetivo o sea la comprensión de caracteres y de llegar al matrimonio, por eso le dije que lo que yo le propuse es (seño) y lo cual se lo repito, aunque no le pido me corresponda inmediatamente sino que Cuando Ud crea poder sentir (cariño) por mi; por lo que a mi parte toca le digo que si antes de hablar con usted sentia mucha atracción ahora es mas y algo mas pues en conclusión me parece en todos sentidos muy (maravillosa) y puedo asegurarle, que la llegaré a querer como nadie la haya (querido).

Figure 1. José Chávez Esparza sent María Concepción "Conchita" Alvarado his first letter of courtship in late December 1963. Florid in his praise of Conchita's virtues and serious in his marital proposal, José would write another forty-four missives in his attempt to conquer her heart and hand in marriage across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Photograph in author's possession.

Migrant Longing, Courtship, and Gendered Identity in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands

Miroslava Chávez-García

Drawing on a cache of letters written between José Chávez Esparza and María Concepción "Conchita" Alvarado in the 1960s, this article explores the world of a male migrant farmworker seeking love and companionship. It argues that, more than beasts of burden in the agricultural capitalist machine, migrants such as José sought fulfillment economically, emotionally, personally, romantically, and sexually.

On 27 December 1963, a week after returning to California's Imperial Valley following a brief visit home to Mexico, José Chávez Esparza, a farmworker, wrote a formal letter to María Concepción "Conchita" Alvarado, a young woman he met during his trip. (See figure 1.) Thirty years old and longing for a female companion, José quickly initiated a bold epistolary campaign to win her heart and hand in marriage. He forced himself to wait a few days before crafting the message, but, as he confessed, he could not delay any longer, as he had "returned enchanted with her personality and all her ways."[1] More than likely, though, he feared she might forget him and his intentions if he waited too long. José reminded Conchita that they had agreed to correspond not only to build a friendship but to

Miroslava Chávez-García is a professor in the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California, 1770s to 1880s* (2004) and *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (2012). A special *gracias* goes out to Paco Chávez, who helped her recover the letters and fill in the gaps of family history. She is also grateful to those who provided their knowledge and assistance to this history. They include Asunción Alvarado, Juan Alvarado, D. Inés Casillas, Adela Contreras, Guillermina Gallegos Díaz, Zuleima Flores-Abid, David Gerber, Inés Hernández-Avila, Rebeca Serna Macías, Natalia Molina, Cristina Prado, Dolores "Lola" Salazar Rodríguez, and Ana Elizabeth Rosas. Funding from the Division of Social Sciences at UC Santa Barbara made this research possible.

[1] José Chávez Esparza, Brawley, CA, to María Concepción Alvarado, Calvillo, Aguascalientes, 27 December 1963 (hereafter JCE to MCA, date). For the original Spanish, please contact the author, as space limitations have forced the exclusion of that material. To remain true to the spirit of the letters, few, if any, grammatical corrections have been carried out, as David A. Gerber advises in *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2006). In consultation with the editor, punctuation has been added before closing quotation marks. All correspondence remains in my possession.

The Western Historical Quarterly 47 (Summer 2016): 137–160. doi: 10.1093/whq/whw042

establish a relationship in which "she was committed to him [*me corresponda*]," and he, in turn, "was committed to her," a theme he raised repeatedly. "I see no point in a courtship [*noviasgo*] as you said 'from afar' [*de lejos*] without the principal objective . . . of marriage," he added. "[I] am not asking you to agree to my proposal immediately but rather when you believe you are able to feel love [*cariño*] for me." "[A]nd I can assure you," he wrote confidently, "that I will grow to love you the way no other has loved you."[2]

The beautifully crafted, formal, and eloquent communication seemed to have little affect on Conchita, however, for she failed to respond. Dismayed, José dashed off a second letter. "Conchita," he wrote, "please forgive me for boring or bothering you but 3 weeks ago I wrote you a letter and I am not certain if you received it or not for I have not received any kind of response nor has the letter been returned. . . . I beg you . . . to please respond . . . or say anything . . . [even] if it is true that you do not want to have at least a friendship with me."[3]

Two weeks later, José's waning optimism was revived when he received Conchita's much-anticipated, though somewhat lukewarm, letter. She apologized profusely for the delay and explained that she had not responded simply because she was at a loss for words. Since then, however, she had gathered her thoughts. "I am going to be sincere with you the way I think you were with me, look I don't feel I love you in a way that would take us beyond being friends," she wrote bluntly. The reason for her feelings was probably "because of the little time we have known each other you can almost say that we barely met, nevertheless," she conceded, "I do feel immense affection and profound gratitude" for the attention. "Look keep writing to me I like you for a good friend and as you say God will decide [*Dios dirá*]." Although José sensed her reserved enthusiasm for a serious relationship, he was overjoyed with her communication: "Conchita I wish I could find the most beautiful words to express the joy I feel as I imagined you would not respond." "[T]rue that we barely got to know each other physically but we can know each more intimately [by] writing and speaking the truth then you can say what your heart dictates."[4]

José's letters, including the forty-five he penned in total (Conchita, in turn, sent thirty-five), while often confessions about his desire for female companionship, love,

[2] JCE to MCA, 27 December 1963. My thinking on epistolary practices among immigrants has been shaped by David A. Gerber, "Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters: Personal Identity and Self-Presentation in Personal Correspondence," *Journal of Social History* 39 (Winter 2005): 317; Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*; Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York, 2006). Similar studies on Mexicans are sparse. See Larry Siems, *Between the Lines: Letters Between Undocumented Mexican and Central American Immigrants and Their Families and Friends* (Tucson, 1995) and William E. French, *The Heart in the Glass Jar: Love Letters, Bodies, and the Law in Mexico* (Lincoln, 2015).

[3] JCE to MCA, 20 January 1964.

[4] María Concepción Alvarado, Calvillo, Aguascalientes, to José Chávez Esparza, Brawley, CA, 28 January 1964 (hereafter MCA to JCE, date) and JCE to MCA, 4 February 1964.

and marriage, reveal the personal isolation, loneliness, and longing that he experienced while living and working in the Imperial Valley in the 1950s and 1960s. For nearly ten years, José lived without the sexual intimacy of a female and the domestic labors usually assigned to a woman, in a region roughly 1,500 miles from home—Calvillo, Aguascalientes, then a small, insulated, largely agricultural pueblo. While he wrote home frequently, his brothers visited occasionally, and he even developed close friendships with individual farmworkers and their families, José felt lonesome. (Whether he lived alone in a room or house or among other men in a camp or bunkhouse is unknown, for he wrote little about his living arrangements.) His anxiety about finding a sexual and domestic partner spoke to his desire for an intimate relationship that fulfilled his emotional, personal, and physical needs as well as his realization that as a slightly older, single Mexican man, he needed (or was expected) to settle down with a wife and family and fulfill his patriarchal duties of supporting a household.[5]

José's correspondence reveals a deep longing for heterosexual companionship, love, and marriage and evokes a desire for the emotional, domestic, sexual, and economic comforts of an idealized home. Like most contemporary male migrants, including his older brothers, uncles, and father before him, he migrated to the United States in search of employment and financial stability for himself and his family in Mexico. He remained ambivalent, however, about leaving behind everything and everyone he knew in Mexico for the United States, a place he scarcely recognized as home. Although he was unhappy living and working in the intense heat and relative isolation of the Imperial Valley, he was equally dissatisfied residing in Calvillo. As a young man, he hoped to study agricultural engineering, but the reality of his impoverished family life obligated him to find employment soon after graduating from the sixth grade at the age of sixteen.[6] Within a few years, he had moved to the capital city of Aguascalientes, where he worked as an apprentice in a tailor shop and, later, as a driver for Pepsi-Cola. Yet even then, he knew his future was in El Norte, with the higher wages it provided.[7]

What follows is an account of the personal, emotional, and creative world of a thirty-year-old single male migrant farmworker in the Imperial Valley, as told through the correspondence of José Chávez Esparza, my father, to María Concepción Alvarado, my mother. (Tragically, it is impossible to fill in the missing gaps of their experiences, for they died in a 1981 car accident when I was twelve years old. My older brother and I survived the wreck, though José's elderly mother did not.) Relying on

[5] Deborah Cohen's research indicates that Mexican ideals of masculinity centered on a man's ability to support a household. *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill, 2011), 191.

[6] In the early to mid-twentieth century, children in Mexico began and ended their primary and secondary schooling at a much older age than in the United States. *Necesidades esenciales en México: Situación actual y perspectivas al año 2000*, vol. 2, *Educación* (Mexico City, 1982), 18.

[7] For details on José's employment, see José Guadalupe Francisco "Paco" Chávez, interview with author, 20 April 2008.

eighty letters written between José and Conchita from 1963 to 1971, this article explores migrant longing, courtship, and gendered identity across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. I also use oral histories, photographs, music, radio programming, newspapers, and family memorabilia to sketch the broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which they crafted and exchanged the letters. Interpreted as tools of courtship (with all their manipulations), and read closely as emotionally restorative confessions of the heart (with all their sincerity and vulnerability), the letters nurtured and, in some instances, constituted the relationship.[8] The correspondence, though expressly limited to courtship, allowed José to disclose his innermost desires and craft a gendered identity as a hard-working migrant, loving husband, and sophisticated resident in the borderlands.

Narratives of the emotional impact of migration on gender, the family, marriage, and identity in the twentieth century are only now emerging. Until recently, much of that literature has examined the contingencies shaping the movement of migrants north and south across the border. While some scholars have explored the personal decisions involved in migrating, as well as the impact on gender and identity across space, place, and time, most have probed the policies and practices that provided both opportunities and limitations for transnational movement.[9] A notable exception is Ana Elizabeth Rosas's research. Using oral histories and personal letters of migrants participating in the Bracero Program—a twenty-two-year, binational labor importation program between the United States and Mexico—Rosas explores the immediate and long-term impact of separation and loss, specifically on women, children, and the elderly left behind in Mexico. She demonstrates that, despite the emotional anguish and estrangement among family members, sometimes for years at a time, women and their children adapted resourcefully to their new situation by forming new relationships, identities, and strategies, enabling them to thrive amid changing contexts.[10]

---

[8] I borrow the concept of letter writing as "emotionally restorative" from Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley, 2014), 109.

[9] The literature on Mexican migration, gender, race, and identity is vast. Studies most relevant to this discussion include Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2005); Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Ithaca, 2000); Kevin R. Johnson, "The New Nativism: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue," in *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, ed. Juan F. Perea (New York, 1997), 165–89; David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1995); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1995); and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley, 1994).

[10] Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu*. For similar studies, see Leisy J. Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* (Palo Alto, CA, 2014); Deborah A. Boehm, *Intimate Migrations: Gender, Family, and Illegality among Transnational Mexicans* (New York, 2013); Joanna Dreby, *Divided by Borders: Mexican Migrants and Their Children* (Berkeley, 2010); Deirdre McKay,

This work builds on those findings and the rich literature in sociology, anthropology, and Latina/o studies on migration, labor, love, and identity to show that migrants were not simply cogs in the increasingly global, capitalist, and postindustrial machine of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, when faced with the loneliness and isolation that came with farm labor, migrants worked to replicate the family structure familiar to them—patriarchal, heterosexual, and sanctified by the Catholic Church—even when it took on a new meaning and operated imperfectly in the borderlands. As the letters between José and Conchita attest, migrants had hopes and dreams for their families, and they sacrificed to build those futures, even if it meant leaving behind everything they knew and forming new identities to satisfy their needs and build a future they could call their own.[11]

This article begins by exploring the broader racial, labor, and environmental contexts shaping José's experience. Specifically, it pays attention to the rural working and living conditions in *el valle* and how those contributed to his loneliness, isolation, and ambivalence as a border dweller. Next, it examines rituals of courtship and the range of cultural tools—letter writing, the English language, photographs, music, and radio—perfectly tailored to draw Conchita closer and forge an intimate relationship where none existed. The correspondence indicates that José reinvented his gendered identity as a relatively poor, rural, and solitary migrant male laborer to one of a sensitive and urbane gentleman in the hope that Conchita would accept his marriage proposal. Finally, it demonstrates that, while Conchita did finally agree to matrimony, her decision was not exclusively a result of his creative courtship rituals. Instead, her limited educational and economic opportunities and her family's increasing impoverishment convinced her to tie the knot and relocate with José to *la frontera*. Knowing her family would have one less mouth to feed, Conchita hoped to lessen their financial burden and set them on a path to economic security.

When José arrived in the Imperial Valley in the early 1950s, demand for male agricultural workers remained strong, even though the end of World War II and the return of U.S. servicemen and servicewomen from abroad had eased labor shortages on the home front.[12] For decades, the region had occupied a central role in the

"'Sending Dollars Shows Feeling': Emotions and Economies in Filipino Migration," *Mobilities* 2 (July 2007): 175–94; and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, "Narratives of Longing, Belonging and Caring in the Dominican Diaspora," in *Caribbean Narratives of Belonging: Fields of Relations, Sites of Identity*, ed. Jean Besson and Karen Fog Olwig (London, 2005), 222–43.

[11] Useful studies that take up themes of love, marriage, courtship, and sex within the context of migration include Felicity Amaya Schaeffer, *Love and Empire: Cybermarriage and Citizenship across the Americas* (New York, 2012); Gloria González-López, *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives* (Berkeley, 2005); and Jennifer Hirsch, *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families* (Berkeley, 2003).

[12] Don Mitchell argues that no real labor shortage existed but that domestic workers were unwilling to toil for so little pay. *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens, GA, 2012).

development of California's agricultural economy. As Deborah Cohen has argued, the "labor regimes and agricultural practices" that emerged in the valley helped make the Golden State the nation's leading producer of fruits and vegetables.[13] José, like many Mexican men of his generation, traveled to El Norte in response to the continuous demand for cheap male laborers under the Emergency Farm Labor Program, or Bracero Program. After the war, sustained demand by agricultural employers for low-cost, dispensable, and manageable workers, as well as cries of labor shortages due to the onset of the Korean War in 1950, convinced U.S. State Department officials to extend the program repeatedly, despite heated protests from organized labor, nativists, and Mexican officials.[14]

The incessant demand for "captive laborers"—as Don Mitchell has described braceros—and the practice of hiring workers outside the official parameters of the program, convinced many other Mexican men, in turn, to head north to try their luck as laborers and, if needed, as undocumented workers, since they knew employers hired first and asked questions later. This surge resulted in the migration of hundreds of thousands of potential workers—given the misnomer of *wetbacks*. While most farm owners preferred to hire laborers under contract, giving them the ability to control the workforce, many hired them as *illegals*—a term that would come to supplant the racialized wetback designation for undocumented workers—or "legalized [them] on the spot."[15]

Likely not wanting to take such a risk as an undocumented migrant, José and two male cousins traveled to the closest recruiting station at Empalme, Sonora, hoping to land a contract.[16] There he competed with hundreds—potentially thousands—of prospective braceros, for a spot as a laborer. None of those competitors, however, were females, as the program excluded their direct participation for fear that their presence would lead to the migration and, eventually, permanent settlement of Mexican families in the United States.[17] Employers desired young, strong male laborers like José, and after likely going through humiliating physical exams, an inspection, and

[13] Cohen, *Braceros*, 8. For more on the early history of the valley, see Benny J. Andrés Jr., *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley: Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900–1940* (College Station, 2014) and William T. Volmann, *Imperial* (New York, 2010).

[14] For more on the Bracero Program, see Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New Orleans, 2010) and Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley, 2010).

[15] Calavita, *Inside the State*, 24. For more on the construction of "illegality," see Johnson, "New Nativism," 171; Abrego, *Sacrificing Families*; and Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*.

[16] Chávez interview.

[17] For women's invaluable support to the program, see Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu*.

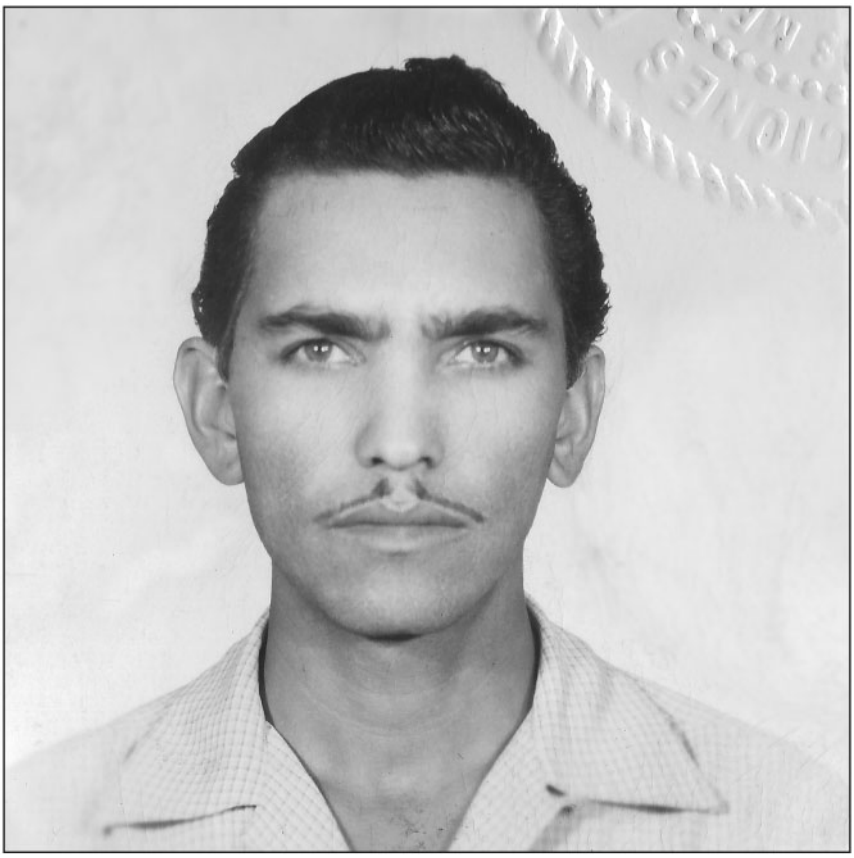


Figure 2. José, ca. 1957, when he migrated to the United States as a bracero. His mother, Leovijilda Esparza, called him "Lin," short for *lindo* (beautiful). Photograph in author's possession.

delousing, he was hired promptly, signing onto what would be his first contract in the Imperial Valley.[18] (See figure 2.)

Soon after arriving, José realized that, unlike the temperate seasons of Calvillo, the valley was desolate, dry, and extremely hot, with summer temperatures reaching 120 degrees.[19] Situated approximately 100 feet below sea level and surrounded by

[18] For details of the recruiting station at Empalme, Sonora, see *Harvest of Loneliness*, directed by Vivian Price, Gilbert González, and Adrian Salinas (New York: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2010), DVD.

[19] For more on local conditions, see Nettie Brown, "The 1961 Imperial Farm-Labor Dispute: A Prize-Winning Feature," *Imperial (CA) Hometown Review*, 21 June 1962 and M. J. Dowd, "History of Imperial Irrigation District and the Development of Imperial Valley" (unpublished manuscript, 1956), 2, Imperial Irrigation District, El Centro, CA quoted in Norma Fimbres Durazo, "Capitalist Development and Population Growth in the County of Imperial, California, and Mexicali, Baja

mountains to the west, the valley received (and continues to receive) little Pacific Ocean moisture—no more than three inches annually—making it among the most arid regions in the nation. Yet the relative warm weather and fertile lands made it (and continues to make it) a highly coveted region for near year-round agriculture, a process that began in the late nineteenth century with the expansion of the southwestern agricultural capitalist economy. To profit handsomely, early twentieth-century Euro-American capitalist developers—led by the California Development Company, founded in 1896—worked out a deal with the U.S. Congress to divert portions of the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley. Within several decades, the much-needed water quenched the parched landscape and brought into cultivation several hundred thousands of acres. By the 1950s and 1960s, when José resided in the region, some 500,000 acres were under production. Twenty to thirty years later, nearly 545,000 acres were farmed year-round, making it the sixth most productive region in the state.[20]

The tremendous economic growth would not have been possible without the importation and control of cheap, dispensable, and racialized laborers—namely, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, Punjabi, and poor white male workers—as the area's harsh environment repelled settlers for hundreds of years. Not until the 1910s did the region claim a significant population—some 13,500 people, among them white workers lured from across the country by the Imperial Land Company.[21] Ten years later, in 1920, with the expansion of the agricultural economy and the use of Mexican immigrants—who were desired for their perceived docility, biological suitability for harsh labor, and status as temporary laborers, or "birds of passage"—the population of Imperial County surged significantly, to 43,453, with Euro-Americans representing 67 percent, Mexicans nearly 15 percent, and others, Asians, and poor whites, nearly 18 percent.[22] With the hostile and legal exclusion of Chinese and Japanese laborers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the proportion of Mexican workers climbed.[23] By 1930 Mexicans made up 35.5 percent of the 60,903 people living in the valley, with Euro-Americans making up 54.4 percent and others the remaining 10 percent. Yet, by 1940, the overall population, including Mexicans, dipped to 59,740, a reflection of the severe economic downturn of the Great Depression and the repatriation of thousands of people of Mexican descent, including citizens. Not until the early 1960s did the population increase to over 70,000, with Mexicans constituting 30.5 percent and Euro-Americans less than 62 percent. Despite the end of the Bracero

California," in *Imperial-Mexicali Valleys: Development and Environment of the U.S.-Mexican Border Region*, ed. Kimberly Collins et al. (San Diego, 2004), 45.

[20] Durazo, "Capitalist Development," 45 and Kimberly Collins, "The Imperial Valley and Mexicali: An Introduction to the Region and Its People," in Collins et al., *Imperial-Mexicali Valleys*, 3.

[21] Durazo, "Capitalist Development," 45–6.

[22] For more on the views of Mexicans as ideal agricultural laborers, see Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*.

[23] For more on Asian exclusion in the United States, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

Program, many stayed in the United States. Nevertheless, the rural region remained sparsely populated until the mid-1970s, when it climbed closer to 90,000, a far cry from the expanding urban enclaves nearby, including San Diego to the west, Los Angeles to the north, and Mexicali, Baja California, to the south.[24]

Agricultural workers in the Imperial Valley, like José, found themselves living in a relatively isolated area, working on large farms in the intense heat, residing in poor housing, lacking access to adequate health care, and dealing with exploitative labor practices. In the 1950s and 1960s, local activists and sympathetic newspapers such as the *Imperial Valley Press* and the *Brawley News* brought attention to the rundown shacks, the shoddy and sometimes dangerous nature of health care, and the astronomical prices for foodstuffs. Rather than allow braceros to purchase such goods from local stores with competitive prices, bosses obligated workers to shop at company-owned stores or select retailers, forcing them to part with much of their pay. Unlike contemporary domestic farmworkers, who organized and launched offensives against exploitative labor practices, braceros remained a hidden and captive pool of workers, with few to no opportunities to join in collective struggle with other workers from around the state. Despite affinities of class, race, and gender with many California farmworkers, braceros experienced alienation derived from their sociopolitical and legal subjectivity as transnational contract laborers.[25]

José escaped many of these exploitative conditions when he obtained the coveted "green card" sometime in the late 1950s, as a result of his employer's willingness to sponsor his application for residency and support him economically if he lost his job or fell on hard times. Although the nature of the relationship between José and his boss, J. C. Reeves (owner of J. C. Reeves Ranches, a commercial farm in Brawley, California, dedicated to growing sugar beets, alfalfa, and wheat) remains unclear, it was known to have been generally friendly. José had worked many years for Reeves and, apparently, had earned his trust and loyalty, leading Reeves to vouch for him, knowing he risked losing a valued worker to another employer. Indeed, in subsequent correspondence to Conchita, José referred to Reeves, or "el patrón," as a "buen amigo."[26] Most farmworker/*jefe* relationships have been described as contentious at best and exploitative at worst.[27] But for José, the relationship proved fruitful; it allowed him to gain his green card and the ability to avoid the precarious life of a bracero and undocumented worker as well as leave his post at a moment's notice when work slowed or emergencies developed at home in Calvillo. In the immediate term, the green card

[24] Collins, "Imperial-Mexicali Valleys," 4–5 and Durazo, "Capitalist Development," 46–50.

[25] Cohen, *Braceros*, 145–71.

[26] JCE to MCA, 27 July 1965.

[27] While most scholars, Don Mitchell included, cast employer-farm worker relations as exploitative, Deborah Cohen finds many exceptions to that rule. She finds that farmworkers—braceros particularly—resisted, challenged, and ultimately reshaped the nature of hierarchical relations with their employers. Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops* and Cohen, *Braceros*.

elevated his status on the farm and gave him what he called *preferencia*. In short, it provided him the opportunity to reject backbreaking stoop labor—not unlike that experienced by black sharecroppers in the South—and earn more money than either braceros or undocumented workers. Despite the potential for new opportunities, José worked for Reeves until the early 1970s.[28]

More significantly, José's green card altered his gendered identity from a temporary, captive migrant male farmworker to a permanent employee, providing him the opportunity to settle in the United States indefinitely and obtain citizenship. His legal status also afforded him a measure of security from deportation campaigns, which had been carried out throughout the twentieth century—most recently in the 1940s and 1950s—culminating in 1954 with Operation Wetback, a massive military-style drive to apprehend and deport 1 million undocumented workers. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Mexican nationals throughout the United States were deported.[29]

But José's identity as a green card holder did little to diminish his responsibilities at work, increase his pay significantly, or lessen his feelings of isolation. Instead, he worked year-round driving a tractor, watering the fields, and overseeing the crops, especially during the peak seasons of planting and harvest, when he was unable to travel. The only exception to his work schedule was two weeks of unpaid leave during the December holiday season. José did all this for low but steady pay, as compared to his impoverished peers working on farms across the country. A surviving income tax return from 1962 indicates that he earned more than the average single male farm resident living at the poverty line in the United States. That year, he made $4,500, while the national poverty line for single males living on farms was $1,370.[30] He was, of course, by no means wealthy, particularly since he lived in California, with a cost of living higher than the national average; and he was dependent on the availability of daily farm work to meet his basic financial obligations for housing, nourishment, and return migration, and contributing to the support of his ailing parents. José's work responsibilities also limited time to reunite with his family, socialize with friends, and meet potential mates. Such conditions made for an isolating existence that, combined

[28] JCE to MCA, 1 August 1964. For the comparison of braceros to black sharecroppers, see Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York, 2010).

[29] For more on Operation Wetback and other deportation campaigns, see Kelly Lytle Hernández, "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954," *Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (Winter 2006): 421–44; Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque, 1995); Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on "Illegals" and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2010); and Kevin R. Johnson, "September 11 and Mexican Immigrants: Collateral Damage Comes Home," *DePaul Law Review* 52 (Spring 2003): 849–70.

[30] "Income Tax Statement, 1962," José Chávez Esparza, in author's possession. For poverty rates in 1962, see "Poverty Thresholds 1962," US Census Bureau, last modified 5 May 2015, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/thresh62.html.

with an isolating environment, chewed at his emotional core, motivating him to take up a fierce campaign in early 1964 to conquer Conchita's hand in marriage.

Nearly five weeks after José began writing letters at the end of 1963, he seemed no closer to convincing Conchita of the proposal. After waiting twelve days for her to respond to his latest letter—the third—José hurriedly sent an "extra" letter at the end of January 1964. He had written it, he explained, not because he had become disillusioned or impatient with her silence but rather to reveal his true feelings. Although he remained confident, José was not completely blind to Conchita's lukewarm response: "[I]t is true" that they barely got to know each other when he visited in December. He had not spoken to her, he explained, because he lacked the experience and nerve to speak to her, especially because she was "muy bonita" (very beautiful). "Remember the day that you told me it was not you that I had spoken to but your cousin?" he asked. "[W]ell I still don't believe it. [T]rue I had a few drinks but I was not drunk I had merely lessened my fear of speaking to you and declaring my intentions, well since I saw you for the first time I had the desire to speak to you but since I am not one of those types [of men] who have the facility of speaking easily to the girls" because "I think . . . I am . . . not attractive [*soy feo*]," he explained, using self-denigrating language to position himself strategically as vulnerable. "[I] want you to know that I will not defraud you if you declare yourself to be my girlfriend. [I] offer you all my love which is bountiful and very sincere."[31]

To convince her of the fateful nature of the relationship, José explained a coincidental yet reassuring (*curioso*) event about their courtship on the day he received her first and only letter. That day, he told her, he had nearly given up hope she would write. He had become so disappointed that he had erased her name—"Shelly," which he had translated literally from "Conchita"—from where he had written it on the inside of the tractor where he worked. He likely used her name, which he recited every day aloud, to keep alive his memory of her and his hope for marriage. Moreover, by Americanizing her name, he went a step further in demonstrating his expectation that she would not only join him as his wife but also adapt culturally—as he had—to the new environment. Earlier in the day, when her letter finally arrived, he continued, "[I] said today I must receive a letter from 'Shelly' (that's how it was written I translated it to English) . . . and if I don't receive it I will not write to her until Selly writes to me and that day I received your letter."[32] While José believed it was more than coincidence that her correspondence arrived on the day he had given up hope, Conchita was not convinced.

Nearly two weeks later, Conchita sent a second letter, brief and less enthusiastic than José had desired. "[A]lthough you might not believe it," she explained, "I don't have a lot of free time as I am studying and the additional housework that I have to do that time escapes me."[33] As one of the two eldest daughters living at home, she and

[31] JCE to MCA, 16 February 1964.

[32] Ibid.

her older sister Asunción, or "Chifis," were responsible for much of the daily domestic chores, including washing, ironing, and cleaning for a family of fourteen. (The eldest sibling, Sanjuana, who had been responsible for much of the housework, had recently married and lived with her spouse and his family.) According to Conchita's siblings, the family's increasing impoverishment—a result of her stepfather's poor financial planning related to the family estate left behind by Conchita's biological father, who was killed by an unknown assailant when she was a child—also meant that her labor was crucial to the household. Moreover, when she did not tend to domestic chores, she focused on her studies, as she was nearing the completion of *la secundaria* (middle school), an unusual feat for girls from rural areas in Mexico.[34] Yet Conchita was not completely closed off to the idea of the courtship and, likely, the attention that came with it. She said encouragingly, "But if you have more time [to write letters] . . . you do it and I as soon as I can will respond to them." Another thing, she said, challenging his assessment of her, "[I] am not beautiful as you say I am considerably ugly [*horrible*], but I understand your reasoning for expressing yourself in that way as you saw me at night. I think that if you saw me during the day you would not say the same thing."[35]

Aware of Conchita's growing disinterest, despite his aggressive epistolary campaign, José made an unplanned trip to Calvillo to save the fledgling relationship. The visit, though brief and unannounced, was significant for it meant risking his employment. At the same time, the trip motivated him to continue to pursue the courtship, and he hoped it would do the same for her. However, during his entire weeklong stay, he neglected to tell her the depth of his longing and loneliness, likely because he lacked the practice—not the vocabulary—to do so, as he and his siblings had few opportunities to express intimate words and engage in physical embraces. Paco, the youngest brother, mentioned years later that the lack of a kiss or hug from their mother or father did not mean that their parents did not love them. Rather, their parents expressed their affection by supporting them and providing for all their basic needs, despite their poverty.[36]

Rather than express his emotions in person, José saved his most sincere and familiar form of intimate communication for when he returned to the Imperial Valley, a distance safe from potential personal, face-to-face rejection. "Shelly," he wrote, after waiting ten days for her letter, "you know this time I went I only did so to see and talk to you I didn't tell you when I was over there because I wanted to leave it for when I wrote to you." "[I] am writing to you to tell you that I have not forgotten you and . . . I wish that you too would think of me." He continued pointedly, "[I]f you only knew how much I wish that you would grow to love me that is what I long for [*hanhelo*]

[33] MCA to JCE, 28 February 1964.

[34] In the 1950s, education in Mexico remained limited, especially among the rural population, despite the enactment of compulsory primary education laws. *Necesidades esenciales en México*, 25, 46.

[35] MCA to JCE, 28 February 1964.

[36] Chávez interview.

most." "[T]he distance" and, he neglected to mention, his limited experience with personal, intimate encounters was working against him, and he explained, "even though for me it does not exist and I hope it's the same for you."[37]

José's confessions seemed to have some effect, for several days later Conchita responded to his pleas yet did so with brutal honesty: "[L]ook I love you [*quiero*] with an affection [*cariño*] very different from love [*amor*], well (let's see if you understand) I wish I could reciprocate [*corresponder*] your feelings, but as you know you cannot obligate the heart." "[I] too have never fallen in love I think it is because the right moment has not arrived for me or because I have a very bad concept of men," she wrote, likely in reference to her stepfather. Assuming José would become upset at her response, she told him, "The letter you can tear it up or read it if you want but don't return it to me."[38]

Conchita's forthright response did not lead José to despair further. Instead, the letter's detailed nature—in his view, evidence of the developing relationship—and the ones that followed in the months to come, made him optimistic and allowed him the opportunity to communicate his innermost feelings, including his longing for home.[39] His proclamations of loneliness and despair, whether honest or embellished, had little affect in stirring Conchita's heart in the way that he expected. After a month of corresponding regularly, a second unannounced visit to Calvillo, and pleasant dreams about her and her home, José had yet to hear words of commitment. He would have to find other ways to capture her heart.

To bridge the geographic and emotional divide, José drew upon a repertoire of cultural tools to build a deeper connection. Among those tools was his beautifully crafted, highly stylized penmanship. Conscious of their differences in schooling—José had completed the sixth grade (*la primaria*), while Conchita finished the ninth grade—he doubtless worked hard to pen nearly perfect letters in longhand, sometimes on unlined sheets of paper, hoping to convince her of his refinement. Comparing correspondence between José and Conchita with that between José and his brother Paco reveals that José took more time and care in composing letters to Conchita: his penmanship was neater and more consistent and the content more effusive and intimate to his potential mate, while letters to his brother were focused on financial responsibilities at home in Calvillo. His punctuation was inconsistent in letters to both parties.[40]

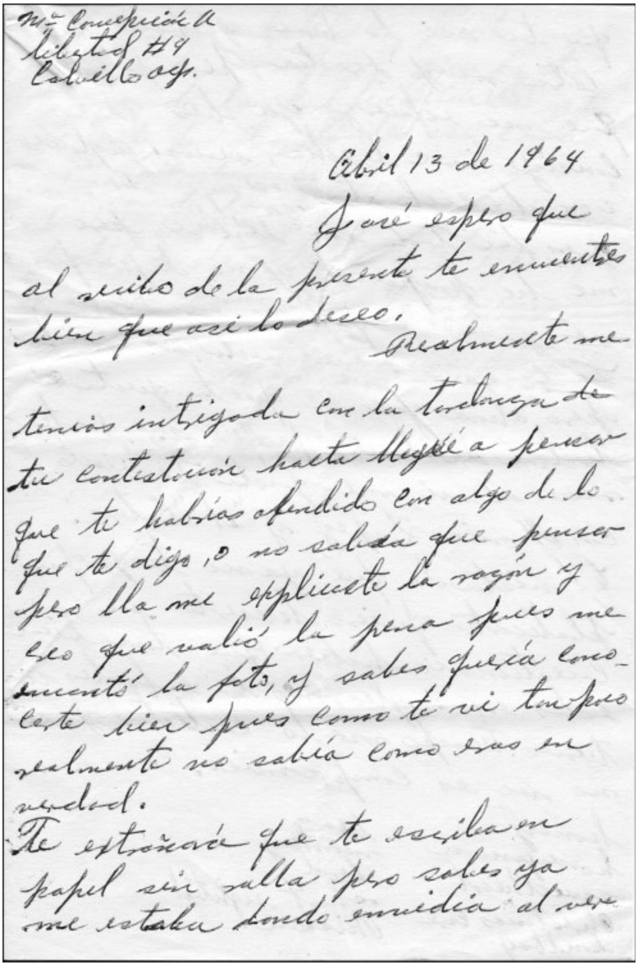
From the start, José's deliberate letter-writing tactic appeared to work, for Conchita was so dazzled with his skill, she confessed that she attempted to emulate it

[37] JCE to MCA, 22 March 1964.

[38] MCA to JCE, 24 March 1964.

[39] Following her correspondence on 24 March 1964, Conchita wrote twice more, on 13 April 1964 and 3 May 1964.

[40] In addition to the eighty letters between José and Conchita, the author retains another larger set of letters pertaining to the extended family and to friends in Mexico and the United States. Those are being used to complete a book manuscript, *Migrant Longing and Letter Writing in the Borderlands*.


Mª Concepción A
Libertad #9
Caballo Oj.

Abril 13 de 1964
José espero que
al recibo de la presente te encuentres
bien que así lo deseo.
Realmente me
tenías intrigada con la tardanza de
tu contestación hasta llegué a pensar
que te habías ofendido con algo de lo
que te digo, o no sabía que pensar
pero ya me explicaste la razón y
eso que valió la pena pues me
encantó la foto, y sabes quería cono-
certe bien pues como te vi tan poco
realmente no sabía como eras en
verdad.
Te extrañará que te escriba en
papel sin raya pero sabes ya
me estaba dando envidia al ver

Figure 3. A letter written in April 1964 by Conchita to José, in which she attempted to exceed his epistolary style and technique. Photograph in author's possession.

with little success. "It might seem strange to you that I write to you on paper without lines but you know I was becoming envious seeing that you do it and you keep your handwriting quite straight," she said a few months into the courtship. "[B]ut I have proposed to not let you beat me even in this instance."[41] Apparently, her words encouraged his approach, for he continued to write beautifully and nearly flawlessly over their three-year courtship, while her writing remained less clear and, at times, illegible. (See figure 3.)

[41] MCA to JCE, 13 April 1964.

José also used his English-language skills to win over Conchita, though they were less than impressive. His early correspondence had hinted at, or rather overstated, his abilities, particularly when he called her Shelly or used other English-language words sporadically. Yet he had far from mastered English, as his subsequent writings revealed. His limited abilities came through when she initiated a lighthearted language competition early in the courtship. "I want to ask you some questions let's see how well you are doing with English," she said. In a list, she wrote: "honey honeymoon sweetheart Christmas Eve handbag bear monkey bird short sighted chicken." "Every word is worth one point respond to me in Spanish and in the [forthcoming] letter I will send you your grade." Playing along with her, José replied to the quiz, answering most of the words correctly, except for "eve" and "short sighted." "[W]ell you grade them the way you have studied them as here [the United States] the English language is modified when spoken," he explained, suggesting he might not need to know formal English, since colloquial English was more commonly used in the United States, especially among farmworkers. After more quizzes, José admitted finally that his English needed improvement. "I don't think it is written correctly for what I know is based on what I have learned by ear I only read 2 lessons from 'La National Schools' before I came here," he explained. "[I]f it wasn't for that [training] I think I wouldn't even know how to say 'yes,'" he wrote sheepishly.[42]

While the English-language word games kept up Conchita's interest in corresponding, the exchange of personal photographs proved even more significant to the courtship, for they brought their likenesses into sharper relief and provided tangible evidence of the budding relationship. For José, the exchange of photographs occupied a central role in the nearly three-year-long courtship, for the images rendered them closer physically and emotionally, diminishing his loneliness and longing. He kept her portraits out in the open in his living quarters, among his other most prized possessions—a radio and an electric record player (*tocadiscos*) he purchased later exclusively to hear music they both enjoyed. "[Y]our photographs I have them in front of the radio," he explained. "[L]ook in one of them you and Chifis are seated in front of the kitchen of my house and in the other you are with your hands close together and smiling I don't know what you were saying but I see you very happy. Do you recall what you said when they snapped your picture?" The pictures, José confessed in a follow-up letter sent months later, also inspired him to write. "[O]ne thing that is going to seem simple to you," he said about his epistolary practice, "is that I write a few sentences and then I turn to see your photograph the large one the one that sits in front of me and it seems to me that I speaking with you." The idea was not impossible to fathom, he explained, "as the mind and the soul can overcome the distance so when you read this imagine that we are together."[43] (See figure 4.)

[42] Ibid. and JCE to MCA, 22 April 1964.

[43] JCE to MCA, 14 May 1965 and JCE to MCA, 21 May 1966.

Figure 4. Conchita in June 1963, graduating from middle school in Calvillo, Aguascalientes. She was among the first cohort of graduates in the *pueblo* and wanted to continue her studies, but she could not because of the family's economic want and gendered moral strictures. Photograph in author's possession.

The simple act of exchanging photographs was not an easy matter, especially for relatively impoverished Mexicans, for neither José nor Conchita owned a camera. Nor did they have the resources to pay for studio-quality photos. More frequently, they relied on Paco for the occasional photo, as he often borrowed cameras and snapped shots of quotidian life in Calvillo. For José, however, carving out time from work to have his picture taken in Mexicali, south of the border, where he tended to his personal services, was no trivial matter, as he had limited time away from the tractor and fields.

While photographs provided a vivid reminder of each other's image across the vast divide, Spanish-language songs occupied a deep, thoughtful connection, as they

touched an emotional core and strengthened the epistolary-based relationship. Like many Mexican farmworkers of his day, José treasured listening to Spanish-language music, for it brought reminders of home, family, and community and reinfused Mexican culture across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.[44] As he told Conchita, he listened to tunes in the car, on his way to and from work, and at home on a radio and, later, the record player, both of which he paid for with his hard-earned money and that he guarded closely. For José, song lyrics served as a primary form of expression and communication with Conchita, assisting him with the language and tone he needed to conquer her heart.

As much as José enjoyed Spanish-language music, he did not have the opportunity to hear the latest tunes, for he lived on the edge of Mexico's northern region, far removed from the epicenter of cultural influences emanating from Mexico City. "[I] have not yet listened to the songs that you indicate here," in the Imperial-Mexicali Valley, he explained, "they arrive a bit behind the songs that are in style in the interior." By "here," he continued, "I mean the transmitters of Mexican radios and regularly the musical 'hits' are played during the day and I don't have the time to listen to the radio until the evening," after work. Apparently, he preferred to listen to radio stations based in Mexico rather than the United States, even though by 1966, there were nearly 200 Spanish-language radio stations across the borderlands playing mostly Mexican tunes and *novelas* (soap operas): "[H]opefully soon I will hear them and I will let you know if I like them or not."[45]

Spanish-language music not only transported José home but also reminded him of the time they spent together, reinforcing the relationship. "[R]ight now I am listening to that record of Conny [Francis] do you remember?" Francis, an Italian American singer, was popular among Spanish-language audiences and was José's favorite vocalist. "[D]o you remember it is [*Quiereme mucho*] one of the songs I like best," he confessed months later. "[D]uring the rainy season [*lluvias*], when you go [to the *rancho*] imagine that I am with you. I often recall that day when we were at the rancho . . . listening to the record . . . do you recall it is one of the most beautiful days that I have lived and it brings me . . . much joy to recall it."[46] (See figure 5.)

José also bridged the physical and emotional divide with Spanish-language programming on radio stations across the borderlands. The call-in dedication shows, which were extremely popular and continue to be so, provided José with the perfect

[44] For more on Spanish-language radio in the United States, see Dolores Inés Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy* (New York, 2014); Félix F. Gutiérrez and Jorge Reina Schement, *Spanish-Language Radio in the Southwestern United States* (Austin, 1979); Cohen, *Braceros*, 121; and "How to win with Juan," *Sponsor: The Buyers of Broadcast Advertising* 5 (4 June 1951): 25–7, 50.

[45] Gutiérrez and Schement, *Spanish-Language Radio*, 7, 11 and JCE to MCA, 20 October 1964.

[46] JCE to MCA, 22 August 1965.

Figure 5. "Invierno Triste" ("Blue Winter") (1964), by Connie Francis, quickly became part of the repertoire of songs José and Conchita considered among their favorites. Photograph and record in author's possession.

opportunity to sway and convince Conchita of the sincerity of his intention. Moreover, by professing his love on the air, he gave witness before countless listeners across the region about his devotion: "I want to dedicate some songs to you on the XELO from Cd. Juarez I can hear it here very well and it has a program that is called Serenata Internaciónal [International Serenade]," an hour-long radio program in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, playing tunes solicited by sweethearts. "[T]ell me if you can hear it so I can dedicate some song to you that way we can hear them at the same time." In a follow-up letter, José explained, "on Tuesdays a disc jockey [*locutor*] goes on the air and to him I want to send a request to dedicate some songs to you." José's plans

were foiled, however, when he learned afterwards that the disc jockey went on vacation. "[F]ine," he conceded, "later we will attempt that."[47]

While the exchange of favorite melodies, photographs, and correspondence, peppered with occasional visits from José, warmed Conchita to the courtship, her diminishing prospects for a career and the economic independence that came with it made her reconsider his marriage proposal. Indeed, when Conchita learned the news that she would be unable to pursue her education, likely due to her family's increasing impoverishment, José's hopes for their future were bolstered. "I am very sad," she told him a few months after her graduation, "because I am not going off to study you can't imagine how I feel toward education [*el estudio*] that I think I'm going to go crazy (a bit more than I already am) nothing consoles me and everything seems worse." Doubtless elated that Conchita would remain in Calvillo, under her family's and, likely, the community's watch, José nevertheless consoled her: "I am so sorry that you are sad for not continuing your studies I too wanted to study when I finished elementary school but I couldn't." The career was too difficult and costly, he explained.[48]

Following Conchita's disappointing news, the tone of her correspondence took a noticeable shift from disinterest to interest in José's personal and family life, though it is unclear if he recognized the changed attitude, for he never mentioned it. Unlike in previous instances, news of his plans to visit Calvillo, this time in early to late fall 1964, made her particularly hopeful. "[I] am very happy to hear that you have decided to come and stay for a long time," she wrote, "I mean a long time compared to the time you stay on other occasions but I want to know more or less when you are coming," as she planned to be away. Although he postponed his trip until late December, it did not deflate her mood, for she was anxious to correspond and, likely, pursue the relationship. "I'm letting you know that I have returned," she said a month later, "and with the urge [*ganas*] of writing lots of letters so answer quickly."[49]

By the time José arrived in Calvillo at the end of that year, his aspirations for marriage and Conchita's consciousness of her need to ameliorate the economic want in her family created an environment ripe for nuptials. Few details remain about his holiday visit, but neither he nor she wrote many details; for José, the trip proved to be a milestone in the relationship, for Conchita expressed a warming acceptance of the marital proposal, and growing affection, but fell short of agreeing to matrimony. "[E]ven though when we spoke," José admitted, "we never said romantic things I believe we love each other very much . . . and when you are my wife I won't have enough with which to repay God for so much fortune [*dicha*]."[50]

---

[47] JCE to MCA, 14 May 1965; JCE to MCA, 28 June 1965; and JCE to MCA, 8 July 1965.

[48] MCA to JCE, 16 September 1964 and JCE to MCA, 29 September 1964.

[49] MCA to JCE, 23 July 1964 and MCA to JCE, 16 September 1964.

[50] JCE to MCA, 28 January 1965.

José's excitement over the prospect of living as husband and wife was cut short, however, when Conchita broke the news that her family had decided to relocate to Aguascalientes. To José, such a move was distressing to his gendered identity, for he worried about what it might mean for her sexual virtue and their relationship. For Conchita, the uprooting was not a new or unexpected decision, as the household had moved once before—during her childhood—at the insistence of her stepfather, shortly after selling much of the family property to keep them afloat economically. Now, after living in Calvillo for some ten years, her stepfather contemplated another move—this time, to the city—as a desperate plan to find a means to sustain the growing and increasingly poor household. He, no doubt, rationalized that living in the city would give the older children, Conchita and Asunción, a better opportunity to find employment. Calvillo, with its small-scale production of guavas and poorly paid needlework, offered fewer opportunities than those found in Aguascalientes, a growing industrial and manufacturing zone.[51]

For José, the news of the move was particularly worrisome, as he wondered how the move might affect his future plans: Would she forget him or, worse, betray him? "I don't know what to tell you about the news I received that you moved I don't know if I have jealousy or fear of the move," he wrote in a conflicted tone. "[I] confide in you I know you are good and sincere I think you would never deceive me plus I have my faith in you and in God let it be God's will."[52] Even though Conchita had never given him reason to think she might be unfaithful, the gender ideology of the day held that single women living and working in cities could not be trusted to maintain their sexual virtue due to their moral failings and physical weaknesses.

José's longing for Conchita's reassurance and commitment to the relationship, as well as her expressed fidelity, did little to elicit a response from her, as she was busy transitioning to a less respectable place of employment, according to contemporary gender conventions. Sometime in late 1965, Conchita quit her job in sales in Aguascalientes in favor of a perhaps even more stressful and physically taxing position as a traveling salesgirl of beauty creams and medicinal products. Conchita and her sister Asunción accepted the offer of a local traveling salesman who frequently bought supplies in Guadalajara to sell door-to-door to customers in Zacatecas and as far north as Durango. Natalia, their mother, initially resisted the idea because they were *muchachas* with little experience. "But because of the poverty and not knowing what to do [for support]," Asunción explained years later, their mother finally relented. "We had to work and we weren't used to working because we were among the rich [*los riquillos*] of Calvillo. We had one of the best houses, we had wealth, we had things. . . . We were among the best dressed but everything was sold bit by bit," Asunción said in an interview. Employment as traveling salesgirls probably brought a measure of shame,

[51] María de los Angeles Crummet, "A Gendered Economic History of Rural Households: Calvillo, Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1982–1991," *Frontiers* 22, no. 1 (2001): 105–25 and Beatríz Rojas et al., *Breve historia de Aguascalientes*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City, 1995), 185–211.

[52] JCE to MCA, 8 May 1965.

as it questioned the sisters' sexual virtue and confirmed the family's desperate economic need. Indeed, for many years, the sisters' experiences remained a guarded family tale.[53]

Two long weeks later, José finally received a letter from Conchita with the news he waited to hear: her return home. "I received your letter which I now answer with much happiness [as] I was anxious to hear from you," he said. "[I]f you only knew how much sadness I had and worry at the same time but now that I know you are in Calvillo I feel relieved."[54] Curiously, José never asked for any details about her travels, nor did Conchita say much, as they likely both preferred to keep the episode as quiet as possible, though they both knew it was impossible in the pueblo, where *chisme* (gossip) was common. Conchita's good news, however, was tempered by José's disappointing communication that he would not visit during the Christmas season that year, despite his repeated intentions to do so. As he explained, the year-round work demands of agricultural production in the Imperial Valley, as well as the inclement weather, work slowdowns, and his needed skills at the worksite, kept him away.

Despite José's news, Conchita's expression of romantic sentiments grew, especially by the end of 1965 and into early 1966. Sometime in late November or early December, in an undated later, during her "terribly sad" experience as a traveling salesgirl, she wrote to José a simple declaration of love when she ended one of her letters with "*quien te quiere*" (the one who loves you), a closing statement she had yet to use.[55] Prior to that, she had preferred to use "*quien no te olvida*" (the one who doesn't forget you), while José used "quien te quiere" with more frequency. Conchita's use of "quien te quiere," though a formality in the letter-writing process, did signal a shift in her consideration of marriage and, along with it, migration to El Norte as an economic strategy for her and her larger family.

Nearly three years after their courtship began, in late February or early March 1966, during one of José's brief visits to see his ailing father in Calvillo, Conchita finally agreed to go along with the marriage plans, even though she was not romantically "in love" with him or ever said "yes" formally to the proposal. (None of the letters indicate that she said "I do," and an interview with Asunción Alvarado confirms the same.) José knew she had yet to fall in love, as he confessed they had yet to exchange terms of endearment (*palabras de cariño*), yet he remained hopeful that her sentiments would change: "My biggest fears are that you do not grow to love me and that you end up to leave me [*me llegaras a terminar*] but now everything seems different and I give thanks to the heavens for having such beautiful hope [and] love." He continued, "you

[53] Asunción Alvarado, interview with author, 14 June 2008 and Juan Alvarado, interview with author, 19 January 2009.

[54] JCE to MCA, 14 December 1965.

[55] MCA to JCE, ca. November 1965. This letter is torn. The first half with the date is missing, but it is clear she wrote it after her return home from her travels sometime in November 1965.

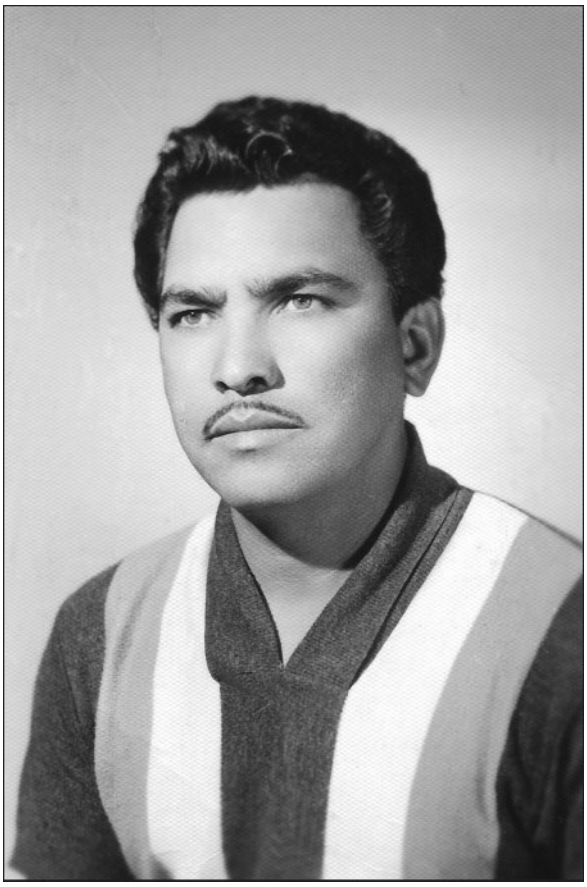


Figure 6. Photographs like this one, which José sent Conchita in 1965, maintained the relationship and also constituted the courtship, for they spent little time in each other's company and had little face-to-face contact in the three years they wrote the bulk of their letters. Photograph in author's possession.

have no idea how happy I feel . . . and even more when I think about that soon my dream will come true."[56] (See figure 6.)

Although the letters are silent as to the details of the couple's engagement, they moved ahead swiftly with their wedding plans and future as husband and wife. Indeed, within a few weeks, they had selected the *padrinos* (godparents), agreed on the month of September for a modest ceremony and celebration, and even made plans for her emigration to the United States. Unlike many male migrants of the day, who willingly

[56] JCE to MCA, 21 May 1966. For José's comments about "terms of endearment," see JCE to MCA, 6 July 1966.

left or were forced to leave their wives in Mexico, José had no plans of leaving Conchita in Calvillo and was confident that marriage to a green card holder would make it relatively "easy and quick" to arrange "the crossing [*la pasada*]."[57] José was mistaken, however, as it took more than two years for Conchita to obtain her green card. Despite the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated previous quotas based on national origins and gave preference to family members of citizens, residents, and immigrants with special skills, a congressional commission appointed to investigate the law took two years to complete its work, delaying the act's implementation. For José and Conchita, it meant waiting for more than two years at la frontera, in Mexicali, in severely impoverished conditions, for they had not prepared financially for the delay.[58] Finally, in December 1968, after the birth of her two children, Conchita and the children obtained their green cards and migrated to the Imperial Valley. Approximately four years later, tired of the demands of agricultural work and lured by the prospects of industrial employment in the San Francisco Bay area and his brothers' offers for support, José and Conchita packed their bags and headed north. There, the family network—so crucial for migrants' ability to navigate the new environment successfully—enabled them to find housing, employment, and schooling for their children.[59]

By then, Conchita's affection for José had blossomed, demonstrating that, even though she had married him to bring relief to her impoverished family, she had fallen in love. In three subsequent letters she wrote to him in the early 1970s, while she traveled to visit Paco and assist his new family in San Jose, California, she displayed an intimacy that had yet to reveal itself in the earlier correspondence. She used, for instance, a variety of pet names, including "*viejillo chulillo*" (beautiful, old husband). Years later, contemporary visitors—namely, Asunción and Juan Alvarado, a younger brother—attested that her demeanor had changed. Conchita's family in Mexico, however, remained impoverished, even though she left the household to relieve some of the economic burden. Forced to move from Calvillo to a rancho where, according to Asunción, they lived in a cave-like dwelling, and then to an urban center in Guadalajara, with the employment opportunities it might afford, her family managed to eke out an existence, yet they struggled to maintain the household. After a few years, almost all her siblings, as well as her mother and stepfather, migrated north one by one with Conchita and José's assistance.[60]

[57] JCE to MCA, 14 June 1966.

[58] For more on the delay on implementing the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 258–64.

[59] Scholars have written extensively on the role of social networks in the process of migration. Douglas S. Massey, "The Social Organization of Mexican Migration to the United States," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (September 1986): 102–13.

[60] Asunción Alvarado interview.

For much of the twentieth century, U.S. policies, politicians, and the public have rendered Mexican migrants, such as José Chávez Esparza and María Concepción Alvarado de Chávez, as cheap, dispensable, and temporary laborers as well as criminals who "sneak" across the border to cheat, lie, and steal and give birth to "anchor" babies in an effort to swindle the welfare system and U.S. taxpayers. José and Conchita's correspondence, however, challenges those narratives by humanizing their experiences. Their letters reveal that migrants led complex lives and aspired to be fulfilled economically, personally, emotionally, romantically, and sexually. Like many contemporary migrants of the 1950s and 1960s, they left rural homes at relatively young ages in search of survival and, ideally, stability for themselves, their families, and their larger communities. In their travels across space, place, and region, they also sought companionship, *noviazgos* (courtships), and, ultimately, marriage, allowing them to have access to intimacy, love, and sex and the gendered domestic labor associated with idealized Mexican patriarchal households. To reproduce the familiar forms of home, culture, and community, José, in particular, developed creative strategies to build a relationship where none existed and convince Conchita of his marital proposal. To do so, he drew upon a repertoire of cultural tools and techniques, including exquisite letter writing, the exchange of photographs and Spanish-language music, and the dedication of songs across the radio airwaves of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Migrants' attempts to improve and remake the self were not without personal sacrifices, however. As José's letters reveal, Mexican male migrants often lived in a world of longing and loneliness, working in relative isolation in rural zones across the Southwest. José and, likely, many of his fellow workers, pined for the comforts of home, the security of a mother and father left behind, and for the familiarity of childhood friends. Not easily defeated, José handled his heartaches by listening to Spanish-language music, programming, and call-in dedication shows. The sounds emanating from his prized radio and record player brought him both emotional relief and cultural affirmation.

Finally, José and Conchita's epistolary practices demonstrate that they sought to reproduce familiar forms of home—namely, the patriarchal, heterosexual family. While the Bracero Program likely suspended temporarily the roles of males and females by forcing men and women to take on new responsibilities in their changing contexts, Mexican migrants sought to reproduce the gendered identities they knew most intimately in order to re-create a semblance of home, family, and culture in their new environment.