

THE POLITICS OF DISPOSABILITY: THE GENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF THE
BRACERO PROGRAM

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
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In partial fulfillment of
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Master of Arts

In

Women and Gender Studies

by

Stephanie Vasquez

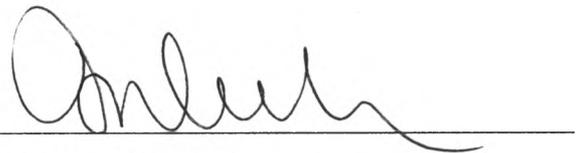
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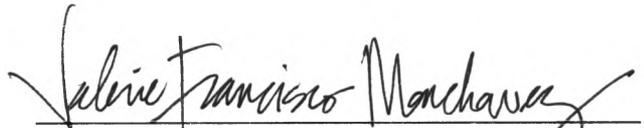
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julietta Hua', written over a horizontal line.

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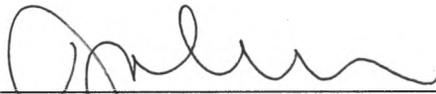
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THE POLITICS OF DISPOSABILITY: THE GENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF THE
BRACERO PROGRAM

Stephanie Vasquez
San Francisco, California
2018

In this historical and ethnographic analysis of the Bracero Program, I argue that despite the program's official termination, the framework of the program remained in place. As such when the state allowed capital to extend its invitation of residency to the *bracero* family, the structural frameworks of racial segregation, national exclusion and labor exploitation were able to funnel migrant children into the agricultural industry, producing a new generation of unofficial *braceros*. Drawing on the historical accounts of the Bracero Program as well as the oral histories of former *braceros*, this project addresses the conditions under which Mexican migrants labored and lived, as well as the social and structural frameworks that were imposed upon them as racial and national outsiders. Drawing on the personal experiences of the adult-children of former *braceros* who grew up in agricultural labor, I argue that when the state allowed growers to offer permanent residency to the *bracero* family, the structural frameworks of racial segregation, national exclusion and labor exploitation produced an unofficial continuation of the program, an in turn, aided in the production of a permanent racial underclass.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

5/14/18

Date

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As the inspiration for this project emerged from my family's own experiences as Mexican immigrants, I would like to take a moment to thank my parents Maria and Jose Vasquez for their countless sacrifices. I would also like to thank my older brother Aaron, whose unwavering encouragement propelled me forward during the hardest parts of my graduate career. It is because of the love and support of my family that this project was possible.

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INTRODUCTION:
RACE, LABOR AND THE ACCUMULATION OF SURPLUS

In late November of my first year of graduate school, I drove down to the Central Valley from the San Francisco Bay Area to visit my family. Having lived the majority of our lives in Watsonville, California, my family had since relocated to the nation's largest and most productive agricultural region.¹ The Central Valley is about 450 miles long and is the world's largest patch of class 1 soil, yielding a third of all the produce grown in the United States and growing more than 230 different crops.² The Central Valley is also home to three of the counties that employ the largest numbers of farmworkers in the state: Fresno county, Tulare county and Kern county.³

In driving down to visit my family, I marveled at the vast expanse of land before me, the roads wide and open—a stark difference to the often congested and narrow roads I had grown accustomed to in the San Francisco Bay Area. Driving past miles of orchards and nearly a dozen fruit stands selling oranges, pistachios, cherries and avocados, I came across a sign that I had not seen before on my many trips home. Displayed proudly outside of a roadside business along Pacheco Pass Highway was a large sign that declared in bold red lettering:

¹ Description of the Valley, <https://www.valleyhistory.org/index.php?c=74>.

² Mark Bittman, "Everyone Eats There." The New York Times Magazine. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/magazine/californias-central-valley-land-of-a-billion-vegetables.html>

³ Philip L. Martin, How many workers are employed in California agriculture? <http://calag.ucanr.edu/Archive/?article=ca.2016a0011>.

THANK YOU FOR MAKING AMERICAN GREAT
 AGAIN! NOW LET'S MAKE CALIFORNIA GREAT
 AGAIN!

In the middle of the nation's largest agricultural region was a slogan that since its utterance early in the 2016 electoral race had been used to terrorize the same laborers the region depended on economically. Indeed, the absurd irony of the situation was in the mere fact that a region with such a historical economic overdependence on Mexican agricultural laborers—an overdependence that has made the agricultural industry one of the largest industries in the nation⁴—was joining in on the collective national abjection of Mexican laborers, despite its own economic interests.

As I drove away, passing herds of angus beef cattle decorating the wide expanse of landscape, I thought to myself; “What would this region be without the labor of Mexican immigrants? What would California—and the entirety of the Southwest—be, if it were not for the labor historically performed by documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants that industrialized the region?⁵ What was the intension behind the demonizing of these vital workers in the heart of “ag-country”?⁶” Or perhaps even more pressing, “What is the historical relationship between capital's desire for a racially

⁴ Alison L. Deutsch, “The 5 Industries Driving the U.S. Economy.” Investopedia. 2016. <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/042915/5-industries-driving-us-economy.asp>

⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 130

⁶ A phrase often used by those in agriculture in the Central Valley.

diverse workforce and the nations rejection of those laborers due to such racial diversity?”

What made this even more confusing was that in the midst of this anti-immigrant political avalanche, rumblings of the resurrection of the long dead Bracero Program have begun to reverberate through various political channels.⁷ Indeed, as anti-immigrant rhetoric continues to place precarious Mexican immigrant communities in more and more danger, growers have once again attempted to reach agreements with the United States and Mexico to bring back a guest-worker program that would import even more Mexican workers into the national territory despite the current administration’s nativist and xenophobic proclamations of making America “great again” by purging them.

In order to fully understand these contradictory narratives regarding race and labor as well as the relationship between U.S. industry, nationhood and the exploitation of Mexican workers, we must first explore the histories of race, migration and labor as they have manifested in the United States. Indeed, in order to fully understand the way these contradictory narratives can in fact be *complimentary*, we must first address how histories of settler colonialism and white supremacy have produced various modes of labor extraction from racialized communities, despite prescriptions of the whiteness of nationhood. Also necessary is an understanding of the ways in which U.S. capital and the

⁷ Kausha Luna, “A New “Bracero program” May Be in the Works,” *Center for Immigration Studies*. <https://cis.org/Luna/New-Bracero-Program-May-Be-Works>.

state have negotiated these ideological contradictions through the strategic utilization of the Mexican body, before, during and after the Bracero Program.

Race, Labor and U.S. Capital

In *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson argues that U.S. capital has historically assembled labor “without regard for normative prescriptions of race and gender” and as such, the racial groups who have historically been excluded from citizenship in the United States, have made up the "surplus populations upon which U.S. capital has depended.” In the United States, racial groups who have a history of being excluded from the rights and privileges of citizenship such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos, have made up the surplus populations upon which U.S. capital has fundamentally depended and as such the acquisition of these populations has accounted for much of the racial heterogeneity within the United States.⁸

The institutionalization of the enslavement of black peoples in the United States was one of the pivotal moments in the relationship between white capital accumulation and the extraction of labor from the racialized other. As Edward Baptiste points out in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of Modern Capitalism*, it was

⁸ Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004). 15.

through the violence of slavery that the United States was able to develop into a world power. Since the trafficking of the first enslaved black peoples to the North American colonies in 1619, the commodification and violent extraction of labor from enslaved peoples had become one of the “engines of colonial economic growth.”⁹ While from 1619 to 1775, the developing nation depended on the forced labor of a smaller population of enslaved black peoples, as well as the labor of indentured white servants, white settlers quickly “imported concepts of racialized slavery from other colonies” such as those in the sugar plantations in the Caribbean.¹⁰ By the 1670s, importation of enslaved black peoples had escalated dramatically—slave ships carrying 160,000 captive black peoples to Chesapeake colonies, 140,000 to colonies in the Carolinas and Georgia, and 30,000 to Northern colonies. By the 1670s, enslaved black peoples had become a highly desired commodity in the settler colonial nation.¹¹ Indeed, by 1775, 500,000 of the thirteen colonies’ 2.5 million inhabitants were enslaved black peoples, their forced labor becoming crucial to the developing economy and racial politics of the nation.

As a result of the influx in the importation of enslaved peoples, the South went from making almost no cotton in 1790 to making almost 2 billion pounds of cotton in the 1860s. As such, it was through the enslavement of black peoples that the South went from “a narrow coastal strip of worn-out plantations to a subcontinental empire.”¹²

⁹ Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. (New York: Basic Books, 2014). 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Baptiste, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 3.

¹² Baptiste, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, xxi.

Indeed, the expansion of slavery as an institution and the violent and often fatal labor extraction of the enslaved black peoples shaped every crucial aspect of the economy of the developing nation, increasing its power and size on the global stage.¹³ As such, Baptiste argues that trafficked and enslaved black peoples were not only the foundation of modern American capitalism but “built the modern United States, and indeed the modern world.”¹⁴

While in the South the plantation economy of enslaved black peoples laid the foundation for its economic growth, in the North the capitalist class predominantly relied on the exploitation of a different class, European and Asian immigrant laborers. Indeed, in *Inside the State: The Bracero Program and the INS*, Kitty Calavita argues that immigrant workers have historically been seen as a “golden stream” of cheap labor used to expand the nation’s developing economy and to maximize profits for the American capitalist class. Since 1791, policymakers have recognized the importance of immigration as a means of bolstering the nation’s labor supply. As a result, throughout most of the 19th century the United States had a “laissez-faire” immigration policy in which many of the early immigration laws were designed to encourage the entry of European workers.¹⁵ The first federal immigration law, passed in 1864—aptly titled “An Act to Encourage

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Baptiste, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, xxiii.

¹⁵ Ngai, Mae M., et al. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2004). 18.

Immigration”—was drafted as a response to capitalists’ complaints of the reduction in the labor supply during the Civil War, decreases in immigration, and rising wages.

This law established the first Bureau of Immigration—located notably in the Treasury Department as Calavita notes—whose primary function was to encourage immigration from Europe and to arrange for the transportation and distribution of immigrant workers upon arrival.¹⁶ At the turn of the century however immigration restrictions began to be implemented that limited the entrance of “various classes of undesirable aliens.”¹⁷ Indeed, as anti-Asian sentiment continued to grow in the United States, orientalist constructions of the Asian laborer cast them as always already outside of the “imagined community” of the nation¹⁸, unassimilable and marked for exclusion.¹⁹ The Naturalization Act of 1870 and the Page Act of 1875 thus ensured that Chinese immigrants “remained an impermanent class of immigrants, domestically excluded from the national family, while American capitalists continued to reap the benefits” of their labor.²⁰ As anti-Asian sentiment continued to grow, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882²¹ suspended the immigration of Chinese and other Asian laborers for ten years, marking Asian peoples as fundamentally unassimilable.²² However, while these measures limited

¹⁶ Calavita, Kitty. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New Orleans, LA.: Quid Pro, 2010). 5.

¹⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 3.

¹⁸ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1993), 6-7.

¹⁹ Eng, Anna. “The WASP Nuclear Family as Metaphor of the Nation.” 3

²⁰ Eng, “The WASP Nuclear Family as Metaphor of the Nation.” 6.

²¹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 3

²² Anna Eng, “The WASP Nuclear Family as Metaphore of the Nation, 4.

the immigration of populations the United States deemed racially “undesirable” and worked to bar the Asian laborers already present in the United States from citizenship, these measures did not interfere with the “golden stream of European migration” the capitalist class necessitated. Indeed, as the 19th century came to a close, nearly a million European immigrants entered the United States every year.²³ In this way, a racial hierarchy, one favoring the entry of particular European immigrants over Asian immigrants, emerged; producing desirable and undesirable immigrants.

As immigration from Europe and Asia continued to increase however, their status as permanent members of the labor force resulted in the depression of wages and an increased fiscal spending on hospitals and poor houses. Indeed, as Calavita notes, while capitalists had asked for exploitable workers, they were met with human beings with human needs.²⁴ In an attempt to resolve this immigration dilemma Congress decided to place restrictive quotas on immigration from Asia, Eastern Europe and Southern Europe by passing the nation’s first comprehensive restriction law in 1924.²⁵ The Johnson-Reed Act (which included the National Origins Act and the Asian Exclusion Act), was the first time the nation had established real numerical limits on immigration along a racial and national hierarchy that favored Northern European migrants over all other migrants. According to Mae Ngai, this new quota system remapped the nation in two ways; first, it drew a racial map based on new categories and hierarchies of difference. This law also

²³ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 5

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 3

worked to “articulate a new sense of territoriality” that marked an apparatus of state surveillance of the nation’s borders that had not existed before.²⁶

However, what was peculiar about this comprehensive legislation were the exceptions made for particular countries. While the Johnson-Reed Act explicitly classified along racial and national lines the status of desirable and undesirable immigrants based on the nations imagined community, this legislation also explicitly excluded Mexico and other Western countries from its restrictions.²⁷ These exclusions were made so because Mexico had always been considered the ideal source of cheap labor in the Southwest. Indeed, Ngai argues that from the turn of the century to World War I, labor “flowed more or less freely from Mexico into the United States,” and that Mexican workers had actually laid the infrastructure for the modern Southwest’s economy, becoming fundamental to the regions industrialization. Mexican workers had laid the railroad tracks that connected the region to the national market, dug irrigation canals and had cleared ranch lands for farming, providing the industrial development for the Southwest’s economy. Indeed, by 1914 Mexican workers had become fundamental to the agricultural regions of south Texas and California.²⁸

As such, in debates preceding the Johnson-Reed Act’s quota legislation, The Chair of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, questioned the director of the U.S. Employment Service on his experience with Mexican labor during

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Calavita, *Inside the State* 5.

²⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 130.

World War I.²⁹ Throughout his questioning, it became obvious that what he was interested in was the flexibility and deportability of the Mexican labor source; “You reserve the right to deport them when you get too many?” Another representative of the INS pressed further, asking; “How did the thing work out? Were you able to deport them when the need had passed?” And yet, another member continued, urgently, asking; “Are you having any trouble in getting them out of the country since bringing them in?”³⁰

Due to their vital roles as cheap laborers, the immigration restrictions of the early 20th century included specific exceptions for Mexican workers in the favor of growers.³¹ Indeed, as Herrera-Sobek mentions, even when a literacy test for immigrants entering the United States was passed in 1917, Southwestern growers convinced policymakers to exempt Mexicans.³² As such, representatives knew that the advantage of immigration from Mexico was specifically the flexibility that was made available due to Mexico’s geographic location. This proximity meant that the United States had the freedom to expand and contract the supply of Mexican laborers depending on specific industrial need. This not only worked to ease the tensions associated with the permanence of European immigration, but it also allowed capitalists to have unyielding access to flexible and temporary laborers. Not only were the majority of Mexican workers adult men but their stay in the United States was entirely dependent on their utility to individual

²⁹ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 5

³⁰ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 5

³¹ Gomberg-Munoz, Ruth, and Laura Nussbaum-Barberena, “Is Immigration Policy Labor Policy?: Immigration Enforcement, Undocumented Workers, and the State.” *Human Organization*. 70, no. 4: 366-375. 6.

³² Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience*. 14.

growers.³³ Indeed, as Congress continued to place limits on Asian immigration, Mexican laborers were used to fill in the labor shortage that was left behind.³⁴

While by 1914 Mexican men had become fundamental to the agricultural regions of south Texas and California, many Southwestern growers expressed frustration at their inability to completely control the Mexican migrant's mobility and autonomy.³⁵ While Mexican migrant labor was deliberately constructed as an imported workforce, which "white Americans defined and situated in terms of their own labor need," the system of free-wage labor meant that growers and other employers were not able to maintain absolute control over the Mexican labor force.³⁶ Indeed, Ngai points out that while the overabundance of labor insured that wages would be kept low, the growers' dependence upon Mexican labor also gave workers some room to negotiate their treatment and working conditions.³⁷ As such, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican nationals and Mexican American workers seeking fair wages and treatment from the growers that employed them organized labor strikes all throughout Texas and California. Growers were outraged, complaining that Mexican workers would "all sit down in the field, and not work if they hear somebody is paying a couple of cents more." One investigation proved that Mexican workers were not "docile" at they had been perceived initially, but as one investigator concluded; "many do not favor any peonage attitude toward their

³³ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 7

³⁴ Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience*, 14.

³⁵ Valdez, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*.
89.

³⁶ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 133.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

race.” And yet another farmer reported, that Mexican workers would quickly “quit a job if they don’t like the treatment even if they haven’t food for the day and no job in sight.”³⁸

The relationship between the growers and the waged labor of migrant Mexican workers was thus a troubling one for agribusiness. This relationship in which colonial whites continued to construct the Mexican laborer as racially inferior and servile was at odds with the reality of active Mexican migrant and Mexican American resistance. During this period, since most of the Mexican migrants were not obligated to continue working for one grower due to the lack of labor contracts Mexican migrants actually possessed the ability to move as they desired, often picking up and leaving without a moment’s notice.³⁹ Indeed, this lack of contractual obligation towards growers allowed the Mexican migrant worker more freedom than the grower preferred. As such, growers grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of control they had over the Mexican migrant labor force. Growers wanted not only seasonal workers that would not threaten to settle down within the physical boundaries of the nation, but they also desired a labor *surplus*—an overabundance of laborers that allowed them to “obtain workers on demand, at low wages, and in plentiful supply to pick their crops early and quickly.”⁴⁰ In other words, white growers desired not the waged labor of willing and autonomous Mexican laborers, but desired a *captive* labor force that was completely and utterly bound by contract,

³⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 134.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 135

laborers who had no other recourse but accept the meager pay and racial subjugation that growers believed them to deserve.

The repatriation of over 400,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the Great Depression made grower desire for a captive and docile labor force clear.⁴¹ The separation of families and deportation of Mexican nationals and Mexican American citizens created a temporary labor shortage and provided the opportunity for domestic Mexican workers to push their collective bargaining power against exploitative growers for higher wages and fair treatment. This proved to be frustrating for agribusiness and in 1936, growers in Texas pressed the state labor commissioner, their representatives in Congress as well as the Department of Labor in hopes that they would declare an emergency labor situation.

Their request was denied. The Department of Labor argued that labor existed, the only thing that growers needed to do was provide reasonable wages.⁴² Yet despite the ready availability of domestic laborers willing and eager to work for a fair pay, growers refused to hire them. The organized labor strikes organized by Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans during the late 1920s and 1930s, has since instilled a distrust on the part of growers towards Mexican Americans, and indeed growers argued that the domestic laborers “demanded too much.” Again, a number of Southwestern states in 1941 formally requested permission from the Immigration Service to import Mexican

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 137.

migrant laborers to cultivate and harvest crops. These requests were denied once more. The following year however, with the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II, the attitude towards Mexican contract labor changed as a labor shortage began to loom over head.⁴³

As such, in April of 1942, the INS formed a committee bringing together top officials from the Departments of Justice, Labor, State, and Agriculture, and the War Manpower Commission, to study the possibility of launching a labor importation program. By May, the Special Committee on Importation of Mexican Labor had formulated a temporary worker program designed to offset wartime labor shortages.”⁴⁴

The Bracero Program (1942-1964)

The Mexican Labor Program—or the Bracero Program, as it had come to be known⁴⁵—thus began on August 4, 1942, in Stockton, California.⁴⁶ The term “*bracero*” came to be the colloquial term for Mexican workers contracted under this program and acted as a means to locate them within a specific racial and classed category as national and racial outsiders temporarily laboring in the United States. Coming from the Spanish

⁴³ Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience*, 147, Calavita, *Inside the State*, 20.

⁴⁴ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 20

⁴⁵ Craig, Richard B. *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971). x.

⁴⁶ Mize, Ronald L., et al. *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados*. 2016, 9.

word “*braso*” or “arm,” a “*bracero*” was thus understood as an “arm man,” or a “farm hand” from Mexico.

Often referred to as a single program, there were two legislatively enacted Bracero Programs, one running from 1942 through 1947 and the other from 1951 through 1964. While from 1942 to 1943, the Bracero Program was governed only through the unofficial agreement between Mexico and the United States, in 1943 these informal diplomatic agreements were made official by Congress with the passing of Public Law 45. After the expiration of Public Law 45 in 1947 however, the program was operated almost entirely by U.S. agencies. In 1951, with the Korean War on the horizon, the program was placed back on statutory footing with the passage of Public Law 78, a Korean War emergency labor measure, which had to be renewed every two years at Congress’ discretion. The Program was then regularly extended and renewed every two years at the request of growers until 1964, when it was finally terminated.⁴⁷

Over the course of this twenty-two year program, over 4.5 million Mexican laborers were imported into the United States as foreign and low-wage laborers.⁴⁸ From 1948 to 1964, the United States imported, on average, 200,000 *braceros* a year. *Braceros*

⁴⁷ Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle Over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California*. (University of Georgia Press: 2012.) 5.

⁴⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, x.

worked in twenty-six states, mostly in California, Texas, and other Southwestern states, and labored predominantly in crops such as cotton, citrus fruits, melons and lettuce.⁴⁹

The Bracero Program was operated jointly by the INS, the Department of Labor, and the State Department, in cooperation with the Mexican government. Of these, the INS was by far the most powerful, holding a majority of the administrative authority over *bracero* entries, departures and desertions. After the end of the first Bracero Program (1942-1947), which was under the discretion of U.S. agencies, this labor agreement underwent negotiations from both the Mexican and United States due to the deplorable treatment of Mexican workers at the hands of growers. As such, with the pressure of the Mexican government, the second Bracero Program was drafted up under the conditions that three provision be followed in order to guarantee the fair treatment and wage of the Mexican workers during their contracted period in the United States.⁵⁰

The first provision assured that “the Mexicans entering the U.S. under provisions of the agreement would not be subjected to discriminatory acts.”⁵¹ According to Mize, this was a response to the first Bracero Program that was implemented during World War I, in which the Mexican government was not consulted. The result of this first program was that the Mexican workers who were employed in the United States were without institutional protections, and as such were subjected to various forms of racial

⁴⁹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 139

⁵⁰ Mize, *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.- Mexico Bracero Program*, 19.; Valdés, Dennis Nodín. *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 91.

⁵¹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 9. Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience*, 147.

discrimination and violence.⁵² As a result of this treatment, from 1942 to 1947, Mexico refused to allow *braceros* to be sent to Texas because of the documented mistreatment of Mexican workers by not only Texans ranchers, but Texan residents themselves. Due to the Jim Crow style segregation prevalent in Texas during this time, as well as the frequent lynching of Mexican people that occurred in Texas—a crime that occurred most often in Texas than in any other state— Mexico blacklisted Texas from receiving any Mexican workers until the 1950s. The states of Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Wyoming were also blacklisted by the Mexican government due to discriminatory practices documented in each of the states.⁵³

The second provision under this agreement, worked to guarantee that the cost of migration as well as the costs associated with the temporary settlement of the workers, would be covered by U.S. growers. In part, this provision was intended to guarantee *braceros* safe passage to the United States, and to secure the decent living conditions while *braceros* resided in the United States. However, while the exact wording of the provision was explicit in its intended interpretation, the actual costs were subject to negotiation by the Mexican government and as a result, many workers had some of these expenses deducted from their wages. Consequently, work contracts signed by the

⁵² Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 9

⁵³ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 10

braceros—the majority of whom could not speak or read English—set the standards on how much could be deducted for room and board.⁵⁴

The third and last provision, centered the issue of the displacement of domestic workers in the U.S., a clause that aimed to guarantee that the employment of *braceros* would not negatively impact the wages of domestic laborers and that *braceros* would not be used as strikebreakers by growers⁵⁵ This provision was intended to reduce competition between domestic and contracted labor in the United States. As such the United States government played two roles in assuring that the *bracero* worker would not compete with the domestic laborer. The first role was the determination of the “prevailing wage” in each region of the country. In order to ensure that *braceros* were receiving the same wage as domestic workers, the so called “prevailing wage” was determined prior to the harvest season in each region the *bracero* was to be working in. Mize notes that this wage was, unsurprisingly, largely determined by the growers themselves.⁵⁶ Additionally, while the Department of Labor was responsible for declaring when regions were developing domestic labor shortages, growers were fundamental to this process as well. As such it was the growers themselves that were responsible for notifying the Department of Labor when they foresaw the shortage of domestic labors occurring, yet it was also the case that growers were often responsible for these labor shortages, as they frequently set the prevailing wages so low that they required domestic workers to labor for wages well

⁵⁴ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 10.; Valdez, *Al Norte*, 94.

⁵⁵ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 9.

⁵⁶ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 11.

below the cost of living, discouraging domestic labors from seeking their employment in the first place.⁵⁷ Indeed, Ngai notes that The Department of Labor determined the “prevailing wage” by calling local meetings of growers, grower associations, and farm organizations. It made no independent investigation of the labor market and took no input from domestic workers, labor unions, or independent organizations.⁵⁸

As such, these provisions and guidelines, while explicit in their intent, were carried out very differently during the Bracero Program. While much of the research on the Bracero Program assumes that these guidelines were followed, the fact remains that these safeguards were poorly implemented, and hardly guaranteed the *braceros* anything but disempowerment and poor treatment during their period in the United States.⁵⁹

Imported Colonialism and the Production of Surplus

In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe argues that the racialized foundations of both the emergence of the United States as a nation and the development of American capitalism stem from the history of the nation’s attempt to resolve the contradictions between the nation’s economic and political imperatives

⁵⁷ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 11.

⁵⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 143.

⁵⁹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 11.

through laws that excluded Asians from citizenship.⁶⁰ Immigration exclusion acts and naturalization laws have thus worked not only ways of regulating the terms of the citizen and the nation-state but also an “intersection of the legal and political terms with an orientalist discourse that defined Asians as culturally and racially “other.”⁶¹ The contradiction in these discourses and state measures surrounding Asian immigration have at different historical moments physically placed Asian immigrants within the territorial boundaries of the nation as an indispensable resource, yet at the very same time constructed the Asian immigrant as “linguistically, culturally, and racially” outside of the boundaries of national belonging and undesirable. As so, under such contradictions during the late 19th century, Chinese immigrants labored in mining, agriculture, and railroad construction but were excluded from citizenship and participation in the national polity.⁶²

As such while theoretically in a nation that is imagined as racially homogeneous the needs of capital and the needs of the state should complement each other, in a racially differentiated nation like the United States, the state and capital may actually contradict one another by design. This is because capital, with its need for abstract labor, is not limited by the origins of its labor force. However, the nation-state, with its need for abstract citizens—citizens formed through a unified culture and political sphere—is preoccupied with maintaining a national citizenry bound by “race, language, and

⁶⁰ Lisa Lowe. *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American Cultural Politics*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 1996), 13.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 5.

culture.”⁶³ Thus, capital deals with its “systemic crisis of declining profits” by seeking out and accumulating cheaper means of production.

Similarly, Ferguson argues that U.S. capital has historically assembled labor “without regard for normative prescriptions of race and gender” and as such, the racial groups who have historically been excluded from citizenship in the United States, have made up the “surplus populations upon which U.S. capital has depended.” Surplus populations exist as future laborers for capital and are “always ready for exploitation by capital in the interests of capital’s own changing valorization requirements”— both redundant yet indispensable, surplus populations exist to fulfill and exceed the demands of capital. In the United States, racial groups who have a history of being excluded from the rights and privileges of citizenship such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos, have made up the surplus populations upon which U.S. capital has depended.

For Mexicans, the Southwest’s industrial agriculture practiced a kind of “imported colonialism,” that went against normative prescriptions of national belonging and created a migratory agricultural proletariat that existed as always outside the polity.⁶⁴ This transnational Mexican labor force, and especially those who were *bracero* and undocumented, became re-colonized subjects that followed along the legacy of the nineteenth-century American conquest of Mexico’s northern territories. This modern

⁶³ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 13.

⁶⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 13.

“imported colonialism” was not quite like the traditional forms of colonialism of Spanish conquest and occupation, but rather involved the colonial-like processes through which laborers were funneled and were resituated along a similar colonizer-colonized relationship.⁶⁵ Thus, this method produced “new social relations based on the subordination of racialized foreign bodies who worked on the United States but who remained excluded from the polity by both law and by social custom.”⁶⁶ This kind of “imported colonialism” worked as a de facto socio-legal condition embedded in formally non-colonial relationships and spaces, in which free citizens of Mexico, an independent nation-state, voluntarily contracted to putatively free, waged-labor, within the United States that produced what Ngai refers to as a “Mexican agricultural proletariat.”⁶⁷ As such, the United States, through this process of “imported colonialism” worked to accumulate the surplus population of Mexican laborers through the Bracero Program, a population of redundant yet indispensable laborers upon which the region (and indeed the nation as a whole) would continue to depend.

Defining the State and Capital

Indeed, if the Bracero Program was very much an extension of colonial importation of surplus laborers, it is necessary to locate the explicit ways in which the

⁶⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 125.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 129.

state and capital were involved in the inception and maintenance of this guest labor program. The Bracero Program has been a site of interest for quite some time in the fields of political economy, immigration studies, and Latino/a Studies. Perhaps one of the most well-known books published on the topic and the interest groups involved, is Richard B. Craig's *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*. Indeed, in this book Craig attempts to take apart the "puzzle" that made up the program's complex and controversial twenty-two year existence.⁶⁸ In his analysis Craig teases out the actions of four conflicting interest groups involved in the development and maintenance of the program, moving past theories that depict the "state" and "capital" as monolithic and autonomous beings. Indeed, in his research Craig identifies the four major actors invested in the program's continuation or termination as the following: US growers, domestic laborers, the U.S. government and the Mexican government. In doing this, Craig argues that the only interest group that truly benefited from this controversial program were U.S. growers.⁶⁹

Craig explores in detail the conflicting relationships between interest groups, engaging in a historical analysis of official US government accounts and legislation spanning the twenty-two year life of the program. However, where his analysis becomes troubling is in his reproduction of cultural deficiency and eugenic narratives of Mexico as a nation and Mexicans as a racial class.⁷⁰ Indeed, in his analysis Craig resorts to

⁶⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, xi.

⁶⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 4.

⁷⁰ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 2.

analyzing the program as partly a result of Mexico's cultural and demographic deficiency, drawing on racist narratives of Mexican people as a whole. Craig argues that "mother nature seems to have smiled rather cynically in the area of demography... in the mold of the model underdeveloped nation, Mexico suffers from overpopulation."⁷¹ He continues that it is not only the "cult of machismo" or "virility and masculinity" that resulted in the assumed overpopulation that has driven migration from Mexico to the United States, but rather the Bracero Program was also partially a result of "social and psychological attributes of the Mexican peasant" who provided the "approximate personality prototype for the role of *bracero*."⁷² Indeed, Craig argues that the Mexican peasant's ability to "toil endless hours in stifling heat and under generally adverse conditions," and his "personality type" that was "accustomed to living, and indeed thriving, in a virtual state of physical and mental peonage," made the ideal *bracero*.⁷³ Furthermore, he argues that "the sociopsychological milieu in which the average Mexican peasant was reared prepared him ideally for this role as the servile, hard-working, seldom complaining, perpetually polite *bracero*."⁷⁴

Even when discussing US grower's desires for Mexican labor, Craig argues that "among the domestics available for work there was a noticeable lack of skills, dependability, and character" and that "it took a unique physical specimen to perform

⁷¹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 14.

⁷² Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 15.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

twelve hours of back-breaking stoop labor under generally adverse weather conditions.”⁷⁵ Indeed, growers needed not only someone who was biologically able to withstand some of the hardest manual labor known to man, but they also needed a worker who had to skills to perform the desired tasks. Indeed, Craig even goes so far as to argue that Mexico as a nation and a people has “benefited financially and socially from the program.”⁷⁶

While Craig’s contributions to the field of political economy is a much-needed foil to theories of the state and capital that assume their mutually interdependent and omnipresent nature, it comes at a cost. While this interest group analysis allows us to tease out the individual actors present in the making and eventual breaking of the Bracero Program and sheds light on these group’s conflicting desires regarding the program, Craig’s overreliance on narratives of cultural deficiency and his unwillingness to address the racial exploitation of the workers themselves leaves his analysis incomplete. Indeed, these assumptions unintentionally work to erase the violence, exploitation and racial discrimination upon which the program depended. While Craig’s analysis allows the reader to analyze the program on economic terms, the lack of discussion regarding race, gender or labor abuses allowing the reader to forget the human beings the program delivered to growers and ranchers in the United States.

In *Inside the State: The Bracero program and the INS*, Kitty Calavita also engages in an investigation of the Bracero Program that highlights the interest groups and

⁷⁵ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 18.

⁷⁶ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 32.

agencies involved in the production and maintenance of the twenty-two year long program. Unlike Craig however, Calavita highlights the participation of the INS as one of the foundational actors in the program, focusing on the ways in which U.S. agencies worked to negotiate their conflicting desires regarding the contract worker program. Indeed, Calavita departs from theories of the state and capital as totalizing, warning that in much of the theorizing regarding the Bracero Program, the state is often oversimplified and indeed “operates from a singular motive—the preservation of the political and economic status quo.”⁷⁷ Indeed, she argues that structuralist theories often give the state the “aura of omnipotence as it simultaneously accommodates capital and defuses social conflict,”⁷⁸ and emphasizes the “relationship between the state and society is an interactive one.”⁷⁹

Indeed, in her analysis of state actors and capitalist interests, Calavita thus investigates the conflicts between multiple state agencies and capitalist interests alike. As such, she looks at the “informal lawmaking” involved in the Bracero Program and the ability of the INS to not just interpret and implement the policy agenda handed down by Congress, but to actually set the agenda depending on their own interests. Calavita addresses the ways in which the INS, troubled by contradictory pressures from various state agencies and growers “walked around” laws that restricted their ability to act on the program. In doing this she aims to expose the non-monolithic nature of “the state” and

⁷⁷ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 188

⁷⁸ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 181.

⁷⁹ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 191.

the conflict and infighting between state agencies and capitalist interests as they all attempted to achieve their own agendas.

Indeed, while Calavita's intervention in theorizing of state involvement in the Bracero Program leaves out discussions of colonialism, race and worker exploitation, her analysis of the multiple state agencies involved in the program is indispensable in understanding the ways in which the Bracero Program was the product of controversial infighting between various state agencies and grower associations and the ways in which these various interest groups vied for their own political interests. Thus, she works to dispel theoretical understandings of the state as monolithic and always serving of capitalist interests, and works to provide us with an in depth understanding of the ways through which state agencies conflict and cooperate in order to meet the demands of capitalist interests, public opinion and the law.

Ngai and Calavita remind us that structures such as the state and capital do not act on their own, indeed behind these multifaceted entities are people whose desires often contradict one another. The Bracero Program was thus an institutionalization of imported Mexican labor that was complex and fraught with tensions from state agencies and capitalist interests the likes it cannot be detangled from.⁸⁰ While these insights are indispensable in understanding the history and politics of the Bracero Program however, state-centered approaches like these leave out vital discussions about race, gender,

⁸⁰ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 182.

colonialism and worker exploitation and indeed work to erase the real human suffering that was the foundation for the racialized exploitation the Bracero Program depended on.

Finding the Bracero in the Bracero Program

While state-centered analyses of the *bracero* program aid in shedding light on the complicated distributions of power scattered across state agencies as well as growers in the making and maintaining of the Bracero Program, the obvious lack of discussions regarding the topics of racism or the experiences of the *braceros* themselves paint a narrow picture that unintentionally subjugates the experiences and voices of the human beings on which this program depended.

As such, in *The Invisible Workers of the US-Mexico Bracero Program*, scholar Ronald Mize argues that much of the state-centered analysis regarding the program has resulted in the experiences of workers being deemed irrelevant or at the very least not considered as a valid source of information. Indeed, many accounts have excluded the complicated histories of American colonialism and the ways in which this has impacted the relations of race, class, and nation between whites and Mexican workers.”⁸¹ As such Mize attempts to pay attention to the voices of those who have been excluded from discussions about the *bracero* Program. Drawing on the life stories of former Braceros as the main source materials for his investigation and intervention, Mize sheds light onto the

⁸¹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 7.

conditions *braceros* faced during their time in the United States.⁸² Thus, his account centers the experiences of Braceros through their own recollections, and in the process of this, highlights the centrality of race and class in shaping the contours of their experiences and the make-up of the Bracer Program itself. This, Mize challenges the state-centered approaches explored by various authors that “belies an understanding of how the program operated to shape the experiences of Braceros. In explaining his intention, he argues that his intention is to avoid the “privileging of the state as the sole focus of analysis, while avoiding the limitation of the study to how the Bracero Program impacted the United States.” Thus, he argues that class exploitation and racism are central to defining the way in which braceros were “systemically mistreated and abused” and are fundamental in understanding how the “invisible workers” survived under circumstances that “profoundly influenced their subjective evaluations about their experiences rendered invisible by U.S society.”⁸³

Similarly, in *The Bracero Experience: Eliteloire versus Folklore*, Herrera-Sobek investigates the depiction of the Mexican bracero through various means of media, analyzing the influence of class on the interpretation and depictions of the bracero’s experience. In doing this, she analyses Mexican novels written by Mexican elites, and compares these novels to the bracero’s own oral histories, folk songs and *corridos*. In doing this, Herrera-Sobek re-centers the bracero and his voice, and synthesizes the experiences of many braceros in to one, resulting in what she refers to as the “composite

⁸² Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 8.

⁸³ Mize, *The Invisible Worker*, 9.

bracero.” By re-centering the bracero’s own experience and pushing back against dominant depictions of the *bracero*’s life through the writings of the elite, Herrera-Sobek pushes back against interpretations of the Bracero Program that refuse to engage with the *bracero* himself.

In “Outside the Border of the Modern,” Cohen takes an approach more akin to gender studies in her analysis of the program engaging in an analysis of gender roles and gendered subjectivities Mexican men were forced to negotiate during their stay in the United States.⁸⁴ Indeed, Cohen argues that for *braceros* living in the United States was “all about crossing lines, both physical and imaginary.” Indeed, in the United States *braceros* could not maintain their gender roles and subjectivities as they were forced to engage in what was understood as “women’s work.” From washing their own clothes, sewing their torn pants to shopping for food and cooking for themselves, the *bracero* was not only forced to exist in a country in which he was seen as a perpetual foreigner and a national outsider but during his stay the *bracero* was forced to negotiate his own gendered subjectivity.⁸⁵

While traditional scholarship in the Bracero Program has typically focused on the experiences of the male *braceros* living in the United States, Rosas’ *Abrazando El Espiritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*, extends the focus of analysis

⁸⁴ Deborah Cohen. “Outside the Border of the Modern: Mexican Migration and the Racialized and Gendered Dynamics of US National Belonging.” In *Gendering Border Studies*. (Cardiff, University of Wales Press), 2010. 27.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

to the transnational Mexican immigrant family produced as a result of the program. Indeed, this study addresses separation, cooperation, and reunification as “foundational to understanding the changes the Bracero Program initiated—changes that put in motion a continued reconfiguration of the social meanings of gender and gender roles in the transnational Mexican family. Taking a gendered approach to her analysis, Rosas addresses the social and cultural ideals, practices, and displays of femininity and masculinity “organizing and shaping opportunities, decisions, and relationships” throughout the program’s twenty-two-year existence in order to illustrate the ways in which the US and Mexican governments’ depended on not only the labor of Mexican men, but on the labor of entire transnational Mexican family.⁸⁶

As such, in her analysis, Rosas argues that those connected to the Bracero Program suffered emotional, physical, and financial turmoil as members of transnational families in a historical moment shaped by family separation across borders.⁸⁷ Indeed, while the program was seen by Mexican President as a way to transform allegedly racially inferior rural Mexican men into modern citizens by “exposing them to US customs, skills, and work habits,” he overlooked the programs emotional financial, and physical costs.⁸⁸ She posits that the Bracero Program’s vision of rural working-class progress did not automatically modernize Mexican families in Mexico and the United States, but rather worked to disrupt their lives and caused them emotional pain. As such,

⁸⁶ Rosas, Ana Elizabeth, et al. *Abrazando El Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US- Mexico Border*. 2014. 6.

⁸⁷ Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu*, 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Abrazando El Espiritu looks at the oral histories of Mexican immigrant families as well as primary and secondary sources, in order to address the “desires, resourcefulness, limitations, losses, and obligations of children, women, and men in families in both Mexico and the United States,” and the ways in which the overdependence of the labor of entire Mexican families lead to entire families feeling like they worked for the United States—feeling like *braceros*.⁸⁹

Taking into account existing scholarship like those mentioned above, this project takes uses a transnational feminist lens to explore the themes of imported colonialism, surplus population, and immigrant exploitation in order to address the long-term effects of the Bracero Program on the transnational migrant family. Thus, this project engages in an analysis of the history of the Bracero Program that builds on the insights gained from state-centered scholarship as well as from *bracero* and *bracero*-family centered scholarship while paying explicit attention to race, gender, sexuality, nationalism and citizenship. As such, this work engages in a historical and ethnographic analysis of the Bracero Program and its lasting legacy on the lives of the adult-children of former *braceros* who immigrated to the United States after the programs termination in 1964.

Taking seriously critiques of existing scholarship that work to subjugate the lived experiences of the people upon with the program depended, Chapter 1 works to bring the *braceros* own experiences to the center. As such, this chapter draws on first-hand accounts obtained through the Bracero Oral History Archive, in order to address the

⁸⁹ Rosas, *Abrazando El Espiritu*, 5.

conditions in which *braceros* labored and lived during their time in the United States. Analyzing these secondary sources, this chapter aims not only to look at the Bracero living and working conditions but also the emotional and the physical toll of such labor. Focusing on the *bracero*'s experiences as racial and national outsiders, this chapter also addresses the racial and settler colonial power dynamics that were imposed upon the worker by state agencies and growers. Looking specifically at these imposed racial power dynamics, this chapter addresses the ways in which growers produced the ideal disposable and racially inferior worker, laying the structural groundwork that shaped the long-term relationship growers would have with farmworkers following the termination of the program.

Chapter 2 builds on the historical analysis of the program and the experiences of the *braceros* themselves and addresses the program's long-term generational effects on the children of former *braceros*. Drawing on primary sourced oral histories done with the now adult children of former *braceros* who migrated with their parents after the programs termination in 1964, I argue that the offer of permanent residency to the transnational *bracero* family allowed the unofficial continuation of the exploitative labor program. Addressing the subsequent shift from agribusiness's dependency on the male laborer to its dependence on the laboring family, this chapter argues that the permanent settlement of the *bracero* family allowed growers to accumulate a controlled population of surplus workers that allowed for the production of a self-populating pool of low-wage, low-

skilled, disposable workers; a permanent racial underclass on which US capital and industry continue to rely on today.

This thesis analyzes the politics and practices of the Bracero Program, addressing the ways in which the program produced a particular racialized and gendered worker through various forms of violence, surveillance and discipline. Additionally, this project aims to address the generational effects the Bracero Program left in place after its termination, looking at the ways in which state agencies in collaboration with agribusiness managed the sudden labor shortages following the program end and worked together to sponsor *braceros* and their families with permanent residency—but never citizenship—in exchange for their labor, producing yet another population of surplus laborers. Lastly, this project also aims to make visible the ways in which capital and the state negotiate the tensions and contradictions between the importation and exploitation of Mexican laborers with nationalist discourses of their racial undesirability. Indeed, this thesis aims to shed light on the ways in which capital and state agents negotiate these contradictions through the strategic use of the Mexican body.

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CHAPTER ONE:

RACIAL DISCIPLINING AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE MEXICAN LABORER

The relationships between the nation and its white constituents vis-a-vis racial migrants have not been naturally occurring and have indeed always been constructed depending on various political and capitalist needs. The state and capital have played significant roles in the regulation of who has been allowed access to the national territory and under what conditions. These relationships of course have been contentious and highly unstable, often fluctuating and changing but always constructing the racial body as outside of the nation and racially inferior to the white citizen subject.⁹⁰ As such, the relationship the white capitalist had to the Mexican laborer has not been a naturally occurring one, but rather was one that was always under production as lack of state regulation allowed growers unfettered access to Mexican migrant's highly valued labor.⁹¹ However, as Ngai points out, it was that same lack of state regulation that provided the

⁹⁰ Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004). 15.

⁹¹ Ngai, Mae M., et al. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2004), 129

space for some Mexican migrants to fight back against their exploitation and poor treatment at the hands of white growers attempting to exert colonial control over them.⁹²

From the turn of the century to World War I, Mexican labor “flowed more or less freely from Mexico into the United States” and had played a fundamental role in the industrializing of the region.⁹³ As Congress continued to place limits on Asian immigration in the early 1900s, Mexican laborers were used to fill in the labor shortage that was left behind. While the Annual Report of the Commission-General of Immigration argued that the Mexican “peon” could stand the heat and discomforts of the Southwest and described the “peon” as “docile, ignorant, and nonclannish,” willing to work long after others have quit, and willing to do so for a meager wage, these relationships were not stable by any extent of the imagination.⁹⁴

By 1914 Mexicans had become fundamental to the agricultural regions of south Texas and California but many Southwestern growers expressed frustration at their inability to completely control the Mexican migrant’s mobility and autonomy. While Mexican migrant labor was deliberately constructed as an imported and colonial-like workforce, which white Americans defined and situated in terms of their own labor need, the system of “free-wage labor” meant that growers and other employers were not able to maintain absolute control over the Mexican labor force. Ngai points out that while the

⁹² Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 130

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Herrera-Sobek, Maria. *The Bracero Experience: Eliteloire versus Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 35.

overabundance of labor insured that wages would be kept low, the growers' dependence upon Mexican labor also gave workers some room to attempt to negotiate their treatment and working conditions.⁹⁵

As such, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican nationals and Mexican American workers seeking fair wages and treatment from the growers that employed them organized labor strikes all throughout Texas and California. Growers were outraged, complaining that Mexican workers would "all sit down in the field, and not work if they hear somebody is paying a couple of cents more." One investigation proved that Mexican workers were not "docile" as they had been perceived initially, but as one investigator concluded; "many do not favor any peonage attitude toward their race." And yet another farmer reported, that Mexican workers would quickly "quit a job if they don't like the treatment even if they haven't food for the day and no job in sight."⁹⁶

The relationship between the growers and the waged labor of migrant Mexican workers was thus a troubling one for agribusiness, as the Mexican laborer proved to be unruly and unwilling to bend to the pre-established colonial order. The relationship in which whites continued to construct the Mexican laborer as racially inferior and servile was at odds with the reality of active Mexican migrant and Mexican American resistance. During this period, since most of the Mexican migrants were not obligated to continue working for one grower due to the lack of labor contracts Mexican migrants actually

⁹⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 133.

⁹⁶ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 134.

possessed the ability to move as they desired, often picking up and leaving without a moment's notice. This lack of contractual obligation towards growers allowed the Mexican migrant worker more freedom than the grower preferred and threatened the power imbalance growers has established.⁹⁷

As a result, growers grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of control they had over the Mexican migrant labor force. Large scale growers wanted not only seasonal workers that would not threaten to settle down within the physical boundaries of the nation, but they also desired a *surplus population*—an overabundance of laborers that allowed them to “obtain workers on demand, at low wages, and in plentiful supply to pick their crops early and quickly.”⁹⁸ In other words, white growers desired not the waged labor of willing and autonomous Mexican workers, but desired a *captive* surplus of laborers that was completely bound by contract and a population that could “fulfill and exceed the demands of capital.”⁹⁹ Indeed, what growers desired was a labor pool of workers who due to their disposability had no other recourse but accept the meager pay and racial subjugation that growers believed them to deserve.

The Bracero Program (1942-1964)

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 135.

⁹⁹ Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 15.

The repatriation of over 400,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the Great Depression made grower desire for a surplus and captive labor force clear. The separation of families and deportation of Mexican nationals and Mexican-American citizens created a temporary labor shortage and provided the opportunity for domestic Mexican workers to push their collective bargaining power against exploitative growers for higher wages and fair treatment. This proved to be frustrating for agribusiness and in 1936, growers in Texas pressed the state labor commissioner, their representatives in Congress as well as the Department of Labor in hopes that they would declare an emergency labor situation.

This request was denied. The Department of Labor argued that labor existed, the only thing that growers needed to do was provide reasonable wages.¹⁰⁰ Yet despite the ready availability of domestic laborers willing and eager to work for fair pay, growers refused to hire them. The labor strikes organized by Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans during the late 1920s and 1930s, has since instilled a distrust on the part of growers towards Mexican Americans, and indeed growers argued that the domestic laborers “demanded too much.” Again, a number of Southwestern states in 1941 formally requested permission from the Immigration Service to import Mexican migrant laborers to cultivate and harvest crops. These requests were denied once more. The following year however, with the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World

¹⁰⁰ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 137.

War II, the attitude towards Mexican contract labor changed as a labor shortage began to loom over the nation's head.

As such, in April of 1942, the INS formed a committee bringing together top officials from the Departments of Justice, Labor, State, and Agriculture, and the War Manpower Commission, to study the possibility of launching a labor importation program. By May, the Special Committee on Importation of Mexican Labor had formulated a temporary worker program designed to offset wartime labor shortages.”¹⁰¹ Thus, the Bracero Program began on August 4, 1942.¹⁰² Under this program, approximately 4.6 million Mexican men were imported into the United States as foreign and low-wage laborers.¹⁰³ From 1942 to 1964, the United States imported, on average, 200,000 contract bound *braceros* a year.¹⁰⁴

The bracero program was not the first instance of imported contract-labor in the United States. As Ngai points out, during the same period, contract workers migrated from the British West Indies to perform farm labor in the Southeast and indeed Puerto Ricans also migrated for seasonal agricultural work in the Northeastern United States. However, the Bracero Program was unique in the sheer number of laborers it allowed

¹⁰¹ Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.*, (New Orleans, LA.: Quid Pro, 2010), 20.

¹⁰² Ronald Mize, et al. *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados*. (2016), 9.

¹⁰³ Richard Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), x.

¹⁰⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 139.

agribusiness to import. Indeed, the Bracero Program was by far the largest project of its kind.¹⁰⁵

While the Bracero Program was a binational arrangement that underwent negotiation by both the Mexican state as well as the United States, it ultimately came to represent an institution that allowed growers to directly produce their ideal surplus population of racially inferior workers. While the time before the program had allowed some Mexican migrant workers to maintain a sense of autonomy, the implementation of the Bracero Program stripped away much of that freedom and worked simply as a way of allowing growers unfettered access to what they saw as the ideal cheap, docile and racially inferior Mexican worker.

Bracero Selection and the Enforcement of the Colonial Order

Perhaps there is no better example of the absolute power this program granted growers in shaping and molding their ideal worker like the processes of laborer selection. In the documentary *Harvest of Loneliness (2010)* produced by Gilbert Gonzalez, a former *bracero* by the name of Alfredo Gutierrez recounts his experience at a *bracero* reception center in Empalme, California.

We would be called with a microphone and then we would
walk up. We would run, take our documents, our

¹⁰⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 161.

identification... And then there would be medical exams. They would listen to your heart, they would take your [blood] pressure, they would look at your hands to see if you had working hands. If they didn't see callouses or beat up hands, they would not take you. They would ask questions to see what kind of reactions one would have, they would watch your reactions!¹⁰⁶

Cipriano Torres Saldana, another *ex-bracero* whose testimony was featured in the documentary, recounts his experience with a visible wave of anger.

Right away they would say; "Lift your left arm up in the air—but quickly! Up! Now the left one—up! Now move it to the right! Now the other way, go! Now your legs! You have to [makes a swinging back and forth motion] 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 times until your heels hit the back of your leg... [pauses and looks intensely at the interviewer] They did all this to make sure your legs were not injured!¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert G. Gonzalez, et al. *Harvest of Loneliness: Cosecha Triste*. New York, NY, Distributed by Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2011., 15:00

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Indeed, there was no more overt way that the Mexican laborer was produced like the humiliating selection process that occurred in recruitment centers across the United States. The selection processes were long and arduous, in which potential braceros were stripped naked, poked and prodded, marking the beginning of their disciplining as inferior subjects on a now foreign land.¹⁰⁸ As Mize discusses in *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program* (2016), it was during the selection process that medical tests were administered, delousing occurred, and workers started their long bus rides to their eventual work sites.¹⁰⁹ However, as we can see from Cipriano's testimony this process also marked the beginning of their production as obedient workers, as workers who had to quickly become tolerant of the abuse administered as a pre-requisite for employment. Upon arrival to the reception center, the *bracero* and his clothes were thoroughly doused in DDT and other pesticides in order to "prevent insects from being brought into the United States."¹¹⁰

In a continuation of his interview, Cipriano recalls further the treatment and procedures he and his companions were expected to tolerate during their initial reception.

They formed us in a line. That's where the chamber was.

They put us inside, stripped us naked... and there they would suffocate us with machines used to fumigate [the fields], with the powder that is used in airplanes as

¹⁰⁸ Mize, *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

insecticide. All of us! They didn't care if we went blind or not. Our heads—our heads would be covered with large quantities of power.

Carranco Fuentes, a former *bracero* interviewed for the Bracero History Archive discussed a similar experience with this process during his time in a reception center in El Paso, Texas.

We would leave the city of Juarez and we would go to El Paso, Texas... and there, ah... There they would examine all of us. They even put this disinfectant powder on all of us, that was what I disliked the most... It's as if we were some... some cattle... some animals.¹¹¹

The carelessness with which the aspiring *braceros*—or *aspirantes*—were treated upon their arrival to the reception centers solidified their new roles as cattle-like beings, the fumigation and lack of care regarding their health or comfort established the relationship whites were to have with the Mexican worker, a relationship aspiring *braceros* would have to either accept in hopes of being contracted, or reject and be deported back to Mexico.

¹¹¹ Fuentes, Carranco. Interview by Jose Antonio Romero. Bracero History Project. Date unavailable.

Don Ramon recalls the selection process with even more detail, remembering the particularly humiliating kinds of the medical examinations that were done to the *braceros* entering the United States. In a testimony cited by Mize in *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program* (2016), Don Ramon recalls the following incident:

When we got there to the check-in where they would pass us they would disrobe us, disrobe us. And they would pull the penis like that [demonstrates using finger how foreskin was pulled back] to check to see if they had gonorrhea or some infection... And then they would open your anus to see if you had hemorrhoids. And the doctor would stick a finger to those who had a hernia... They would disrobe you completely, then they would fumigate you... But that was their requirements.¹¹²

Isias DeArcos, interviewed for the Bracero History Archive in [year], recalls his experience with these medical examinations in detail as well, recounting the humiliation he underwent during his time in a reception center in El Centro, California.

ID: Oh, the examinations were very difficult, very difficult... they would strip us, they... they would pour this... powder... with a machine that was used to fumigate

¹¹² Ibid.

[the crops]. They poured this powder on all of our clothes, and then we would pass on to the medical examination that was very very rigorous, a medical exam that was very very strong... Then they would take X-Rays to know that we didn't have any illnesses, they would check our mouths... every everything... they were looking for, um... any illness... It was a very difficult exam...

Int: How did you feel?

ID: Well, very bad, because for example [they would say]; "well let's see if you have hemorrhoids, let's see if you have a hernia, let's see if you have a venereal disease..." um, they did everything... by hand... and they would do it all...[trails off].

Int: Were there some that were rejected?

ID: Yes! Yes. Some because they arrived with bad lungs, others because they had some infection or because they had something like that, they would return them the same day.

If we were 500, they would return 20 or 30. They would just toss them to Mexicali.”¹¹³

The arduous medical examinations in which the *bracero*—some of which had never seen a physician in their lives prior to this—were poked, prodded in sexually humiliating ways worked to establish their status as less than men and more akin to cattle. Indeed, Manuel Mendez recounts his experience in the program as; “really bad because they... did with us what they—in other words they robbed us of our dignity as men... not just me—all of us!”¹¹⁴ The sexual nature of these examinations and the humiliation felt by the *braceros* was not unlike the experiences of the racial Others abused through the prison and military industrial complexes alike. Indeed, as Puar notes, bodily torture and racialized sexual violences are both elements in a “repertoire of techniques” utilized not only within imperial and colonial occupation but within the process of racial subjugation.¹¹⁵

The rejection of some *aspirantes*, described as “echando,” or rather a careless and violent “tossed out,” (often considered as a way of treating animals in Mexican-Spanish) not only made *braceros* aware of their status as less than men, but it also made them aware of their established disposability. As Isias recalls, if there were 500 *braceros*

¹¹³ DeArcos, Isias. Interview by Jose Alamillo. Bracero History Archive. March 11, 2011.

¹¹⁴ Mendez, Manuel. Interview by Hugo Arriano. Bracero History Archive. December 4, 2010.

¹¹⁵ Puar, Jasbir K. "On Torture: Abu Ghraib." *Radical History Review*, no. 93 (2005): 3, 3.

passing through the selection process, 20 to 30 of them would be “tossed back” to Mexicali, making Mexican workers very much aware of their new status as not only surplus laborers but as legally disposable beings.¹¹⁶

The humiliation did not end once the medical exams and preliminary delousing was over, however. Quite the contrary, their disciplining as racially inferior laborers—and indeed commodities—only mounted as they were quickly funneled into the waiting area where growers and their associates would choose individual workers to contract and transport to their eventual work sites. In a group interview featured in *Harvest of Loneliness* (2010), one unnamed *ex-bracero* discussed what he remembered about his experience at a reception center in El Centro, California:

There was a place called “el corralon.” [the large corral]
That’s where all the people were... Where we were kept—
for comparison—like we were “guelles” [cattle]¹¹⁷ Pardon
me saying it like that... because ranchers would come by
the corral... from different companies... and say; “I want
18 people--I want 20!” They would go to “el corralon” and,
“Let’s see... [makes a counting out motion as if selecting
out people from the crowd].”

¹¹⁶ Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Gonzalez et al, *Harvest of Loneliness*. “Guelles” is a colloquialism that often has the meaning of “idiots” as well as a very hard way of saying “steer,” which is why he apologizes for saying it. The use of *guelles* however, highlights the harshness of the treatment he recalls receiving.

As he spoke, several men who had been listening to his story nodded somberly, murmuring to themselves in agreement, as if recalling similar events. The comparison to cattle was an apt description of the way *braceros* were both kept and treated during their time in the United States, marking their re-situation in the colonial racial order as non-human subjects.

Henry Anderson, a critic of the Bracero Program, visited a Calexico processing center in 1958 and during his visit was told by a labor contractor what he believed the criteria for the “ideal bracero” was.¹¹⁸

The first time that I actually visited the reception center, the manager of the center said it would be okay for me to go into the hall where the “selecting,” as they called it, was going on that day. The fellow representing some grower's association up in Northern California was happy to have me at his side while he demonstrated the way he did his so called “selecting.” Well there were these hundreds of men lined up outside who would shuffle past this guy, who commented on why he was selecting one guy and rejecting another guy and it all had to do with whether they measured up to his criteria for what he considered to be a “good bracero”.... These had to be men that were

¹¹⁸ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 102.

apparently timid, docile, unlettered, impoverished... anybody who was well dressed or well-spoken would be rejected.¹¹⁹

In a separate interview cited by Mize in *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program* (2016), Anderson continues his recollection of this experience, elaborating further on what the labor contractor considered to be a “good bracero.”

The right man, was “built right.” “He’s a farm worker, you can tell that he hasn’t any big ideas... He’s humble, not fresh and cocky. He’s an Indian type, probably from Jalisco or Guanajuato.”¹²⁰

The desired *bracero* worker was experienced, had callouses on his hands from working in agricultural labor in Mexico—he was desperate for work, humble and racially marked by his indigenous roots, making him easily distinguishable from the white colonial subject. Indeed, the “ideal bracero” in the white colonist’s mind, was inferior to himself in every single way and it was only the “ideal” worker that was selected to continue on to individual farms for work.

In this way, the white colonial subject was able to “hand pick” the workers who met his criteria for racial inferiority, molding the *bracero* population to fit the national and cultural imagination regarding what a Mexican man was supposed to be like—docile,

¹¹⁹ Gonzales, *Harvest of Loneliness*.

¹²⁰ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 102.

timid, an “Indian type.” Having witnessed the unruliness of Mexican laborers in years past, growers had decided that those laborers were not the way Mexican laborers were supposed to behave and took it upon themselves to mold and produce the “proper” Mexican laborer through the *bracero* selection process.

The criteria for rejection was also described to Anderson, highlighting the characteristics that would mark the Mexican laboring man as a threat to the pre-established colonial racial order. Anderson recalls these criteria as the following:

This one [referring to a specific *bracero*] is too tall, he is too “cocky,” that one a “loafer,” another “lazy and irresponsible,” he’s a “smart aleck,” this one a “ladykiller” and not “peon” enough.¹²¹

The characteristics for racial and gendered subservience were so clear to the workers that when asked what they believed to be the pre-requisites for employment they knowingly responded with similar answers. Former *bracero* Isais DeArcos for example recalled the prerequisites for being a *bracero* and in doing so stated that one needed experience in agriculture and “that one [needed to] not have any properties or land, that was it... that one be “de un rancho” [from a ranch or farm].” Another respondent by the name of Rodolfo Balderama recalls similar requirements stating;

¹²¹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 102

They would check your hands, they would scrape them— [to check] if you had callouses on your hands to [make sure] you were a worker... well, a man from “los ranchos” [from the ranches or farms]... If you didn’t have rough hands, [if you] didn’t know how to work [on a farm]... they didn’t contract you.¹²²

Yet another former *bracero* by the name of Felix Gallegos recalls the following:

Well... [you had] to be a farmworker! Those were the principle prerequisites... that one be a farmworker...if one was a professor they didn’t give you [a job]. You had to be a farmworker... they would check you... check you to see if you were a farmworker.¹²³

The criteria of prior agricultural experience and poverty was so clear to the *braceros* themselves that some even worked to make themselves more “marketable” to grower desires. One former *bracero* by the name of Francisco Angeles, recalls that despite being a student all of his life prior to traveling to the United States (and not a farmworker as *braceros* were expected to be) he was able to get contracted with an American grower simply due to his “aspecto de trabajador” or rather, his “worker’s appearance.”

¹²² Balderama, Rodolfo. Interview by Jose Medina. Bracero History Archive. April 8, 2008.

¹²³ Gallegos, Felix. Interview by Paulina Salazar. Bracero History Archive. April 15, year unavailable.

For me, I had to travel on a train... like those in which they transported animals, well... very filthy! I was in one for a week without taking a shower, without washing my hands because it was the first time that I had come over here and they [other braceros] would tell me that I should come here—that I should look, well, like a farmworker, with a “worker’s appearance.”¹²⁴

Even in recalling his transportation to the United States, Francisco acknowledges that there was a particular way he was supposed to present himself to potential white growers in order to be contracted. In looking at the photograph of his younger self on his *bracero* identification card, he recalls the following:

Here I—[points to his bracero identification card with a photo of himself]—before arriving I was in Empalme, Sonora, for a week. The first day, well, I took a shower, and the others would tell me; “No! Don’t take a shower! Americans; that’s what they want—people from farms, that are coming here to work!” And so, I didn’t even wash my hands [laughs].¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Angeles, Francisco. Bracero History Archive. Interviewer information and date unavailable.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Don Andres, whose testimony was cited in Mize's *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program* (2016), also recalled his own attempt at making himself more marketable to the growers who had been looking for workers to pick lemons.

They would inspect your hands and if you did not have them like if you worked in the fields [in Mexico] they would tell you that you do not work in the fields. So, I got a shovel and made some calluses [he explains that he would get the handle of a shovel and run his hands up and down the wood handle until calluses would form in his hands through constant friction]. Then I would get to Empalme which is where they would contract them, they saw my hands and said, "ok."¹²⁶

The selection process allowed growers to reproduce colonial relationships with their workers, allowing them to construct the power imbalance that they saw appropriate for the extraction of Mexican labor. The selection process also allowed growers to reject those workers who did not fit their perceived colonial notions of inferiority; rejecting men who were too tall, who had too much personality (and who could possibly organize other workers for better wages or treatment), who were handsome, educated, well-dressed, well-spoken or in any which way threatened white colonial masculinity and the power relations it demanded.

¹²⁶ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 102.

As Ngai argues, this form of imported colonialism was not quite like the traditional forms of colonialism of Spanish conquest, but the colonial-like processes through which laborers were funneled, worked to resituate them along a similar colonizer-colonized relationship.¹²⁷ While in the 20s and 30s growers had encountered Mexican farmworkers who defied their preconceived notions of what a Mexican laborer was imagined to behave like—“docile, timid and non-clannish”¹²⁸—The Bracero Program’s selection process allowed growers and their associates to produce a population of Mexican workers in which any behavior that did not fit their criteria for the ideal Mexican worker was eliminated before entry to the United States.

The selection process was the most obvious form of “producing” the *bracero* as a “homogeneous product,”¹²⁹ as any worker that may have threatened colonial power relations of white rule was quickly deported. In this sense, growers and their associates were able to enforce dehumanizing criteria for the ideal Mexican worker by selecting workers who were desperate enough to withstand the dehumanization of the admittance and selection processes, marking the *braceros* gaining entry to the United States as particularly tolerant of abuse. It was through these forms of disciplining that a particular kind of racially inferior and emasculated Mexican worker was molded, resulting in a

¹²⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 125.

¹²⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 130.

¹²⁹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 101.

workforce of disciplined, desperate and docile Mexican workers that fit the imagined mold the Mexican workers of the 20s and 30s had challenged.¹³⁰

However, the selection process—while humiliating and truly horrific—was not the only means through which growers were able to mold and shape their ideal work force, indeed the captivity that resulted from the housing arrangements made for *braceros* opened up yet another chance for growers to ensure that their ideal labor force would remain under grower control.

Racial Segregation and Social Isolation: Disciplining the Bracero Worker

The selection process allowed growers to hand pick their “ideal bracero” yet perhaps one of the most disempowering effects of the Bracero Program was the issue of housing *braceros* during their stay in the United States. One condition laid down by the Mexican government in exchange for the Mexican national’s labor, was the guarantee that Mexican nationals would be housed at the expense of the grower he was employed to with, assuring workers that they would have adequate housing and boarding while contracted. While this condition laid forth by the Mexican government had the well-being of their workers in mind, the issue of grower controlled housing opened up the possibility for intense forms of worker isolation, surveillance and abuse.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Mize argues that one of the ways in which growers enforced a high level of social isolation and racial segregation was through the “institutionalized practice of housing *braceros* in labor camps.”¹³¹ Indeed, according to Mize, these “labor camps” were typically located on the private property belonging to growers, however *braceros* could be housed in anything from fairgrounds to converted schools and gymnasiums. One *bracero* interviewed for the Bracero History Archive by the name of Antonio Barrios even recalls being housed in a former internment camp in which the United States had imprisoned Japanese-Americans during World War II.

The first year I ended up in San Bernardino... [in a] camp that was where they previous had the Japanese imprisoned.... It was now a camp for *braceros*. They took the Japanese out... and they put *braceros* in.¹³²

There is no better example of how the Bracero Program was implemented in such a way that growers could access laborers in the most cost-effective manner than the inhumane ways in which *braceros* were housed during their contracted period in the United States. Indeed, the housing in this instance, occurring in the echoes of the internment of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans, also gestures to the program’s attempts at the captivity and containment of racial difference.

¹³¹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 23

¹³² Barrios, Antonio. Bracero History Project. Interviewer and date unavailable.

In *Harvest of Loneliness* (2010), one unnamed *bracero* widow recalls her husband's stories regarding his stay in the United States with a mixture of awe and anger.

[He would say] that they suffered a lot there; they were crowded in there as if they were animals. He would say; “We couldn't even stretch, no we didn't all fit because of how they had us,” he would say—“Oh! The time to rest would come and I didn't know if it was better to just be picking or be laying down in bed.” He said [that] because one could rest... Morning would come and one would be even more tired because those that were able to sleep on the bed, well good—but those that didn't manage to get a bed? No, well they would have to sleep on the floor.¹³³

Juan Zaratte, also featured in the film, recounts the living conditions he experienced in Texas, a state that was known for its particularly inhumane treatment of *braceros* and other people of Mexican decent and had been blacklisted from receiving *bracero* throughout the first era of the program:¹³⁴

In Texas, it was very uncomfortable. There wasn't—We didn't have a bathroom. We had to wash ourselves in a

¹³³ Gonzalez at al, *Harvest of Loneliness*.

¹³⁴ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 16. Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*,

ditch, in the water there next to the cotton field, there is where we had to bathe ourselves... There we didn't even have a kitchen or where to cook. We had to cook under a tree... like "camping" like they say here [in the United States]... "camping."¹³⁵

Another *bracero* featured in the film, recalls the following experience in a labor camp in Arizona:

In Arizona, they had these large barracks made out of aluminum. Outside, the temperature would be 122 degrees. Inside the barracks, we were 250 to a building. There were three barracks and we were more than 700 braceros at that camp... And it was very hot because aluminum gets very hot and the heat of so many of us inside was worse—and the stoves where we would cook! Because there we all had to cook for ourselves!¹³⁶

Guadalupe Garcia Gonzalez recalls having to sleep outside because the heat that would build up inside the barracks in which he was expected to sleep made him feel like he was "sleeping in an oven." Indeed, in describing the conditions he gives a heave of emotion

¹³⁵ Gonzalez at al, *Harvest of Loneliness*.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

and states simply; “I would go outside! I would grab my mattress and I would go sleep outside, it was better that way.”¹³⁷

The existence of on-site housing forced workers to endure not only inhumane living conditions but also the isolation of racial segregation that forced them into a life under which surveillance was “the order of the day”¹³⁸ and in which deportation was a constant threat.¹³⁹ In *Mexican Labor and World War II Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (1990), Gamboa argues that the “hierarchical supervisory system” present in the lives of braceros held “tremendous power over the workers.” Indeed, braceros were always surveilled by a combination of growers, camp managers, farmers, and crew leaders who transported them to and from work, gave them orders, supervised them in the fields, maintained the payroll, and maintained worker discipline.¹⁴⁰ In *Consuming Mexican Labor* (2011), Mize and Swords contest that the threat of returning a contracted worker to Mexican is he did not “meet the demands of the job without complaint” was usually enough for workers to do as their employers and foremen demanded.¹⁴¹ If a worker chose not to comply with these demands, he was deported. If a worker attempted to organize or demand better treatment, he was deported. If a worker did not work hard enough, he faced the possibility of deportation--or worse—

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 57

¹³⁹ Ronald L. Mize, and Alicia C. S. Swords. *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II*, 74.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

mysteriously died.¹⁴² The day to day surveillance of housing workers on site expanded the growers control over his captive laborers. Indeed, in *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region* (1991) Valdes argues that the isolation, social relations and controls forced upon the bracero worker produced a world that “had several features in common with the barrio, the ghetto, and the American Indian Reservation” and that it had “the general characteristics of an internal colony.”¹⁴³

The racial segregation imparted through the housing conditions *bracero* experienced in labor camps worked to not only segregate the racially marked *braceros* from the white citizenry, but this racial segregation also aided in producing *braceros* as always already alien subjects that needed to be hidden from sight. Not only did segregation impart a sense of social isolation that conveyed *braceros* as racially undesirable and unclean, but this isolation also insured that laborers understood their own foreignness and undesirability during their stay in the United States.

In an interview conducted with Jose Magdaleno for the Bracero History Archive, Jose recalls the restrictions in place that relegated the *bracero* to the labor camp.

You had to do what they [said]... If you were going to leave, it was because they were going to transport you to another place but for me to be going out to spend the day I

¹⁴² Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, 17.

¹⁴³ Dennis Nodín Valdés. *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*. 1st ed. Mexican American Monographs ; No. 13. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. 24.

didn't work, I couldn't leave because it was illegal... If something happened they would throw me out [of the country]. I would be breaking the law.¹⁴⁴

Later in his interview, Jose recalls an instance in which he decided to venture past the marked boundary between the labor camp and the town of Oxnard, California and the consequences that came with that trespassing. He recalls this boundary as “el boulevard” or rather, “the boulevard.”

JM: At that time, here in Oxnard... They did not let—the people from here, Americans, they didn't want us to cross the boulevard on this side, they didn't like it one bit... one time they beat me, out there somewhere, [they gave me] a real bad beating.”

Int: Because you cross to the other side [of the boulevard]?

JM: Yeah, because I crossed to that side. They didn't want for Latino people to go over there...¹⁴⁵

Rodolfo Balderama, a former *bracero* also interviewed for the Bracero Oral History Archive recalls the few interactions he had had with whites during his time as a *bracero* as antagonistic and taunting if not outrightly violent. Rodolfo stated that white would

¹⁴⁴ Jose Maadalen. Interview by Ana Ojeda. Bracero History Archive, December 1st, 2010.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

throw rocks at him and his companions as if they were “unos animales”—some animals. Indeed, in his interview he remembers that whites would “todo el tiempo” or “all of the time” start fights with him and other *braceros*. He describes the ways in which whites would push them and laugh, expecting the *braceros* to tolerate the abuses tossed at him. He recalls, with an audible tint of anger, that often whites would yell “taco,” “wetback” and “beaner” at him when they saw him. “All of the time, I don’t know why... they would look at one badly.”¹⁴⁶

Racial segregation was not just an issue of housing *braceros* away from the white population however, racial segregation occurred in the labor camps as well. Mize reports that during the period of the Bracero Program growers often did hire few domestic workers to work on their farms as pickers. These domestic workers were often Mexican-American Asian and African American workers (alien subjects in the same country themselves). However, *braceros* were strictly instructed to keep their distance from citizen workers.

Indeed, the distinctions between *braceros* and resident and citizen workers were made in interesting ways. As Francisco Angeles recalls, one of the ways in which these distinctions between the imported guest worker and the local worker was made, was through the assignment of tools, in this case the hoe that workers were to tend to the

¹⁴⁶ Balderama, Rodolfo. Interview by Jose Medina. Bracero History Archive. April 8, 2008.

fields with. In recalling his first time working as a *bracero* in Mendota, California, Francisco recalls the following:

We were in what we called “el cortito.” You all know what it is that we call “el cortito” is, right? They would give us... There were these very large fields—the fields we would tend to—very large because they were growing melons. And so they wanted us plant one seed every foot, right? But just one. They would give us a hoe—a short-handled hoe, so we could cut as we went along. And for the people that were born here or that already had their papers they would give them a tall one. They would work standing up. Us, we would work bent over.... I tell my daughter, I say: “We were like a couple of slaves, but licensed!” Because that is how they would treat us... they would give us braceros the short-handled hoe, so that we wouldn’t waste time.... And those that were born here or where residents, they would be given a long-handled hoe. We had to work double that them, right? To them they would give them *una cebrada*, the way you say it here “a break” and we wouldn’t get one. And us—for them they would take them a bucket of water, for us the water was just running water [from a hose] and

they would say; “There! There is the water! Drink up!” So,
it was very different.¹⁴⁷

“El cortito” translated as “the short one” was also referred by some as “el brazo del diablo” or rather “the arm of the devil” due to its debilitating effects on the bodies of *braceros*. As Jain discusses in *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety in the United States*, the short-handled hoe was widely used by farmworker in California until it was outlawed in 1975.¹⁴⁸ As Francisco details, use of the short-handled hoe required workers to bend over at the waist, quickly raising and lowering the hoe while walking sideways down the row of plants. Indeed, the grueling labor involved with this tool wrecked havoc on the physical health of many workers. As Jain points out, the many side effects of using the short-handled hoe included not only severe back injuries but also nose bleeds, kidney malfunction, headaches, runny eyes from dirt, fever, acid urine, kidney pains, arthritis, exhaustion, wrist swelling, and poisoning from inhaling pesticides while working close to the ground.¹⁴⁹ While workers forced to use the short-handled hoe may have not fully realized the long term effects the tool would have on their bodies, the assignment of the tool to *braceros* and not to resident or citizen workers translated a particular lack of care and a devaluation of the *bracero* workers health, body and indeed life.

¹⁴⁷ Angeles, Francisco. Bracero History Archive. Interviewer information and date unavailable.

¹⁴⁸ Sarah S. Lochlann Jain. *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

The assignment of “el cortito” also did something else, it produced tangible and material distinctions between *braceros* and Mexican-Americans, these distinctions translating to further devaluation of the guest worker’s life and produced yet another level of isolation and alienation. Mexican-Americans, despite sharing the same racial and ethnic category as *braceros*, were not like *braceros*. They may have looked like the guest worker and indeed at times sounded like the guest worker, but growers distinguished them from one another—and, indeed even Mexican Americans distinguished themselves from the contract worker as we will explore in a later section. These “like me, but unlike me” identifications and distinctions further alienated the *bracero* from those he may have believed he shared the intimacy of race with.

Distinctions between *braceros* and Mexican-Americans did not end there, however. Juan Zarate, whose testimony was featured in Gonzalez’ *Harvest of Loneliness* (2010), recalls the following:

The people who were already there in the United States were kept separate. We didn’t live together. We would work together. But those people, they had their own houses to live in. At work, we would all be together, but in the evenings, when one would go home, they would return to

their own homes. They wouldn't mix within the
braceros.¹⁵⁰

Indeed, the distinctions made between the permanent alien subject and the citizen subject went beyond the physical segregation of the *braceros* from the white citizenry, but even dictated who could work alongside whom, who could speak to whom and who used which tools. These distinctions that marked the *bracero* as inferior and cattle-like were even imbedded in where and when they were allowed access to water during the job. These distinctions also produced the *bracero* as fundamentally *alien* in the United States, as he was marked as inferior to and indeed distinct from the Mexican-American, despite their shared ethnic and racial category. As such, not only were *braceros* to be hidden from the white citizenry in segregated labor camps but they were segregated from other workers as well, even those with whom he shared the intimate physical bond of race with. Yet, the deployment of isolation as a means of control did not end there. Some *braceros* were even encouraged to isolate themselves from each other.

One former *bracero* by the name of Felix Gallegos recalls his inability to make meaningful friendships during his stay as a *bracero* in the United States. When asked why he believed that was, he replied that it was due to the short contracting period.

I was in large camps, where there were about 300 people...

You could not make friendships like that... No, because...

¹⁵⁰ Gonzalez et al, *Harvest of Loneliness*.

You came for 2 or 3 months... and the friendship was of 2 or 3 months and then it was over and we wouldn't never see each other again... No.¹⁵¹

According to Mize and Swords the contracting system of the Bracero Program consisted of "short, temporary individual work contracts that were tailored to the labor needs of growers."¹⁵² Crops that were easily perishable such as fruits and vegetables required *bracero* contracts that spanned the standard forty-five-days. Crops such as sugar beets were contracted for a minimum of three months due to the longer and more intensive labor processes involved in cultivation and harvesting.¹⁵³ While growers who needed workers for longer periods of time were allowed to re-contract individual *braceros* as they saw fit, generally contracts were not designed to maintain the *bracero* in the United States for an extended period of time as the intention behind the program was to ensure the temporary and disposable nature of the Mexican laborer.¹⁵⁴

As such, contracting periods ranged from 45 days to 2-3 months at a time, after which *braceros* were typically deported. If a *bracero* wanted to return to the United States for work, he would have to be contracted to another grower, producing a continuing recycled and randomized flow of labor, greatly impacting the workers ability to form meaningful relationships with one another and hindering their ability to organize

¹⁵¹ Felix Gallegos, Bracero Oral History Archive, time stamp needed.

¹⁵² Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, page?

¹⁵³ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 59.

¹⁵⁴ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 60.

for better treatment. Yet the short duration of the contracted period was not the only reason *braceros* found it challenging to get to know one another, indeed for some *braceros* the reasons were even more violent.¹⁵⁵

One former *bracero* by the name of Don Crecencio, shared his own experience with *bracero* isolation as a result of the death of a fellow worker.

DC: Some got killed. Like two fell from the trees and they would get stabbed by the trees. "And so-and-so is missing" [then someone would say,] "oh, I think he was working by my row." So they would say, "get off because there is someone missing... Check to see if he is dead by there." "There was one right next to me" I said. "I don't remember what his name is" [said Don Crecencio] "Well then look for him" [said the foreman]. I then looked through my row and passed through it and then jumped to the next row to see if . . . I then saw him with his head hanging down. There was a stick stuck on him his face full of blood. I went to go tell, "he is here."

Int: When you saw the dead man did you get scared?

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

DC: I never found out if they sent him back to his land. I am not sure where he was from. You know that from distinct places people came there [as braceros to work in the U.S.]. They would tell us “you go over there to pick lemons.” They would never ask us where we were from. The foreman would never ask us. We did not know where they were from. Because there are too many and I did not know where they were from. I did not like to ask where they were from.¹⁵⁶

The lack of value for the individual workers by the managers and growers themselves, the lack of care when one died over work or a workplace accident and the unpredictable nature of the bracero life discouraged workers from forming bonds with one another, for fear that they would lose friends. Another former bracero by the name of Juan Zaratte recalled the following:

Working in the lettuce fields was very difficult. You can't step normally, you have to step sideways... No, no, that work would break you to pieces. That work was very, very, difficult... Can you imagine working 10-12 hours bent over, all day there?... I saw people working in the cotton fields in the Arizona heat... people that would just fall to the ground

¹⁵⁶ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 34.

and would start foaming at the mouth... dehydrated... We couldn't drink water, and the furrows were very long to finish. And when one finished, one would be dizzy from the heat... There were 3-4 older men, who fell while working in the field. And they would just pick them up and put them on the truck and let them to recover on their own.¹⁵⁷

Another former bracero by the name of Guadalupe Garcia Gonzalez recalls his own experience as well, highlighting the disposability of the bracero life.

That was really bad about our situation... When one got sick, instead of helping them... they would just send one back to Mexico. If someone got injured at work instead of helping them, they would say that it was part of the job and send him back. That is why many people, if they were injured, it was preferred to not report our injuries that way they wouldn't send us back.¹⁵⁸

The devaluation and disposability of the bracero worker and the constant threat of injury, death or deportation was one of the ways in which the bracero was made to feel isolated not only from other *braceros*, whose stays were unpredictable and who would

¹⁵⁷ Gonzalez et al, *Harvest of Loneliness*.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

disappear from one day to the next, but also from himself.¹⁵⁹ In his testimony for the Bracero Oral History Project, Francisco Angeles who had been a student all his life during his time in Mexico, recalls a discovery he made when reading over his contract one day:

In the contract that they would give us, there was a, well it was in English and in Spanish, some parts, right? But I would see these small letters and well I would check to see what they said. One was worth, for example, if one died here [in the United States] the worth of one person that came here from Mexico was \$1000. I don't know if you knew that already. That was what one was worth. If one ended up becoming disabled as a result of an accident, if one ended up paralyzed or something like that the American government would return him to his town and they would give him a pension of \$30 a month. That is what the contract said. If one lost an arm, it was \$250, a leg, \$250. And if you died in an accident? \$1000. That was it... That was what we were worth.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, 15

¹⁶⁰ Francisco Angeles, Bracero Oral History Project.

Later in his interview, Francisco comes back to this in discussing the way he and his coworkers would be transported from the camp where they lived to their work site. It became obvious that this discovery was one that had deeply impacted him.

In Mendota they would transport us in a truck, not sitting but standing, just holding on and sometimes the truck would break abruptly and we would all go forward or we would go backwards when the truck would speed back up, right? Sometimes the people would yell at the driver that, well; “You aren’t transporting animals!” and he would [probably say] “No well, it will only cost me \$1000 if I kill one or two [Francisco laughs].”¹⁶¹

The devaluation of the bracero life was one way through which interpersonal connections were prevented, creating an environment in which contract durations were short lived and a *braceros* stay in the United States was always uncertain.¹⁶² This devaluation worked to not only remind braceros that their comrades were disposable, but reminded braceros that they themselves were disposable, low in monetary value and replaceable, further alienating the bracero from his companions, his labor, and himself.

Yet another way through which braceros were isolated was the way in which workers would be pit against one another for wages, further increasing the bracero’s own

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, 32.

sense of isolation from his fellow nationals. Competition also worked to encourage negative feelings between the workers, as Isias DeArcos mentions:

In that time, the worker that did not make [his employer] enough, when the 45 days came up, they would not renew his contract and they would throw him back to Mexico... And then you didn't have another opportunity... and so, all the time, you had to be competing with everyone else to take care of yourself. Because, for example, if after 45 days they threw you back to Mexico well you were not able to earn back what you paid for your passage... You returned to Mexico in the same conditions, with nothing. And so, the work was very, very, hard.¹⁶³

The competitive nature of some camps in which braceros were granted shorter contracts prevented them from forming bonds with one another, forcing them to always work harder in an attempt to prove their usefulness to their employers, at the expense of their companions.

The Mexican worker was encouraged to isolate himself from everyone during his time as a bracero.¹⁶⁴ This in turn multiplied the already mounting sense of isolation felt by the workers and helped growers maintain even more control over them. The high

¹⁶³ Isias DeArcos, Bracero Oral History Project, 22:50.

¹⁶⁴ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 23.

degree of surveillance, racial segregation and violence the bracero worker was forced to endure during his stay in the United States was profoundly disempowering and these forms of racial disciplining helped construct and enforce colonial power relations that continued to reproduce the Mexican worker as always already value-less and under the complete neglectful and violent “care” of the grower who contracted him. The construction of the bracero as a “commodity function and utility” devalued nearly everything about the Mexican laborer. Moreover, the “injection of foreignness into the commodity-identity rendered Mexican labor disposable, in addition to being cheap,” making Mexicans “not only strangers in their own land but strangers to themselves.”¹⁶⁵ The isolating and alienating effects of such dehumanization and devaluation of the Mexican laborer produced him not only as disposable to his employer but impacted his sense of self in ways that are not hard to imagine.

Bracero Solidarity, Resistance and Organizing

In *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.–Mexico Bracero Program*, Mize points out that collective action was not an option afforded to braceros who had been “pushed to the margins of existence.”¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the program had been designed precisely to allow growers the ability to extract labor from Mexican migrants in the most cost-effective and repressive way possible, releasing laborers to the cruelties of bare existence. One former

¹⁶⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 155.

¹⁶⁶ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 56.

bracero interviewed for the Bracero History Archive by the name of Felix Gallegos, recounts his experience and states with in an understandable outburst of anger:

The bracero did not come to choose! Not salary, not the job, not where we would live. He didn't come to choose his employer—nothing! None of that. Only where they would take you, there you had to work, whether you liked it or not. If you liked the job, you had to do it. And if you didn't like the job? You had to do it. And hard. Because in that time, you worked 10 hours and there were times when they didn't let you straighten out your back... you were not allowed to straighten out your back, on your knees, with the short-handled hoe... all the way over there and then back without straightening up.¹⁶⁷

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, some braceros like Felix, also found that they couldn't form friendships with their companions, noting yet another way through which the bracero was isolated and disempowered. However, it is important to note that these repressive conditions did succeed in stomping out all dissent. Indeed, despite threats of deportation and violence at the hands of growers and local law enforcement, braceros did

¹⁶⁷ Gallegos, Felix. Interview by Paulina Salazar. Bracero History Project. Date unavailable.

resist in a variety of ways, marking an incredible sense of resilience under unbelievably repressive conditions.¹⁶⁸

In “Outside the Border of the Modern,” Cohen suggests that despite the repressive conditions under which braceros labored, some braceros actually helped each other quite often. ¹⁶⁹Indeed, citing an interview with an unnamed bracero, Cohen quotes the following:

The first say... I took... my sack and started to pick... I watched the others and tried to imitate them. That helped, but not that much.’ Finally, one man ‘took me aside. “Like this,” he said. “It’s much easier.” And it was... We got to be friends. And then later... I showed other man [the technique]... That’s how it worked.¹⁷⁰

Cohen recalls another former bracero by the name of Mauricio Herrera who told her simply; “We were Mexican, we learned from each other.”¹⁷¹ Indeed, in some cases, veteran workers were able to pass down their knowledge to newly contracted workers, helping them “mediate the power of grower associations, which compiled and traded names of worker who caused trouble.”¹⁷² This coded term of “causing trouble” was a way

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Cohen, “Outside the Border of the Modern,” 25.

¹⁷⁰ Cohen, “Outside the Border of the Modern,” 26.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

for growers to trade the names of workers who attempted to improve working and living conditions or attempted to hold grower accountable for their wages. This “passing down” of knowledge and mentoring of newly contracted workers allowed braceros to build solidarity with one another and facilitated their ability to organize for better treatment.¹⁷³

In *Mexican Labor and World War II Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (1990), Erasmo Gamboa also notes that the perceptions of *braceros* as unable to organize for better working conditions and treatment was not the case in the Northwest. Indeed, Gamboa argues that “in spite of what has been written on this topic, braceros were not powerless to act. When work and living conditions became unbearable, they went on strike.”¹⁷⁴ Gamboa notes one case that occurred on June 17, 1946, in which four hundred braceros from three Nampa area labor camps in Idaho went on strike. These braceros were joined by over six hundred other workers at Marsing, Franklin, Upper Deer Flat and Amalgamated Sugar Company camps. This strike which had occurred over wages, continued until June 26, when the Mexican Consul Carlos Grimm had persuaded the men to return to work. Gamboa notes that this incident had “put great fear into the farmers.”¹⁷⁵

Indeed, while Gamboa argues that braceros were almost continually on strike in the Northwest, Zats points out, that the experiences of braceros in the Pacific Northwest

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Erasmo Gamboa. *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947*. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, 75.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

were very different from those that were contracted in the Southwest, where the majority of braceros were employed. Indeed, the Southwest's proximity to Mexico made braceros working in the Southwest "eminently replaceable" and highly disposable if they stirred up any inkling of resistance. Zatz argues that one of the reasons the experiences of braceros in the Northwest were so unique was because they were not replaced as easily by their employers, as the transportation costs of deporting a worker were greater for growers in the Northwest.¹⁷⁶ These conditions gave braceros the unique chance to organize for better pay, even if these cases were not successful in the end. Cases of successful organizing were less common in the Southwest, however, where braceros had to grapple with their hyper-disposability at the hands of capricious and abusive foremen and growers. Despite their hyper-disposability, some braceros in the Southwest still spoke back to their employers regarding their despotic treatment.

Indeed, one bracero by the name of Guadalupe Garcia Gonzalez, whose testimony was featured in Gonzales' *Harvest of Loneliness* (2011), recalls his own experience with organizing for better workplace conditions while working in Arizona during his first year as a bracero.

...They had these large barracks made out of aluminum.

Outside, the temperature would be 122 degrees. Inside the

barracks, we were 250 to a building. There were three

¹⁷⁶ Marjorie S. Zatz. "Using and Abusing Mexican Farmworkers: The Bracero Program and the INS (Book Review)." *Law & Society Review* 27, no. 4 (1993): 851-63, 853.

barracks and we were more than 700 braceros at that camp... And it was very hot because aluminum gets very hot and the heat of so many of us inside was worse--and the stoves where we would cook... That is when I protested. Because there was not air conditioning and there the temperature gets to more than 120 because we were living worse than animals, the food they had there was not for people!

But there, the person... I think he got everyone out, because then they said that everyone had been sent to a different camp. But I think it was because another man and I had protested.

His act of courage and his daring to break the colonized-colonizer relationship imposed upon braceros was not taken well by his employers. His request for more humane housing was not met with his and his companion's deportation but with the scattering and redistribution of the entire camp. Indeed, the birth of dissent could have marked all of the workers at the camp as possible "trouble makers" who needed to be separated from one another.

Another former bracero by the name of Antonio Barrios, whose oral history was collected for the Bracero History Project recalls his own experience in great detail as well.

Only one time [did I protest], over there in the Imperial Valley, because the food was a pretty bad... and there we went, and I said, well, that we didn't want the food! That they should change it and then we got together, [and said] well that "we are not going to work today"... Myself and another guy, we put ourselves at the front, "in case they want to fire you, we will also go, [the other braceros said]." No, well, the foreman came over with the truck saying; "whoever wants to go to work, get on the truck and whoever doesn't go stay and we will take them right now to El Centro" and well right way they got on the truck and only the two of us stayed [laughs].¹⁷⁷

Indeed, Antonio and his compatriot had been taken back to El Centro and were re-contracted to another grower. When asked what had happened regarding the food, he replied; "well we didn't ever find out because they swapped us out [laughs]!" In this case, we can see that Zatz observation holds true. Due to their proximity to the border and the

¹⁷⁷ Barrios, Antonio. *Bracero History Archive*. Interview and date information not available.

real threat of deportation, even when braceros worked up the courage to speak back to their employer's atrocious treatment, many of them were coerced into complying with their employer's demands. Those who chose not to, were "tossed back" to Mexico, as some braceros described it.

Despite the consequences faced by braceros employed in the Southwest as a result of their protests, what I wish to point out is that even through the absolute repression they experienced, the unruly bracero of the 20s and 30s—the worker who would as one grower described "sit down in the field, and not work"¹⁷⁸—was not stomped out. Indeed, even under these profoundly disempowering moments, many braceros who did not see themselves as doing an act of great courage, spoke out against their ill treatment, poor food, and housing conditions, marking a tremendous resilience and reclamation of the self in the face of the absolute disempowerment the Bracero Program allowed growers and their associates to produce.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the Bracero Program largely came to be as a result of grower desires for a captive, surplus and disposable workforce. The Bracero Program, as a means of imported colonialism, allowed growers to amass a surplus population of disposable laborers that acted as the direct solution to the "unruly" Mexican

¹⁷⁸ Herrera-Sobek, *Northward Bound*, 35.

laborers who throughout the 1920s and 1930s sought fair wages and better treatment from the growers that employed them. As such, the Bracero Program was engineered to allow growers unfettered access to a large pool of surplus laborers that could be molded and disciplined into their ideal “docile” laborer through various means of racial violence and surveillance.

Using oral history and interview material from a variety of sources including the Bracero History Archive, I have also argued that the dehumanizing and humiliating processes of *bracero* selection and the profoundly disempowering surveillance and control present in the labor camps allowed growers to “produce” their ideal bracero and hold them in captivity with the threat of deportation always at hand. As such, the Bracero Program allowed growers to discipline Mexican workers into docility and racial subservience through various means of racial violence and segregation, “producing” the *bracero* as a “homogeneous product,”¹⁷⁹ as any workers that may have threatened these colonial power relations were rejected. It was through these forms of disciplining that a particular kind of racially inferior and emasculated Mexican worker was molded, resulting in a workforce of disciplined, desperate and docile Mexican workers that fit the imagined mold the Mexican workers of the 20s and 30s had challenged.¹⁸⁰ The existence of on-site housing also forced workers to endure not only inhumane living conditions but also the isolation of racial segregation that forced them into a life under which

¹⁷⁹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 101.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

surveillance was “the order of the day”¹⁸¹ and in which deportation was a constant threat.¹⁸² Various forms of segregation and neglectful care produced an isolating and alienation experience for *braceros* in the United States who were always marked as fundamentally alien and low in monetary value and completely disposable. Distinctions such as the assignment of “el cortito” also produced tangible and material distinctions between *braceros* and Mexican Americans, these distinctions translating to further devaluation of the guest worker’s life, further alienated the *bracero* from those he may have believed he shared the intimacy of race with.

As I will explore in the chapter to follow, the Bracero Program’s construction of *braceros* and the established and violently enforced power relations between white growers and Mexican laborers, would ultimately provide the framework for the modern agricultural industry. Most importantly however, this framework and the importation of *braceros* and their families after the programs termination in 1964, greatly shaped the lives of those that followed their *bracero* fathers to the United States. These methods of importation, segregation, racial disciplining and national exclusion worked to fashion yet another generation of surplus and disposable Mexican laborers this time out of the *bracero*’s own children.

¹⁸¹ Mize, *The Invisible Workers*, 57.

¹⁸² Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, 15.

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CHAPTER TWO:
GENERATIONAL EFFECTS AND THE PRODUCTION OF A PERMANENT
RACIAL UNDERCLASS

On December 31, 1964, Public Law 78—which acted as an extension of the Bracero Program in 1951—expired and with it, the twenty-two year *bracero* contracting system.¹⁸³ As discussed previously, the Bracero Program came to be as a result of grower desires for a captive, surplus and disposable Mexican workforce, who unlike their counterparts from the 20s and 30s, would be unable to advocate for humane treatment, proper housing or decent wages. One of the reasons the Bracero Program worked so well and so long for growers was because the guest worker program added workers to the labor force “without adding permanent residents to the population,” proving an adequate solution to the problem of permanence the state saw with the immigration of racially “undesirable” workers in the earlier part of the twentieth century.¹⁸⁴ As discussed in *Inside the State*, Calavita argues that this “*bracero* solution” fit well with the needs of Southwestern agriculture as it provided an always available and captive work force with which to “offset the unpredictability of agricultural production and to minimize worker

¹⁸³ Craig, Richard B. *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971. Kindle Locations 3070-3071.

¹⁸⁴ Martin, Philip. “There is Nothing More Permanent Than Foreign Workers.” *Center for Immigration*. May 1, 2001. 1.

resistance to arduous working conditions and bare subsistence wages."¹⁸⁵ Of course, she notes, the other reason the program had been so successful for growers throughout the 1940s and 50s, was in large part as a result of the efforts of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to promote grower satisfaction¹⁸⁶. Throughout the life of the program the INS used their power to fashion policies aimed at maximizing the utility of the contract labor system on the behalf of growers.¹⁸⁷ However, while the guest worker program successfully reduced the financial costs associated with a permanent immigrant work force and eliminated the permanent accumulation of racial difference, the reduction of wages and the mass erosion of the power of organized labor that resulted from these successes, highlighted the tensions that were associated with the guest-worker program.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, while the INS had crafted policies designed to satisfy growers, the Department of Labor was forced to deal with the program's negative impacts on domestic workers. As Calavita puts it, the "grower-oriented nature of this solution, and its adverse effects on domestic labor," made the Bracero Program a contentious topic for the Department of Labor, whose overall duty was to "mediate the conflict between labor and capital."¹⁸⁹ As a result of these tensions, by the 1960s this "*bracero* solution" had begun to fall apart.

¹⁸⁵ Calavita, Kitty. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* Classics of Law & Society Series. New Orleans, LA.: Quid Pro, 2010. 194.

¹⁸⁶ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 153

¹⁸⁷ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 195

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

In part, the demise of this system lay in the state and state agencies' inability to rationalize the program's formal existence upon the changing political and cultural tides of the United States. As state agencies like the Department of Labor faced mounting pressures from organized labor groups, the INS's ability to facilitate the flow of labor was hindered, and this in combination with the mounting public pressures placed on Congress, meant that the program as a formal means of acquiring disposable Mexican labor had reached its end.¹⁹⁰

Not only was organized labor gaining more traction in their push for the termination of the Bracero Program but the Kennedy Administration was "far less sympathetic" to agribusiness than the previous administrations had been.¹⁹¹ Indeed in a climate that "produced the Civil Rights Act and the War on Poverty," the continuation of the Bracero Program "became a moral issue and urban support became much harder to secure."¹⁹² The moral position against the program was only bolstered in late 1960, when the CBS documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, aired on national television. This documentary depicted in graphic detail the poverty experienced by *braceros* who had previously been rendered invisible to the broader population. This graphic portrayal of the poverty and ill treatment experienced by *braceros* all across the United States "touched off a reaction of astonishing proportions." The film caused such an outrage that it was denounced as a "harm to the American image." Congress was flooded with mail condemning the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

program and calling for measures to help domestic labor from “an outraged and conscience-stricken public.”¹⁹³ *Harvest of Shame* had brought *braceros*—who had been largely invisible to the broader American population prior—to the forefront of American consciousness. As a result of these combined mounting pressures, in May of 1963 the House voted to terminate Public Law 78. Pressures on the part of the growers’ lobby were so strong however, that in the late fall a one-year extension of the bill was passed without amendments.¹⁹⁴ As such, on December 31, 1964 Public Law 78 was allowed to die, taking with it the Bracero Program. However, growers along with their allies at the INS had already devised means for retaining a portion of their *bracero* labor force, ensuring that while the program was officially over the importation it had routinized would continue.¹⁹⁵ In this post-*bracero* era, a different category of migrants had to be adopted in order to extend the labor services the program had allocated for growers for so long. This new era’s *bracero* came to be known as the “green-card commuter.”¹⁹⁶

This chapter thus addresses the continuation of these labor currents and systems of exploitation that were normalized during the post-*bracero* era, by focusing on the lived experiences of the children of former *braceros*. In doing this, I address the ways in which the INS ensured that despite the program’s termination, growers would continue to have

¹⁹³ James F Creagan. "Public Law 78: A Tangle of Domestic and International Relations." *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 7, no. 4 (1965): 541-56. doi:10.2307/165274. 553; Calavita, *Inside the State*. 155.

¹⁹⁴ Creagan, "Public Law 78." 553.

¹⁹⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 166.

¹⁹⁶ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 190.

access to disposable, temporary and captive Mexican labor.¹⁹⁷ I argue that the services established by the Bracero Program were maintained through the “green-card commuter system,” allowing growers to continue these legal forms of “imported colonialism” and reproduce yet another generation of *bracero*-like workers.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, this refurbished system of labor importation produced similar conditions of disempowerment, isolation, and exclusion from the polity, this time without the outraged eyes of the citizenry—there was no *Harvest of Shame* for this population—allowing them to remain largely invisible.¹⁹⁹ Lastly, this chapter argues that these forms of disempowerment, entrapment and exclusion produced generations of *bracero* descendants not only as a “Mexican agricultural proletariat” but as a permanent racial underclass that would remain exploitable, disposable, and excluded from cultural and affective forms of national belonging.²⁰⁰ These attempts between growers and the INS to produce Mexicans as exploitable and alienated commodities—as laborers rather than human beings—resulted in the engendering of a permanent racial underclass that would be trapped within the agricultural industry or relegated largely to service and low-wage labor.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Calavita discusses that growers felt that Mexican labor was their right given their proximity to the border.

¹⁹⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 166.

¹⁹⁹ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 155.; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*. 165.

²⁰⁰ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 13.

²⁰¹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 13.

Methods

In early January of my second year of graduate school, I drove down to the city where I had lived the majority of my childhood to meet with a member of the farmworker community who had excitedly volunteered to share her story with me and act as my informant for this project. As I drove down from the San Francisco Bay Area to Watsonville, I became overwhelmed with a familiar sense of nostalgia.

Driving past the green fields of the Pajaro Valley, I was greeted with a familiar sight of *campesinos*—farm workers—laboring in the lush expanse of the strawberry fields. Their bodies were covered from head to toe, familiar and colorful paisley patterned bandanas protecting their mouths and noses from the toxic chemicals that were so routinely used on the fruits they cradled in their hands—and on them as a result. Familiar cars decorated the unpaved shoulders along the road, cars that had not been manufactured since the late 1980s lined up neatly, the paint on the hoods sun beaten and peeling. As I drove past, my eyes lingered for a few more seconds than they should have on the *campesinos* as they worked, folded at the waist, their gloved hands moving quickly, disappearing into the lush foliage below. I turned away just as the corners of my eyes began to sting, blinking through my blurry vision and focusing on the road ahead.

Watsonville is located in the center of the Pajaro Valley in Northern California, about five miles inland from the shore of the Monterey Bay.²⁰² Santa Cruz, a mere 14 miles south of Watsonville poses a bit of an awkward situation for those unfamiliar with the area, housing little of the racial difference that Watsonville does and rendering Watsonville a farmworker town upon first glance. In her own study of Mexican farmworkers, Ann Aurelia Lopez notes that “the disparity between the comparatively wealthy insulated lives of Californians living in Santa Cruz and the often dangerous, life threatening, impoverished lives of Mexican farmworkers hidden from public view only 14 miles away” is stark and truly shocking.²⁰³

Watsonville is home to the state sponsored Buena Vista Migrant Labor Camp, a camp that was built in the 1960s as a cite of temporary housing for migrant farmworkers. This camp, once occupied by single men, is now used to house migrant farmworker families. This camp is open from late Spring to late Autumn, housing migrant workers for six months at a time before closing for the remainder of the year when local fruits are no longer in season.²⁰⁴ Some have characterized the houses at the state sponsored migrant labor camp as one-bedroom “bungalows” and others, like one of the women interviewed for this chapter, would call them shacks with mattresses on the floor, not suitable for

²⁰² Jane Borg and Jack Schoellhmer. "Pajaro Valley History." Watsonville Public Library. <https://www.cityofwatsonville.org/450/Pajaro-Valley-History>.

²⁰³ Ann Aurelia Lopez. *The Farmworkers' Journey*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xiii.

²⁰⁴ N.A. “With the best of intentions a California rule leads to dropouts and splits families.” *The Sacramento Bee*. 2017. <http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/editorials/article161300723.html>

habitation. During the off seasons, workers are forced to move more than 50 miles away if they wish to qualify for housing the following year, contributing to unsteady schooling and low graduation rates for workers' children."²⁰⁵ While the one-bedroom shacks hardly provide the space for a couple and their families, in some cases three families with a total of twelve people share a single unit.²⁰⁶ The three women interviewed for this chapter all recall spending time at the Buena Vista Labor Camp, living there for 6 months at a time for several years throughout their time in the United States.

The women interviewed for this chapter were found through an interconnected network of farmworker community members. Drawing on these community ties, I engaged in a "snow-ball" data collection method in order to find members of the farmworker community that wished to participate in a discussion of their experiences as the children of former *braceros*. This snowball method relied on the participation of one informant that will be referred to as Yolanda Rocha for the remainder of this research. Over the course of a month, two long time farmworker women who had known Yolanda for the majority of their lives contacted us with interest in participating in this research.

²⁰⁵ Ann Aurelia Lopez. *The Farmworkers' Journey*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.150.; Nicholas Ibarra. "A "sordid system": Watsonville tour offers glimpse into farm workers' lives." Santa Cruz Sentinel. 2017. 1. <http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/20170730/a-sordid-system-watsonville-tour-offers-glimpse-into-farm-workers-lives>.

²⁰⁶ Ann Aurelia Lopez. *The Farmworkers' Journey*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 150.

The interviews for this research were conducted in the home Yolanda and her husband were renting at the time, and were done over *café* and *pan dulce*. In this community setting, the interviews became informal in nature, as participants interjected in each other's recollections with a; "remember, that story you told me?" and "oh, remember that time—what was his name?" While this interview method was unplanned on my part, it resulted in the most relaxed and natural way of engaging in conversation with the women present, as it allowed participants in the space to engage with each other in a more natural and community oriented way. Centering their own experiences in this way the women participating were able to engage in a variety of modes of solidarity and empathy with one another.

By drawing heavily on interviews collected with the children of former *braceros*, this chapter is an attempt to address approaches to Bracero Program and post-Bracero Program research that have erased the presence of the very real human beings who have for years labored in a land they have never been able to call theirs. This chapter aims to center the voices of those who have been, through various institutional and systemic means, rendered invisible and silent.

Yolanda Rocha

Yolanda, is a member of the farmworker community in Watsonville, California. She is 62 years old and was born in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. She is a third-generation farmworker, daughter and granddaughter of former *braceros*. She is a short

woman, her hair greyed at the roots, a dark brown mixed into it, giving her long hair a silver shimmer. Despite her short stature, her voice is fierce and electric, one of the reasons she is so well liked by the members of her community. The corners of eyes sport generous fine wrinkles and as she smiles and laughs with her *comadres*, I wonder how much they are a reflection of her *alegria*—her joyfulness—or her squinting in the bright sun while working. She walks around the home she rents with her second husband and her middle son using a walker, having experienced a back injury in her late 40s while working as a *fresera*. When discussing it she displays a sadness that is more than understandable, but follows it up with a proud; “*Pero yo nunca me raje!*” and a first in the air. She never gave up, she says, and she is proud of that. As she walks around her kitchen, the wheels of her walker squeaking against the lenolium floor, she displays an astounding level of self-sufficiency.

Yolanda migrated to the United States around age 12, along with her *ex-bracero* father, her mother and her 8 siblings. She was the oldest of her siblings and as a result had to bear many of the family responsibilities usually associated with a mother, despite her very young age. Her father, Eujenio Rocha, had worked “*en los rieles*”—laying down railroad tracks—before being contracted to a grower and spending the remainder of his youth working as a farmworker. Her grandfather, who had also been a *bracero*, had labored “*en la calabasa*.”

[My grandfather worked] in the pumpkin [fields]. I was very small, so I didn't see many things. But we would visit

him and he was very old. He would come home late, muddy and without having eaten... Tired. He would say that he was coming back from working 10 hours—and, see, he was very old... I don't know who arrived first, if him or us.

Her memories of her *bracero* grandfather are vivid and consist almost entirely of him in his old age, covered completely in mud. It is unclear whether he migrated to the United States before her father had brought her and the rest of her family over but she recalls him working in the fields even after she migrated to the United States. In discussing her own experience as a child, Yolanda recalls hardship for her mother and her siblings.

My mother says that sometimes he would be gone for a year, sometimes two but in Mexico he was only there for 3 or 4 months and then he would go back [to the United States]. He was almost never with us. When my mother would get pregnant sometimes two years passed and he wouldn't know the child that was born until he came back. Most of the time my mother was alone with us. We would all sleep in one bed. My poor mother. What my father made was not enough, even though we were in Mexico, and the dollar was strong. Everyone would be happy when they heard that the dollar would grow... but everything else got

expensive too. We almost never ate meat, or flour tortillas or oatmeal... what most families would usually eat we didn't have. When she received money, my mother bought a large sack of flour, one of maize and another of beans. And from there we would eat until another month passed and my father could send a little more. But it wasn't easy because there were many of us. We didn't go to school because we didn't even have anything to eat for breakfast. And when we came here, we didn't go to school either because we had to work.

When asked if she had known what kind of labor her father performed during his time in the United States, Yolanda shook her head. He had never told his wife or his children what kind of work he did. In remembering this she said simply: "We didn't find out [what he worked in] until we came here and started doing the same work as him... [There were] many many different fruits and vegetables that we picked."

She recalls immigrating to the United States when she was about 12 years old, making that around 1967, approximately two full years after the termination of the program. She recalls her father saying that the reason they were able to immigrate to the United States was due to his employer's sponsorship.

Well what I remember is that we were all, all of my siblings, we were 9, we were little when our father brought us here. First, he came alone and every two years he would go to Mexico, he would return... Where he worked, his boss told him; "I am going to give you a letter so you can immigrate along with your family and you're all going to live on the ranch where you have your job," and that's how it was.

She recalls them moving to "*una casa en el fin*"—a house in the fields where she worked on the grower's property. She recalls there being many people living on site, estimating that there must have been about six families living on the property during the time she was there. When asked what it was like she recalled the following:

We started working from like 12 or 13 years, every one of us that turned of age would start to work... and the boss would from every check take out a percentage of our pay. I don't know how much but he would take it out for rent... There were many of us in the family and we lived very poor...[And] it wasn't like they only took money from my father... they took money from all of us.

In discussing the kinds of labor she performed at such an early age, Yolanda recalled performing two jobs; taking care of her younger siblings and picking alongside her younger sister and her parents.

I would make a crib, from one tree to another and for a bit,
I would work and then for a bit I would watch them. I
would be taking a big bag of fruit and when one of the
babies would cry, I would run over, give them a couple
rocks [on the crib] and then I would continue working.

Since she had 8 siblings and her parents simply could not house, clothe and feed them all on the little wages farm work left them, Yolanda and her younger sister began working alongside them, while at the same time caring for their younger siblings. Indeed, since their parents did most of the hard labor and could earn more money, she and her sister were in charge of the added job of caring for their infant siblings. In discussing her employment as such a young age, she recalls the way her mother would stuff her and her sister's shirts with fabric, to make them look older.

We were very small... our mother would make us put
fabric in our chests to make it look like we were of age.
And that ensured that there wouldn't be any problems with
us looking like we were too young... They must have seen

that I was a little girl, but they didn't care! Not as long as I got the job done.

She reiterates this negligence and lack of care later in her interview, as she recalls working through every single one of her pregnancies—a total of 5, which resulted in the miscarriage of her first daughter.

I worked through my first pregnancy—10 hours a day. I would almost fall asleep while working because I was so tired, standing there with my big belly! I lost the baby because I worked too hard... With all of them I worked. I was so big with [my second son] and a week after delivering him, I went back to work... they [the foremen/bosses] didn't care what happened to me. When I was pregnant, they knew and they didn't care! They just cared about the fruit. You could drop dead and they didn't care... We were like—to say it crudely—like *burros*, carrying fruit on our backs, silent.

Indeed, the negligent care of the bosses and foremen pointed to the lack of value imbued to the Mexican worker's body. During our interview, I asked Yolanda what her life was like while she was living on her boss' property as a child and she explained to me that it

was always unstable, as she and her family moved every couple of months on what seemed like an already established migration pattern.

We would be here about 7 months and we would be in Mexico for 3-4 months and come back. So, I didn't get to go to school there or here. Because I would just start to make friends and they'd say; "Let's go to California!" And then, they would say; "We are going back to Mexico!" I never had a childhood—I never even had a damn doll! Just little brothers and work... From Watsonville, when the work ended there, we would go to Santa Maria and from Santa Maria we would go to Oxnard. We would pick strawberries over there first because the harvest was always early and when it ended there, we came back to pick here. That's what it was like every year. It was sad.

When asked where they would live when they moved from city to city, Yolanda explained that it was complicated.

[Usually we lived] in a camp for immigrants... [but] there wasn't one in all of the places. There were times when we would have to rent an apartment that was more expensive... When we would come back here to

Watsonville, there was the Buena Vista Camp. They would let us live there for very little money.... And sometimes when we worked there were... places to live owned by the same boss. But not in all of the places.

Sometimes families were able to find housing with the grower—trading off independence and freedom from surveillance for affordability. Other times, families would be left to their own devices, meaning that their rent would dramatically increase depending on where they were able to find housing outside of the contract labor system, rendering their small earnings even less and making their lives even more difficult.

These patterns of circular migration and constant rehousing were something Yolanda experienced her entire life. She confesses that at some point, these familiar migration currents had become so routinized that she began to see them as an entirely normal part of life.

When he [my father] would say; “Oh, we are going to move here,” it would seem almost fun... But with my kids, they would get mad. They would say; “You’re making us move again? You don’t even let us have friends!” They didn’t like it, that I made them [move around] like that... It was like a routine!

As she grew up and had children of her own, she found that the same struggles she experienced as a child had been passed down to them. In discussing this Yolanda could not help but shrug her shoulders sadly, stating that despite her children's frustration with her moving them around often, there was nothing she could do to change it.

This [life] was necessary to survive. [As a child] we always lived like that... sleeping on the floor, on those mattresses that stabbed you... When I lived in the Buena Vista Camp [with my children] it was the same. The same houses and the same bad mattress. [So] my kids... they got to live some of the same life as me.

Yolanda recalls wanting a change for her life sometime during her late teens, growing frustrated with the controlling and abusive relationship her parents had with her. She recalls not only having to move around often, having to work for meager wages in the hot sun and being unable to make friends as a child, but also being physically abused by her father, who often attempted to limit her personal freedoms and exerted his control over her sexuality. Indeed, in discussing this she laughs and states; "I married the first idiot I found! Because I was so tired of living like that... but I was working even after getting married!" Indeed, despite hopes that leaving her family would open up different possibilities for her she found that even after getting married the same circular migration, exploitation and poverty persisted.

I lived in a camp at the time that belonged to the same rancher... it was many rooms but every couple had their own room. And there you had to go cook outside and to go bathe outside—all the women together—there were many showers. And another bathroom for the men. Everything was the same... [pauses and sighs] It was all the same *chinga* [beating/work] and the same kind of place, just different people.

Yolanda's life remained almost entirely the same after her marriage to her first husband, the only difference being that now, instead of having to work and take care of her siblings, she had to work, be a wife and mother her own children. Balancing these roles, she confesses, was incredibly difficult for her.

You would leave the house at 6AM and you would get home at 6PM... Work absorbed all of my time... 10, 12 hours of work every day and it was very sad because when my children were small... I took them to daycare in the same camp where I lived... I would see them, but I never got to talk to them because I would take them in the morning when they were asleep and at night I would come pick them up at 6 or 7 at night... My daughter and son—the first ones I had—they would grab each other by the hand

and they would start crying and they would say; “Go ahead mommy, go to work, we are okay,” and I would leave crying because sometimes they would tell me; “Well we don’t see you mom... you take us at night and you pick us up at night.” There wasn’t any time to play with them. That’s why they don’t have good memories, but not because I didn’t want to... I had to work.

The impact of these memories was heart-wrenching for Yolanda, as she sat at her dining room table I could see her attempt at keeping her tears back. After she divorced her husband for physically abusing her after being married for 7 years, Yolanda’s responsibilities only doubled. She now had three children to support and only one source of income. As a result, she then began to pick up night shifts in the same fields she worked during the day, shortening the already limited time she had to rest and be with her children.

When I got divorced, I had to work double... Because I had 3 kids to support... I worked 10 hours in the strawberries, I would go home, have dinner, take a shower and then I would go work at night, in the same thing. In the strawberries, cutting the plants that would be planted in the morning. The same company I worked for during the day, I worked for during the night.

Yolanda argues that not only did working in the fields literally take up all of her time, leaving none for her children, it also greatly limited her ability to learn English and work on attaining her citizenship. She recalls with irritation being asked by members of her community why she never got her citizenship.

I never went to school, so I don't know English because from the day I arrived, I was here to work... They ask me why I don't become a citizen, or why I haven't become a citizen... but it's because I never went to school! I don't know English and I don't have money for the application... [work] was a daily routine. You would leave the house at 6AM and you would get home at 6PM. Where would I find the time? I couldn't study... Work absorbed all of my time. And that's how it was for many many years.

Work completely reshaped and reorganized not only the lives of her family but the lives of everyone she knew. The farmworkers she had gotten to know all experienced the same routinized migration flows as they were organized by the crops that were in season—a migration pattern established before they even immigrated to the United States as children. In discussing this Yolanda explains:

Our *raza* Latina, everything I am tell you, the majority of the women have the same experience. All of my friends,

everything I am telling you they also lived. Because their fathers also came here under the same Bracero Program. My childhood... It was all work, work, work... I didn't even have friends... Because there was no time. For us... our family, there was no Sunday to rest. The work week was even... if then your children don't like school... well, they continue in the same thing and it's a chain that doesn't break. It continues.

She confesses to me, with sadness in her voice, that her oldest son has been working as a farmworker for most of his life, despite having graduated from high school and having had opportunities she never did. He had begun working in the fields when he was young. She recalls him often coming home with fresh groceries and upon investigation, she found out that he had started working in the fields.

[He] still works in it. He works whatever he can get. But only him. He started working when he was in school, at about 12 years old. But then he worked at a factory, assembling electronic parts... then from there he began to go work in the fields... I feel like they lived the same thing as me. Like they settled [for what they do] like they say... "Well, my mom did it so...."

Yolanda gave a sigh at this point in our interview. The memories coming back to her seemed to make her thoughtful. She confesses to us with what seems regret that she had hoped that as she got older she would be able to move back to Mexico and settle there permanently.

I always thought to myself; “Why did I come here?” The job was *una chinga* [a beating]! And then, they [my parents] never sent me to school. I can just for that; to work... I always wanted to go back [to Mexico] and build a house. But when I eventually did, we were already getting a divorce!

Upon hearing this I asked her why she had never wanted to settle down in the United States. She states that it was because she simply never felt comfortable here.

I never liked how they treated me here. I always felt like they didn't treat me like a human; “Just work!” and they didn't care what happened to me... I always felt like I had to look down when the bosses were there. I always felt less than. I was always quiet... didn't say anything during that time. Later, however, I did defend myself, and cursed at people [laughs].

Despite the emotional nature of these stories she shared with us, by the end of our interview Yolanda is laughing again, recalling the fights she found herself in at work and her *comadres* laugh with her. Once again, as I laugh at her animated reenactment of some encounter she had when picking, I am astounded by her resilience.

Rosa Magana

Rosa was the second woman interviewed in this series and is a second-generation farmworker, who also immigrated to the United States with her parents as a child. A long-time friend of Yolanda's, she was also born in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. She is a short woman with a slender frame, her hair thick, shoulder length and tied back with a clip. She is 60 years old and her hair is a dark brown, the only silver on her head peeking out at the roots. This, in combination with round and easily reddened cheeks, makes her look much younger than her age would suggest. Her eyes are bright and filled with life and throughout our interview Rosa half talks and half laughs with a mixture of shyness and good humor.

Rosa is retired from fieldwork and has been for 7 years, having spent the majority of her adult life working "*el la fresa*"—in strawberry fields in Watsonville, California. Her husband is a few years older than she is and despite his age he has continued to work. However, she notes quickly and with excitement, he has been promoted from picker to *mayordomo* for the season—a foreman—which means that he is spared the exhausting

task of folding over at the waist for 10 hours a day. She is unsure if he will be re-contracted as a foreman for the next season and this lack of security makes her nervous. She notes however, that she is glad that they own their own house now and that they don't need worry about paying rent. The house, which is modest in size, is paid off and she, her three adult children and her two grandchildren live somewhat comfortably in a predominantly working class Mexican neighborhood. Despite this stress, she has a cheerful disposition and a large smile on her face as she talks to the group.

Rosa tells me that immigrated to the United States when she was a young girl, along with her mother and her 7 siblings. She recalls her father telling her that they immigrated as a result of the help of a "*compadre*" of his. In recalling this she states simply; "That's what I had heard, that back then it was very easy to immigrate and a *compadre* had helped him." The usage of "*compadre*" is vague, and even she shrugs her shoulders when discussing it, not entirely sure what her father had meant at the time. "*Compadre*" can mean many things in Spanish, from an acquaintance, a friend, a coworker to someone one shares the bond of nationhood with. In this case, we are both unsure if her father meant that he was assisted in the immigration process by simply a friend of his, or if he was sponsored by someone he knew well at work like Yolanda's. In any case, it appears that some similar migration opportunity occurred with Rosa's father that resulted in him being able to retain his employment after the termination of the program, as she recalls him being able to continue living in the same camp he lived in as a *bracero*.

Rosa also recalls a similar circular migration, one in which she and her family would often live in the United States for a few months, work until their contract was over, and then move back to Mexico— only to do it all over again after a few months. In our interview, Rosa notes that while her father was the one who would follow these migration routines at first, when she and her family migrated to the United States with him, it became their life as well.

My father, from what I remember, would go [back to Mexico] every year... I remember that when we were small, he would go every year and then come back... But my father only worked the season... when it was over they would tell them [*braceros*] they were allowed to leave, so they did... And us too, when we lived in [the] Buena Vista [Camp], we would return [to Mexico] every year.²⁰⁷

In discussing her arrival to the United States, Rosa recalls moving to the same camp her father had lived in during his time as a *bracero*, a camp managed by a woman who lived on site.

It was like a bunch of trailers. I remember when he brought me [to the United States] it was... Like three trailers and

²⁰⁷ Rosa interprets the relationship *braceros* had to labor as one of captivity, her wording “they would tell them they were allowed to leave”—is one that implies detention, one that “allows” the worker to go home after certain dues are paid.

like three houses because two houses were divided into halves of a house, and then other people lived in the other one next to it, and then next to that there was a trailer. I remember from when they brought me... it was like a small camp... [and] all of the people that lived with that woman worked in the fields.

Rosa notes that she did not begin working as a picker immediately after arriving to the United States. Instead of working in the fields, she was in charge of caring for her nieces and nephews while her parents and extended family worked.

When my father brought me here... I was little then... My other brother, the youngest, they sent him to school, and well, me, well my nieces and nephews didn't have anyone to take care of them so I would stay and take care of them. And well, me, they didn't put me into school.

While she was not required to pick in the fields with her older siblings and parents, Rosa was required to perform another form of labor—the work of caring for the younger children in her family. While she does recall working a bit as she got older she stated that she did not work “too much” until she got married to the man who is now her husband.

It wasn't until I got married that I really started to work in the fields. When I was with my father, I didn't work very

much because, well, I took care of my little nieces and nephews. When I got married, my husband took me to his boss... and there I started to work.

In recalling what her experience was like working in the strawberry fields, she gives her nose a rub and smiles sheepishly, her cheeks a bright pink. I asked her why she seems so amused at the question and she laughs, stating that, well, the work was just unbelievably difficult!

Well, look, we would go in at 5AM and we would get off at 3 or 4... depending on what the work was like that day, in the strawberries. All day, bent over in the fields, Stephanie [laughs]! It was heavy work, ask Yolanda! You know how bad her back is. Only the injuries are what remain of that time.

Yolanda and Catalina nod and gives a knowing “*asi es*” in agreement—“That’s how it is.”

Our conversation turns to her children, and what kind of lives they have lived as a result of her experiences as a farmworker. She confesses that her children simply do not understand how physically exhausting the labor was. Her children, one in her 20s, another in her 30s and the last in his 40s all continue to live with her and her husband.

OM: They don't know to what point we got...[trying to survive]. Alejandra has never worked, Mayra works right now, in what? A jewelry store! Junior worked in Salinas, as an inspector, checking the strawberries. That's all they do now.

[Yolanda, impressed]: He works as an inspector?

OM: He did, not anymore... He didn't like it!

Rosa tells us again that her husband still works with the same company he has been working since before they got married. He works as a foreman, she says again, this time with more worry in her voice. If he is not rehired as a foreman he will have to continue picking the next season. He is 65 years old.

Catalina Ramirez

Catalina is 67 years old, and was the most gregarious of the three women interviewed, which was why she mentioned she wanted to be interviewed at the end. She is a second-generation farmworker and is a tall slender woman with waist-long wavy hair. She is the oldest of the women but the most excited to share her testimony with me, her memories of her childhood still vivid. She has a hearty laugh, a big smile and her

tongue curls around her words with intension when she speaks, as if she is savoring the very memories themselves. She is a born storyteller, Rosa informs me, and I can tell.

Catalina divorced her husband fifteen years ago and is currently seeing a man she really likes. She tells me that she has four adult children and 8 grandchildren whom she takes care of on her time off. She works as a member of the cleaning staff at a hotel near her parent's home where she currently lives. When she is not working at the hotel, selling Avon or taking care of her grandchildren, she takes care of her parents, cleaning their home and taking them to their doctor's appointments. She is the oldest child in her family, she explains, and as such it is her responsibility and honor to take care of her parents in their older age.

In beginning our interview, Catalina looks back at how she and her family immigrated to the United States. She is unsure exactly how her father attained the paperwork necessary to ensure her family's immigration, however it is clear that her parents immigrated first. She tells me that she and her 4 siblings had been left in Mexico with a trusted friend of the family for several months while her parents had arranged their immigration paperwork in the United States.

When we came here, my parents acquired some documents that said that we were able to immigrate. So, we took those to Mexico so that we could get our green cards. That is how we immigrated, with the papers my father got from here....

When I arrived here, I was about 11 or 12 years old. We didn't go to school... because our parents were very protective of us. We started to work in the fields... When there was work, the bosses would give us a job to do.

Catalina began to work at a very young age, almost immediately after arriving to the United States. In her case as well, she argues that her bosses must have known that she was too young to legally work, but that did not stop them from employing her.

Even when there wasn't a lot of work, I don't know why but they would give us little children to take care of. And so, some of us were growing up and learning to work at the same time. I don't remember how much we made, they paid us very little. But the rent was also cheap.

Catalina also had to take care of children when she wasn't working. In this case however, she states that they had simply "given" her little children to care for. When asked if these were all children she knew, she shook her head and confessed that she wasn't sure why they would give her children she didn't know to care for, but she took care of them anyway. When discussing what it was like to work at such an early age, she replied with the following:

Well... we didn't have the opportunities our children have now. Now, from 5 years old you start school and you

continue as long as you want. In those times, we didn't have that... once we immigrated here... well, we learned to work.

In discussing her experiences once she arrived to the United States, she recalls first living in house on the ranch where she and her family worked. Much like Yolanda and Rosa's experiences, Catalina seemed to easily slip into a pre-existing work relationship her father had established.

We lived for a long time on a ranch that was owned by the boss who was giving us work. There we lasted, I think about some 8 or 10 years. That's where the house was and that's where the work was... Since it belonged to him our rent was, I believe, \$40 a month... The boss had 2 or 3 houses that he rented out to his workers there on the ranch.

As Catalina grew older, she got married and continued working as a farmworker, moving from city to city like many other families did. She recalls usually living on ranches where she worked and on occasion living in a labor camp like the Buena Vista Migrant Labor Camp in Watsonville, California.

The majority of our time that we worked... [we worked] on a ranch. Sometimes, some years we lived on a camp that was for all of the farmworkers called the Buena Vista

Camp. The Buena Vista Camp... was only for those that worked in the fields. They would have it open for 6 months... it was very few houses but many people. So, we had to go line up our cars, we had to sleep for one or two weeks in our cars, standing in line, to be able to get a house... When they would open the Buena Vista Camp they would charge us \$7 a week, the rent was very inexpensive and there was daycare for the children. So, they would leave the camp 6 months open but they would also have the daycare open where they didn't charge us anything. But it was a sacrifice getting a house in the Buena Vista Camp because we had to line up with all of our children, us mothers.

As she grew older and became a mother herself, Catalina states that many of the migration flows she had experienced with her family, she continued with her own. This, she realized, had greatly impacted her children's lives.

When I became a mother, some of the customs we had, we continued, because we continued to live in the Buena Vista Camp, we continued to work in the fields, but what happened is that all of us that worked in the field and lived in the Buena Vista Camp, all of those children were not

able to get the education they should have because they were only in school for 6 months and the other 6 months we would go back to Mexico... because parents could not pay a \$1000 rent and support so many children if there was no longer any work in the fields. So, there was no other choice but to go to Mexico, stay there 6 months without the children in school and without working [and] spending the very little we were able to save up... We would return [to the United States] without money and with our children behind in school because they would miss 6 months... So, they weren't able to continue school the way they should have because us parents, well how do I say it... how we made them grow up! Behind, behind in school because they were never able to be on the level of the other students that never missed school. They were never able to catch up with their homework with their grades because they missed half a year...

Looking back at this routinized migration, Catalina also notes that it was not just her family who migrated so frequently, everyone working in the fields did.

It was like all of the people thought the same thing. We would come at the same time, in the same month and we

would leave at the same time, in the same month. All the sons and all the daughters missed school because we could not be here all year, we could not pay the rent... We had to leave.

She notes that this migration from the U.S. to Mexico and then back again meant that her children, and indeed many children in farmworker families, had to do without the traditional education that other children received in the United States. This severely impacted not only their grades and their ability to make and maintain friendships, but it also greatly impacted their chances at finding employment as adults.

Well, what they were able to do [in terms of employment] was with what little schooling they had. Because they couldn't dedicate time going to school. And so, they choose some, uh, some jobs where you didn't need the entire year of school—rather, the positions they now have is due to their efforts after they got married. Now, everything is different. And so, they changed their way of living but not until they grew up and they had their vision regarding what they wanted to do and what they had to do [to get there].

Indeed, Catalina notes that once her children grew up and got married, they were able to change their way of living. After having lived their childhoods as migrant children unable

to access consistent schooling, they were able to find significant others, marry and settle down. Settling down allowed them then to pursue employment opportunities that were different from their mothers. Catalina does note, however that before this point, some of her children had begun to work as pickers like her.

Juan Manuel did work [in the fields]. A short time but only him. None of the others ever knew—ah, Marisela! When Marisela was... What would it be? 11 years? We went to work but it was because it... was a weekend. After the strawberry harvest was over, one has to pick up the strawberry plants. So... after the harvest, we went—me, Juan Manuel and Marcela to go plant the strawberries, it was a Saturday We worked 4 hours. We made \$22.50. When we left after those 4 hours of work Maricela—I was driving, a minivan—and Maricela was next to me in the front seat. Juan Manuel was behind Maricela. Juan Manuel swatted Maricela's arm and said to her; "Well then, *morena* [dark skinned girl], how do you feel?" And Maricela turned around to look over to Juan Manuel and you could see the effort she made and the grunt she made and her face and she said; "Ay, Juan Manuel do not touch my back because it hurts so much!" And I turned around and I said;

“Maricela, your back hurts, *hija*?” and she said, “Yes, mom!” and I said “I cannot believe it!” “Why is it that you can’t believe it?” I said; “No well *hija* because you are 11 years old! With 4 hours of work I cannot believe that you are aching.” “Oh mom, I cannot stand my back.” “*Hija*, if you had the years I had, and you worked 10 hours, every day would you be able to stand it?” “I don’t know how you do it—I don’t know how you do it yourself!”

Catalina believed that this experience served to teach her daughter about the kind of labor her mother performed on a day to day basis and ended up shifting some of the household responsibilities off of Catalina’s shoulders. Indeed, she explains that from then on, her children began taking up some of the household chores.

From then on when I would come home from work I didn’t have to do anything because whoever returned early from school was the one who cooked. The one that left for school late, or did not go to school at all, was the one who would clean the house. And so, from then on, I didn’t do anything in the house because they recognized that I did not come home with the energy to clean the house and make dinner and make lunch [for the next day] and do the laundry and everything. And so, Maricela tells me; “That

day I learned that money is earned with many sacrifices if one does not go to school.” All the people that didn’t go to school, for us we have no other choice but accept whatever job there is, even if it is exhausting. And that experience is one that taught her what it was that you had to endure [when working in the fields].

Catalina views this experience as one that taught her children both the value of their mother’s work and the value of a good education. Despite this however, Catalina recognizes that due to the everyday flow of labor and the necessary migration that organized her life, her children were just not afforded the privilege of a stable education. She notes however that her children are content now, having made lives outside of the realm of agricultural labor.

Let’s see... Marisela has a job where she is an interpreter at one or two clinics. Elsa is a real estate [agent]... Cecilia works in a beauty salon and Luis right now is not working. And so, they work a lot but they don’t... that was not a job they choose a long time ago. No, that was something they choose until later, until after they got married and had their children and so I admire them a lot because I have seen all of the effort, sacrifice rather, that they make to be able to do all they have to do. And so, they are not some jobs that,

how can I say this, that are well paid but they are jobs that they like to do and that they are able to do... those are jobs that they like to do.

While these jobs were perhaps not her children's first choice and are not "well paid" as Catalina says, they are jobs that afford her children freedoms that she never had when she was their age and for her that is what matters.

Agricultural Labor as a Family Affair

In 1970, David North—a consultant to the Department of Labor—observed that the green card commuter had become "this generation's bracero,"²⁰⁸ and as the stories above illustrate, this was no exaggeration. After the termination of the Bracero Program, immigration officials relaxed their ban on permanent visas for former *braceros*, allowing a number of employers to bring their workers back into the United States even after the expiration of Public Law 78.²⁰⁹ As such, Mexican workers were able to attain permanent residence on the basis of a letter from a U.S. employer asserting that the worker being sponsored was the only person capable of doing the job. Predictably, most sponsored Mexican immigrants in the 1960s were "graduates of the Bracero Program,"²¹⁰ and with

²⁰⁸ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 172

²⁰⁹ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 159

²¹⁰ Douglas Massey, "International Migration: Prospects and Policies in a Global Market." 12.; Calavita, *Inside the State*. 172.

their employers written promise of employment, thousands of *bracero* “graduates” returned to their jobs in the mid and late 1960s.²¹¹

The Bracero Program’s attempt to institutionalize and legitimate the flow of disposable Mexican labor, left behind foundational near-colonial systems of importation, housing, segregation and migration that growers and immigration officials were able to continue to utilize even after the program’s eventual termination.²¹² As the program came to an end, all growers and immigration officials needed to do was to find a way to continue the legal importation of labor and these systems would do with these laborers what they had done to *braceros*, capture, segregate, isolate, and exploit them. As such the termination of the Bracero Program brought forth a refurbished system that depended on the exploitation not of *braceros* but of “green-card commuters.” This system allowed growers not only to regain their *bracero* workers after the programs demies, but also produced new workers that would tend to the fields for generations to come. Indeed, not only did the *bracero* return to his employer with permanent residency in hand but he did so in multiples, introducing not only himself back into these despotic circuits of labor, but introducing his wife and children as well. This new system of labor importation now produced entire families that filled the labor needs of growers, radically transforming the human landscape of agricultural labor from one that was exclusively male-dependent during the *bracero* era, to one that was family-dependent. Indeed, this shift produced a

²¹¹ Robert J. Thomas, *Citizenship, Gender and Work: Social Organization of Industrial Agriculture*. 1985. 75.

²¹² Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 13.

marginalized “agricultural proletariat” that was not only self-sustaining but self-reproducing.²¹³

As illustrated in the interviews above, the children of *bracero*’s began to labor in a variety of ways and very early upon their arrival to the United States. In *Abrazando El Espiritu*, Ana Elizabeth Rosas notes that during the Bracero Program, entire transnational Mexican families were shaped by family separations across borders, leading to different forms of labor being distributed across the family.²¹⁴ While the Mexican patriarch labored in the United States, Mexican wives and children had to perform different kinds of labor in order to maintain the family in his absence. Thus, the Bracero Program’s severe overdependence of the labor of entire Mexican families led to families feeling like they all worked as *braceros* themselves.²¹⁵ These forms of family labor did not end after the termination of the program, however. As the program came to a close and growers sought to regain their workers, entire transnational families migrated to the United States with their *bracero* patriarchs, producing new laborers. Indeed, as the transnational family crossed the border and became contracted as agricultural laborers themselves, these families did not simply *feel* like they all worked as *braceros* but essentially became *braceros* themselves.

²¹³ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 13.

²¹⁴ Rosas, Ana Elizabeth, et al. *Abrazando El Espiritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*. 2014. 7

²¹⁵ Rosas, *Abrazando El Espiritu*. 5.

As Yolanda explains in her interview, when she arrived to the United States with her parents and siblings, she was contracted by the same employer that had contracted her father during his time as a *bracero*. As such, almost immediately after arriving to the United States Yolanda joined her parents in the fields. As each sibling reached a certain age, they were all contracted by the very same grower.²¹⁶ Not only was Yolanda expected to labor as an adult in the fields despite being only a child but she was formally contracted and had wages deducted from her earnings in ways that were reminiscent of the Bracero Program. She was not alone in her experience as a child laborer, as Catalina recalled working after arriving to the United States as well.²¹⁷ However, while both women recall working in the fields, this was not the only kind of job they were assigned.

As Yolanda explains, not only was she responsible for working in the fields alongside her parents, but she was also responsible for taking care of her younger siblings at the same time. As such, not only did this refurbished system produce new sets of laborers but it also produced *new forms of gendered labor* on which the reproduction of future laborers relied. As Yolanda recalls, not only did a typical work day consist of her picking, but it involved her juggling both forms of labor in order to ensure the family's survival, in discussing this she recalled constructing a hammock-like "crib" between two trees, allowing her to rock her siblings to sleep while she worked.²¹⁸ Catalina as well recalls taking care of children when she was not picking in the fields with her parents. In

²¹⁶ As discussed on page 11.

²¹⁷ As discussed on page 25.

²¹⁸ As discussed on page 11.

discussing this she states; “Even when there wasn’t a lot of work, *I don’t know why but they would give us little children to take care of* [emphasis added].” In this case Catalina was not just responsible for taking care of her own younger siblings but she was also responsible for taking care of other people’s children while they picked in the fields. Indeed, the “they” is nonspecific, and in listening to her interview once more I am unsure if she meant that other families gave her children to take care of, or if her bosses assigned her children to take care of. Regardless, the reliance on young girl-children to perform gendered forms of labor is significant, as it produced them not only as workers themselves, but as caretakers ensuring the survival and production of future laborers as well.

In line with the experiences expressed by both Catalina and Yolanda, Rosa as well recalled caring for small children. While she was spared the experience of working in the fields at such an early age due to the migration of several of her family members during the time she arrived to the United States, she was nonetheless responsible for taking care of children despite being just a child herself. Unlike her younger brother, who was allowed to go to school, Rosa was not given the same opportunity despite the fact that her farm work was not essential to the survival of her family. Instead, she was forced to take on the role of a caregiver, taking care of her nieces and nephews while the adults in her family picked and her youngest brother went to school.

In all three cases, the daughters of former *braceros* were all responsible for the gendered labor of mothering children slightly younger than themselves at a very young

age, some of them forced to pick in the fields as well. The reproduction of gendered labors of care that fell on the shoulders of young girls worked to produce a distinct role for them among the *bracero* family economy; they were to aid in the reproduction of future laborers. These girl children had to learn to mother their own siblings and other children while their own mother labored in the fields, her adult body able to work quicker and harder alongside her husband. As such, girl children like Yolanda, Rosa and Catalina were in charge of not only ensuring the survival of younger children but they were also responsible for the survival of those who would someday become agricultural laborers themselves.

Indeed, this shift from depending on the married male laborer who toiled in the fields for a family back in his home country, to an economy that depended on the gendered care work and the picking of women and girls marked a stark change in the human landscape of agricultural labor, one that relied on the reproduction and rearing of future workers who would continue the farmworker's inheritance of labor. While the Bracero Program depended on the male workers labor, this new system of dependence on the family unit of green-card commuters *relied on the explicit and exhaustive labor of women and girls to sustain it.*

In my interview with Yolanda, she recalled being a child and her mother attempting to make her look older so that she could also work in the fields without

issue.²¹⁹ As such, the *bracero*'s daughter not only had to be an adult worker despite being a child, but also had to become a woman before reaching womanhood. Indeed, in this case not only did this refurbished system of Mexican labor exploitation produce out of children adult laborers but made out of girl-children women and mothers, who were forced to supplement their own mothers' absence from the home.

Whether it was the gendered labor of child care—one that worked to supplement the absence of their mother as she worked in the fields herself—or the labor of picking in the fields along with their parents, these forms of labor were meant to sustain the family in the face of great disempowerment, exploitation and family need. Yet, these forms of labor also aided in the continued production of future laborers, making the family a self-sustaining network of workers who would ensure that the fields would have future workers to tend to it. Indeed, the shift away from the exclusively male laborer to the laboring family thus helped produce for growers, generations of future agricultural laborers who would be swept up in the currents of migratory labor and would find the prospects of agricultural labor inescapable.

However, this new refurbished system did not only re-organize the roles of members in the Mexican farmworker family but this system also reorganized the entire family's life so that it revolved completely around the sheer prospect of labor, producing not only agricultural labor as a family affair but producing a routinized circular migration

²¹⁹ As referenced during her interview on page 12.

that completely dominated their lives, entrapping the *braceros* children in agricultural labor.

Circular Migration and the Inescapability of Labor

One of the most despotical and dehumanizing feats of the Bracero Program was its production of captive guest-workers whose lives were completely reorganized around labor and whose human needs were institutionally neglected. In the wake of the program's demise the utilization of the "green-card commuter" had a similar advantage for growers. As reflected in the stories shared by the women interviewed, green-card commuter families acted as circular migrants who worked in the United States seasonally only to return with their savings to Mexico during the off seasons when they simply could not afford to continue living in the United States.²²⁰ These migration streams rendered green-card commuter families temporary despite their permanent legal status²²¹ and while these temporary conditions were a massive advantage for growers, the human cost of this way of life was devastating. This constant migration produced overwhelming forms of permanent instability that these families could not break free from, resulting in families that were perpetually "caught" in an endless cycle of migration. This endless

²²⁰ Chávez, Sergio R. *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants and Commuters in Tijuana*. 2016.; 28, Martin Escobar, Agustin Latapí., and Susan Forbes. *Mexico-U.S. Migration Management: A Binational Approach*. Program in Migration and Refugee Studies. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008. 284.

²²¹ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 165.

circular migration kept families from putting down roots, providing their children with consistent schooling and ensured that parents would not find alternative opportunities for employment, entrapping entire families within the violence of agricultural labor. Like the continuous shuffling of laborers during the Bracero Program that brought growers great economic successes, this “green-card commuter system” relied on the coerced and unyielding “flexibility” of Mexican families who were forced to forgo their basic human desires of stability, friendship and community in exchange for bare subsistence.

In her interview, third-generation farmworker Yolanda discussed the presence of this circular migration in her life as the daughter of a *bracero* at great length, detailing the ways in which this routinized flow of everyday life impacted her childhood and the ways in which it produced a constant sense of instability and loneliness for her. Indeed, Yolanda recalls these memories with great sadness, the overwhelming responsibility of being a laborer instead of a child robbing her of many of the luxuries usually associated with childhood. The complete and utter reorganization of her life as a migrant child and as a worker produced conditions of great disempowerment, instability and loneliness for her not unlike the isolation experienced by *braceros* during the Bracero Program. The constant migration from Watsonville, to Santa Maria, to Oxnard—and then from the U.S. to Mexico and back again— meant that she was always prevented from forming friendships and doing literally anything else other than prioritize work. Even when she and her family relocated to Mexico for 3 or 4 months during the off seasons and she was not working, she wasn’t able to truly dedicate any time to school or making friends,

because just as she was settling into this new flow of everyday life, she was uprooted once more.

The overpowering currents of harvest migration produced for Yolanda a life that prioritized labor and bare survival over all other human needs and desires. This necessity produced a life in which simply “living”—or simply not working every single day for over 10 hours a day—was a luxury and, in which work—whether it was the work of mothering or the work of picking—was the priority. Indeed, the continuous uprooting from place and space resulted in an extremely isolating and lonely life for Yolanda growing up, demanding from her and her family an inhumane level of flexibility. These migration flows, produced by growers seeking the always elastic labor of Mexican workers, were followed due to the family’s sheer need for survival, resulting in labor currents that were inescapable, producing Yolanda, her family and others like them as workers and nothing else.

She notes later on in her interview, that as she grew older she did become accustomed to this constant migration and that moving from one city to another became almost fun. When she eventually had children of her own however, she began to realize how much it was impacting them as well but by this time there was just nothing she could do; this way of life had been naturalized because it was necessary for survival. Indeed, this routinized migration and uprooting had become normal for Yolanda as she grew up, her entire life organized around the following of an established migration route. But as she came to have children of her own, the same unrealistic flexibility was demanded of

them. Indeed, their complaints were similar to her own as a child, the constant migration robbing them of their abilities to make and maintain friendships and forcing them into a life that revolved completely around agricultural labor.

In her interview, Catalina also recalled these routinized migratory patterns and the ways in which they impact her own children, detailing the way in which this migratory life made giving them a proper education incredibly difficult. Instead of moving from city to city, Catalina and her family lived in the Buena Vista Migrant Labor Camp in Watsonville, California. This camp was a state-sponsored labor in camp in which farmworker families could live for \$28 a month. While this camp provided affordable housing for migrant workers, it was also only open for 6 months at a time, forcing migrants to move at least 50 miles away from the camp for half of the year that the nearby crops were not in season. For Catalina and her family this meant that they had to move to Mexico during this time, spending what little money they had saved up in Mexico while waiting for the harvests to come back into season again. Indeed, she notes that there was *no other choice* for her and her family but to return to Mexico during the off seasons because she and her husband simply could not afford to go from a \$28 monthly rent to a \$1000 monthly rent and support their children if there was no longer any work for them. As a result, she and her husband were forced to uproot their children for 6 months out of the year in the same way she was uprooted as a child. This “custom” as she calls it, was something that she recalled all farmworker families doing at the

time.²²² These migration patterns became naturalized parts of life driven by economic necessity, resulting in families that were unable to break free of these currents that continuously uprooted entire families and pushed them from one side of the border to the other.

This constant migration and reorganization of life around labor impacted the women interviewed not only in their ability to have a childhood, make friends or keep their children in school, however. These routinized migration currents also impacted their abilities to mother their children in ways they desired. Indeed, as Yolanda painfully explained, labor was such a dominating part of her life that it severely impacted her ability to be a mother. Indeed, in her interview, Yolanda recalls having to work during her first pregnancy and losing her first child as a result. The inescapability of work and the necessity to survive, resulted in Yolanda not only working through her pregnancies, risking the loss of her children, and returning to work soon after giving birth, but it also resulted in her inability to mother her children the way she wanted to once they were born.²²³ The inescapability of labor and the sheer amount of time it claimed from her day was devastating for Yolanda, as she was forced to prioritize it over her own children. In sharing this with me, she was overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame, feeling as if she had failed her children as a mother. Work was such a totalizing force in her life that she recalls not even having the time to talk to them, much less play with them. Yet, the lack of these “good memories” she insists was not because she did not want to spend time

²²² As discussed on page 28.

²²³ As discussed on page 16.

with them, but simply because she *could not* spend time with them. When she divorced her first husband for being physically abusive to her however, the responsibility of ensuring her children's survival was even heavier. After her divorce labor became an even bigger part of her life, totalizing her days and her nights as she was forced to work even harder than before in order to support her children, working in the fields during the day and returning to the same fields during the night.

Agricultural labor was inescapable for Yolanda, taking up nearly every hour of the day and night but because it was the only means through which she was able to ensure the survival of herself and her children, she continued to work. This inescapability of labor and the sheer level of instability that resulted from necessary migration greatly impacted the lives these women were able to have as children and as adults, forcing them to always prioritize labor and subsistence over all else. Indeed, these migration currents and the inescapability of labor produced conditions in which commuter families were not allowed to simply exist or provide for themselves basic human needs, but rather forced them to settle for bare life.

This life produced conditions in which the migrant family was coerced into performing a hyper-flexibility that reorganized their lives around labor, coercing them into migration streams that trapped them and made it impossible for them to find alternative ways of living. These migration patterns reorganized family life, producing agricultural labor as not only a family affair but as something that completely dominated their lives. Indeed, because the family needed to survive, they became caught in these

migratory currents, in a way of life that left no time in the day to do or be anything other than a low-wage, exploited worker. Yet, this did not only impact these women's chances of leaving agricultural labor and finding other means of employment, but also limited their abilities to utilize their status as permanent legal residents and work toward participating in the national polity. Indeed, these restrictive flows of everyday life were the perfect ways to ensure that green-card commuters would lay down few roots, would not threaten to touch the nation and would work to produce them as forever foreign and always outside of the nation.

Always the Worker, Never the Citizen

In 1911, the Dillingham Immigration Commission noted that the special advantages of Mexican immigration were due to Mexican people's "strong attachment to their native land" which resulted in few Mexicans becoming citizens of the United States. Mexican migrant workers, they argued, proved to be a "fairly adequate supply of labor" and while they were "not easily assimilated, this is of no very great importance as long as most of them return to their native land." Indeed, the Dillingham Immigration Commission concluded that "in the case of the Mexican, he is less desirable as a citizen than as a laborer." The Bracero Program was thus a perfect project for producing the Mexican laborer as just that—a laborer with no chance of ever becoming a citizen. In the wake of the program's termination however, the "green-card commuter" became the next

best option for growers and the INS in adding workers to the labor pool without adding citizens to the nation.

Much like the guest worker laboring under the Bracero Program, the *braceros* of this generation were temporary despite their permanent legal status, putting down “relatively few ties in the communities” in which they worked and “carrying few social or economic costs for those communities.” Indeed, these commuter families in many ways represented a labor supply “stripped of most of its human needs”²²⁴ whose migratory life did little to aid in their settlement within the United States and rendered them virtually invisible. Indeed, the “green-card commuter” was an even more ideal source of disposable labor for growers, who using this status were able to produce *bracero*-like guest-workers out of permanent legal residents. The use of these commuter workers helped produce workers who were present when needed and that would return to Mexico when the work was over, not adding to the permanent population and not transforming the racial landscape of the nation. This circular migration and the reorganization of the Mexican family’s life around labor greatly impacted the chances green-card commuters had of not only leaving agricultural labor and finding other means of employment, but also limited their abilities to participate in the national polity. Indeed, these restrictive flows of everyday life were the perfect ways to ensure that green-card commuters would lay down few roots and would not have the chance to participate in the

²²⁴ Calavita, *Inside the State*. 165.

national polity, producing the green card commuter as always foreign and always outside of the imagined nation.

These instances of forced migration and the reorganization of the lives of green-card commuter families greatly limited their abilities to access any sense of belonging within the United States and insured their inability to access cultural, affective or legal forms of citizenship. Not only were migrants unable to settle down, but they were also unable to develop the cultural and social knowledge necessary to someday participate in the political processes of the country they were now permanent legal residents of. The persistent presence of circular migration, housing segregation, and a life that revolved around labor meant that they were constantly alienated from the broader American population and insured that these migrants and racial outsiders would not “touch” the nation. Green-card commuter families instead existed as invisible workers, whose presence was so inconsistent and isolated from the American population that they simply did not exist politically or culturally. Indeed, as Yolanda notes in her interview, not only did working in the fields literally take up all of her time, leaving none for herself or her children, it also greatly limited her ability to learn English or work on attaining her citizenship. In recalling her childhood, Yolanda notes that she was never able to go to school because from the first day she arrives, she was here to work.

The complete domination of agricultural labor in Yolanda’s life left no time for her and others like her to negotiate their presence as racial and national outsiders in the United States. Indeed, the fact that her life and the lives of so many farmworkers

revolved around an employment that took up 10 to 12 hours of her day and left no time for her to recover, meant that she was not able to exist as anything but a worker, much less a mother or a person who could engage her rights as a permanent legal resident and pursue a path to citizenship.

Yolanda's inability to find any sense of belonging in the United States and the overwhelmingly disempowering effects of farmwork left her always feeling alienated, her racial distinctiveness, language and employment marking her as always outside of the nation and as a permanent racial outsider. In her interview, she confesses that she never really wanted to settle in the United States but instead had hoped that she would be able to save up money, build her own home in Mexico and settle down there permanently.

I never liked how they treated me here. I always felt like they didn't treat me like a human; "Just work!" and they didn't care what happened to me... I always felt like I had to look down when the bosses were there. I always felt less than.

Not only did this refurbished system of labor importation and exploitation produce Mexicans as always laborers and never citizens, but these systems of circulatory migration, national exclusion and constant uprooting also produced these families as permanent racial outsiders with little prospects for improving their lives and leaving the viciously cyclical nature of agricultural labor. Yet, these feelings of alienation, exclusion

and the lack of cultural knowledge was something that did not simply impact those that migrated to the United States as green-card commuters. These feelings of permanent alienation and the inescapability of agricultural labor was inherited, impacting the life chances of their children as well. Indeed, the culmination of these forms of disempowerment, entrapment and alienation all served to produce the *bracero* family not only as an agricultural working class but as permanent low-wage, exploitable workers with little claim to national belonging.²²⁵

The Production of a Permanent Racial Underclass

The circular migration and permanent displacement of children that was so routinized, resulted in generations of Mexican people produced as low-wage laborers always outside of the national polity. Indeed, these routinized flows of labor that trapped first the *bracero* and then soon after his family within the confines of agricultural labor worked to ensure the production of generations of laborers who would see little opportunity for survival outside of the realm of agricultural work. As such, much like circular migration and the prioritization of labor impacted the lives of the women interviewed, this inescapability significantly impacted their children's lives as well, greatly limiting their social and economic mobility and their feeling of affective and cultural belonging. Constant migration from the U.S. to Mexico and then back again

²²⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 129.

meant that children in these migrant families had to be pulled from school for half of the year and as a result had to do without the traditional education that other children received in the United States. This constant interruption severely impacted not only their academic successes and abilities to develop feelings of social, affective and national belonging, but also greatly affected their chances at breaking out of these pervasive cycles of migration. Indeed, this continuous uprooting and inability to catch up linguistically, academically or socially greatly impacted their life chances as they grew into adults, routinized flows of labor producing not only a trapped agricultural working class out of the *bracero*, his wife and his children, but producing a permanent racial underclass out of his grandchildren as well.

In her interview, Yolanda discussed how the constant back and forth between Mexico and the United States meant that her children had to do without the traditional education that other American children received. This meant that not only were they not able to do well in school, but they were not able to cultivate friendships or other networks that encouraged feelings of group belonging. The inability to make or maintain friendships meant that these children were unable to acclimate to the United States or pick up cultural knowledges that would have made navigating the United States and negotiating their presence as immigrant children easier, meaning that as adults they would continue to feel like national and racial outsiders in a country to which they presumably belonged. This constant uprooting also severely impacted their grades, worsening their chances at finding employment outside of the realm of agricultural labor

as adults. In her interview, Catalina notes that one of the consequences of pulling her children out of school so often and for so long, was that when they returned to the United States during the harvest seasons her children would always be more and more behind in their schooling compared to other children, their 6 month absences from school adding up quickly year after year. As such, Catalina notes that once her children grew up and got married, they were forced to do what they could with what little education they received as children, looking for employment that did not require “the entire year of school.” This limited greatly their employment opportunities, leaving them the only option of making due with what employment was available.

Catalina does note however, that despite these restrictive conditions, her children were able to break out of the world of agricultural labor. After having lived their childhoods as migrant children unable to access consistent schooling, Catalina’s children were able to find significant others, marry and finally settle down with their own families. This act of settling down allowed them then to pursue employment opportunities that were different from their mothers and allowed a majority of them to find forms of employment that did not demand of them the unyielding flexibility that had been demanded of their mother or grandparents. Catalina does note, however, that before this point, some of them had begun to work as pickers for some time during their childhood. However, Catalina believed that this short experience in stoop labor that her son and daughter had experienced served to teach them about the kind of labor her mother performed on a day to day basis, a labor they were to avoid at all cost. Indeed, Catalina

viewed this experience as one that taught her children both the value of their mother's work and the value of a good education which motivated them to pursue other job opportunities later on in life. Indeed, for her, her children's dedication to getting an education, even if it was irregular, proved to be the key to breaking out of these cycles of forced circular migration and the totalizing nature of agricultural labor. While the jobs her children were able to eventually attain were perhaps not her children's first choice and were not "well-paid" as Catalina says, they were jobs that afford her children freedoms that she never had when she was their age, freedoms that resulted in wages at or slightly above minimum wage and the opportunity to settle down and build stable lives. Indeed, despite these jobs not being her children's ideal jobs, they offered them freedom away from the entrapment of agricultural labor and circular migration and for Catalina that was what was the most important.

However, despite the belief that going to school would be the pathway to a better life and a successful career, even some of those children that graduated from high school and earned high marks sometimes were not able to escape the world of agricultural labor in which they grew up. Yolanda notes that her eldest son began working as a farmworker at the age of 12, hoping to help around the house by bringing home groceries with the little income he made. While originally this labor had been a temporary solution for him, as he grew older he found himself often coming back to agricultural labor throughout his life, despite having graduated from high school and having done well academically. Indeed, despite having had opportunities she never did as a child, her son had ended up working

in agricultural labor for the majority of his adult life. Indeed, for Yolanda's eldest son, education unfortunately did not prove to be the key to new occupation opportunities, and despite his consistently high grades in school, he still continues to work in agricultural labor to this day.

Rosa's experiences were similar, of her three children, two of them were unemployed at the time we conducted our interview. Her son has previously worked as an inspector for a local grower checking picked strawberries for quality control. However, Rosa notes that he was not there long because he ended up not liking the job very much. Indeed, he quit and was unemployed at the time we spoke. Her youngest daughter, was also unemployed and her oldest daughter, she informed me, worked at a local jewelry store. Indeed, while one of her daughters managed to find a job outside of agricultural labor, which she was deeply grateful for, this job was a minimum wage position with unfortunately few prospects for advancement.

In exploring the employment opportunities presented for the children of green-card commuters, the effects of continued displacement, migration and lack of consistent education are apparent. Indeed, the *bracero* and green-card commuter family's entrapment in currents of agricultural labor greatly restricted their social and economic mobility, locking the family into limited opportunities for multiple generations and producing out of the *bracero* family a permanent racial underclass that continues to labor in various forms of low-wage employment.

Indeed, while former *braceros* and their children were trapped within agricultural labor—compulsory migration currents and the dominating force of agricultural labor placing great limitations on a family lucky to attain bare subsistence—many *bracero* grandchildren were able to find occupational opportunities that allowed them to break free of these patterns of agricultural labor and circular migration. However, while some of these grandchildren were able to break free, still some found themselves unemployed or with limited occupation opportunities that required little schooling and typically paid them low-wages. Indeed, *bracero* grandchildren—the majority of whom were U.S. citizens and spoke fluent conversational English—still dealt with the consequences of the life forced upon their parents and grandparents and made up yet another exploitable population of low-wage and racially alienated laborers.

The migration currents and the overwhelming presence of agricultural labor in the lives of green-card commuters and their children produced conditions in which agricultural labor and service work were the only available options for employment, producing out of Mexican people, permanent low-wage workers still coping with the consequences of generations of exploitation and national exclusion. In line with the Dillingham Immigration Commission assessment in 1911, Mexican were historically valuable as *laborers as opposed to citizens*. In this sense, the Bracero Program and the green-card commuter system that replaced it succeeded in producing this particular Mexican population as a permanent racial underclass, taking a single *bracero* and producing multiple generations of low-wage workers and racially alienated outsiders.

Indeed, entrapped by agricultural labor, racial exclusion and constant migration, the *bracero* and his descendants were constructed through a combined effort between capital and the state as workers before they were even imagined as people.

Conclusion

The Bracero Program was the first attempt at institutionalizing the mass importation of Mexican peoples as laborers for growers. Indeed, this successful twenty-two year program set the stage for a refurbished system of importation in which growers continued to import *braceros* in the form of green-card commuters. The Bracero Program worked to institutionalize the importation of Mexican laborers, producing them as laborers and stripping them of their humanity. Indeed, the program's colonial construction of Mexican men as racially inferior, timid, docile and most of all, unyieldingly flexible reproduced Mexican men as racialized commodities, as animal-like and ready to be worked in the agricultural fields of the Southwest.

After the termination of the program in 1964, the system meant to replace it—the green-card commuter system—allowed growers to continue this routinized labor importation, this time importing not only married men, but entire families. This importation of Mexican families was useful as it allowed growers to produce entire groups of temporary workers who would reproduce the labor force in abundance. Indeed, the shift away from the male-centered Bracero Program to the family-centered green-card

commuter system allowed entire families to rear future workers, trapping them in flows of circular migration and limiting their prospects to agricultural labor.

These migration flows and the reorganization of life around agricultural labor thus produced generations of workers, some who would remain bound to the land in which they toiled and some who, if lucky, would break out of agricultural labor and supplement the service industry. The legacy of the Bracero Program and agribusiness's overreliance on the exploitation of these Mexican communities ensured the production of a community of permanent racial outsiders with few claims to cultural, affective or legal citizenship. The long-term effects of the Bracero Program are thus in its production of a dependable, precarious and nationally excluded labor pool that would be maintained as a permanent racial underclass for generations to come.

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CONCLUSION

As the granddaughter of a former *bracero* and the daughter of an agricultural laborer who dedicated nearly her entire life to working in the strawberry fields, this project hit home for me in many ways. Engaging in such a community oriented research method lead me back to a home I had not visited in many years, returning me to a time in my life I had nearly forgotten.

My mother migrated to the United States when she was very young and like the women interviewed for this project, worked as a strawberry picker almost her entire life, yielding only when she could no longer withstand the sheer impact the work was leaving behind on her body and spirit. My father immigrated later in his life, crossing the border without documentation but finding other means of making a living, eventually learning English, getting his GED and working as a truck driver for a nursery. Indeed, from the very beginning of his time in the United States, my father's immigration experience was one that was not bound to agricultural labor through transnational inheritance like my mother was, allowing him to find employment outside of agricultural labor. As the daughter of a former *bracero* and a "green-card commuter," my mother did not have these opportunities.

As such, she worked 10 hours a day, laboring in all weather, in the lush green strawberry fields of the Salinas Valley I would associate with her for the rest of my life. Agricultural labor dominated both of our lives, our morning routine occurring like

clockwork for many years. When I was three or four years old she would wake me up at 5 in the morning, before the sun even rose into the sky, her face wearing a permanent tired smile. She would get me dressed, pack me some snacks and a bean and *queso fresco* burrito wrapped in foil. She would then carry me, still half asleep, to her beat down car to drive me to my grandmother's house. She would walk me in, my eyes still clouded with sleep, the sky still dark, the air sharp on my skin. She would give me a long hug, a kiss on the cheek and before I knew it, her warm embrace was gone and I was left in my grandmothers living room, the endless chatter of children's movies in the background lulling me back to sleep.

The day would rush by quickly, children trickling in through the door throughout the morning, their mothers embracing them and parting ways, dressed almost identically to my mother. Indeed, they wore those same faded light blue jeans and loose-fitting flannels shirts, their hair always tied back tightly with colorful paisley bandanas. My grandmother was in charge of taking care of us while our mothers worked, supplementing for the lack of formal daycare services available to women not living in the Buena Vista Migrant Camp anymore. She took care of my cousins, myself and even a handful children I did not know as our mothers went to toil in the fields. The day would go by quickly, my grandmother preparing us the snacks our mothers had left behind with us—always sneaking myself and my cousins a little extra from her own kitchen, as if to gently remind us that we were kin.

Mothers would trickle in through the door at around 6 in the evening, just after the sun had set and the sky had becoming dark. They arrived dressed exactly the same, the only difference being that their previously clean and neat clothes had become wrinkled and caked with mud from a long days' work. Their smiles were even more tired, the day having worn them down to the bone. My mother would arrive then, the sky dark and the air cold and crisp, just like the morning in which she left me. I never did understand why her clothes looked like that or why she looked so tired but I never asked, I was just grateful to be going home after a long day away. I didn't understand then the kind of sacrifices she had to make for me.

This was the routine that was established for us for the first few years of my life, my first memories of my mother consisting of her, in the same few outfits, clean in the morning and covered in mud at night. Her expressions always tired, her eyes always slightly sunken in.

"Well we don't see you mom... you take us at night and you pick us up at night."

Those words resonate with me in their innocence, in how much I relate to them. I never saw my mother growing up, my few memories of her consisting of her wearing her work on her body, the red stain of strawberry juice on her skin, the mud cracked into her clothes. As I got slightly older, I managed to spend more time with her but this was a result of the health problems agricultural labor had begun to bring to her body. At 7 years old, I stood at a receptionist's desk explaining to a white woman that my mother had lost

her voice and some of her vision because she had been sprayed with pesticides while picking at work and that she needed to see a doctor. At seven years old, I remember being both her eyes and her voice, navigating the complexities of white and Mexican immigrant relations, the effects of labor on her body bringing us closer together in a very heartbreaking way. As I grew older, the effects of agricultural labor began to display themselves more and more on her body. Her hands and feet developed carpal tunnel, the cartilage in her knees and ankles wearing down to the bone, her back developing a series of devastating injuries. Surgeries upon surgeries left their marks on her body, the pain never going away, the scars reminding us of the cost of our survival.

Agricultural labor had reorganized my mother's life, dominated her body and spirit and had taken so much from her, and in a way, taken so much from me.

My motivation for this research was partially as a result of my own history as the granddaughter of a *bracero* and the daughter of a long-time farmworker. Indeed, a part of my motivation was the desire to learn more about my community's own histories and a desire to see those histories, experiences and voices represented in mainstream academic work about the Bracero Program. The other motivations were of course the political discourses occurring in the current historical moment in regard to myself and my community. Indeed, the contradictory relationships between nationalist desires to scapegoat immigrant Latino communities, whose presence in the United States has often

been related to capital's desires for the labor of exploitable and precarious workers, have become louder during our current political moment. As such, this research was not only an attempt to center the experiences of those who have been historically exploited and whose voices have been subjugated but this project was also an attempt to gesture towards the ideological and historical contradictions between nationalist feelings of abjection towards the Mexican immigrant's presence and that of capital's persistent and insatiable desire to seek out, discipline and accumulate Mexican labor. Indeed, nationalist discourses like the sign displayed so proudly along Pacheco Pass Highway in the very heart and soul of California's agricultural industry makes these contradictions even more jarring given the Southwest's historical dependence on Mexican immigrant laborers.

As the current administration's desires to strengthen border security continues to put immigrant communities under even more surveillance and in even more danger of family separation, incarceration and other forms of physical violence, it is not a coincidence that rumblings of beginning a "new" Bracero Program have reverberated through various political avenues. In June of 2017, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue stated the following in a discussion pertaining to the resurrection of the 1940's guest worker program:

Not only are they [Mexicans] excellent day laborers and workers, they are honest people who want the opportunity to provide for their families, who want to enter and leave the United States freely to be able to do their jobs, but also

visit their native countries and to visit their families. And we seek to give them a legal way that they can carry out these activities... a legal guest worker program in the U.S., that would provide their citizens the opportunity to float freely, *seasonally, temporarily*, into the U.S. for the work and come back to visit their families in their homelands [emphasis added].²²⁶

While the agricultural industry continues to have access to the descendants of *braceros* and indeed, since the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, have continued to import temporary workers into the U.S. to do the “seasonal work that domestic workers cannot or are not willing to do,”²²⁷ the farming industry still relies heavily on undocumented workers, who are estimated to make up about half of the country’s 2.5 million agricultural laborers, according to the Labor Department. Indeed, the temporary H2-A visa program, with its bureaucratic red tape and slow processing times, is responsible for a mere fraction of the overall agricultural workforce and its slow processing times have gained the wrath of growers, who have called for an improved program.²²⁸ The H-2A program’s wait times have resulted in the agricultural industry’s emergence as a surprising supporter of “immigration reform” and in 2017, a bipartisan

²²⁶ Kausha Luna, “A New “Bracero program” May Be in the Works,” Center for Immigration Studies. <https://cis.org/Luna/New-Bracero-Program-May-Be-Works>.

²²⁷ Farmworker Justice, “No Way to Treat a Guest: Why the H-2 Agricultural Visa Program Fails U.S. and Foreign Workers,” 13.

²²⁸ Kausha Luna, “A New Bracero Program” May Be in the Works.” N.A.

group of Congress members calling for H-2A reform sent a letter to the Labor Department and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services leaders, asking them to streamline their guest worker visa process in order to allow quicker, more stable and indeed easier access to Mexican laborers.²²⁹ While growers continue to hire highly vulnerable undocumented workers, they—much like their counterparts in the 30s and 40s—may possibly fail to meet growers own desires for a completely captive and contract-bound workforce. If this is the case, then it may be of no surprise that as racist, anti-immigrant policy and rhetoric has reached a fever pitch, growers have used this political opportunity to call for the resurrection of the Bracero Program.

While the violent nativist rhetoric used by the current administration works to enforce feelings of white nationhood and bind white citizenships and feelings together, this rhetoric has simultaneously bolstered capital's chances at accessing their ideal captive Mexican laborers. Once again, just as we saw in the 1940's, we are called to witness the same balancing act that relies on the expulsion of the racial Other through violent acts of border securitization—indeed, the mass deportation raids occurring across the nation ring eerily similar to the violent raids so common during Operation Wetback—that placate the citizenry while allowing for alternative routes of labor importation for growers.²³⁰ Indeed, once again, we witness as racial tensions and racial expulsions come

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Calavita, Kitty. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S. Classics of Law & Society Series*. New Orleans, LA.: Quid Pro, 2010. 113.

together with the protection of capital's own interests, these seemingly contradictory desires—yet historically complimentary—are resolved in the end, just like they were in the 1940's, the solution negotiated once again through the strategic utilization of the Mexican body.

As the current administrations intentions continue to unravel and immigration restrictions are continued to be placed that produce more and more precarity for undocumented and documented Latino communities, we must look to these histories of political manipulation and the deeply disempowering effects of the Bracero Program to inform us, guide us and animate us into action.

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