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California's Bracero Program: Racializing and Legalizing Mexican Transportation

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Abstract

This paper re-examines California's Bracero Program (1942–1964) through the critical lens of transportation, arguing that it served not merely as a logistical necessity but as a crucial site of systemic exploitation and racialized harm. While scholarships often focused on other aspects of labor abuse, this piece centers on transportation-related injuries, culminating in the tragic 1963 Chualar accident, as a potent manifestation of racial capitalism and state neglect. Oftentimes, privatized transportation infrastructure contributed to both the physical vulnerability and symbolic dehumanization of Mexican laborers, as a direct result of agribusiness's pursuit of profit. By reframing mobility as a key mechanism of control and marginalization, this analysis challenges the historiographical silence surrounding transportation and deepens our understanding of labor exploitation within the Bracero Program.

Keywords: Bracero Program, California, Chualar Tragedy, Mexican Migration, Operation Wetback, Pub L. 78

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Introduction

The Mexican Farm Labor Agreement (1942-1964), referred to as the Bracero Program, is frequently oversimplified as merely a bilateral understanding between the United States and Mexico. The goal was to educate Mexican farmers about American agricultural techniques while supplying the U.S. with affordable farm labor. However, in practice, braceros were often subjected to perilous and exploitative conditions echoing slavery. Recently, there has been a general lack of awareness regarding the program, which suffers from a "historical amnesia."[2] While considerable research was conducted during this period and continues to this day, historians—both past and present—have failed to address specific aspects that deserve further investigation and clarification. A prime example is the development and influence of transportation infrastructure.

Transportation's centrality to the Bracero Program was not merely logistical; it was a key site where the racialized nature of capitalist exploitation was enacted and maintained. Without transportation, the usage of inexpensive Mexican labor, a cornerstone of the program's profitability for agribusiness, would have been impossible. Furthermore, this infrastructure served dual purposes: for braceros, it offered economic and social mobility, and for agribusiness, it provided profitable labor.[3] However, this need for cheap labor mirrored a pattern of neglect similar to other provisions—housing, sanitation, and healthcare.[4] During the program's implementation in California, there were numerous accidents, often leading to serious injuries or fatalities. Yet, agribusiness and state officials dismissed these incidents as mere occurrences.[5] The situation became so widespread that the California legislature sought to establish a minimum standard of care, but this, too, was ignored by both state agents and agribusiness. This negligence culminated in the 1963 Chualar Tragedy in Salinas, California, which claimed the lives of thirty-two braceros, making it impossible for the U.S. government and public to overlook the systemic neglect any longer.[6] While the Bracero Program's practices and California's involvement have been extensively studied, viewing transportation through a racial capitalist perspective reveals that bracero

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[2] Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*. (UNC Press Books, 2011); Jesse Esparza, "The Roots of Oppression: Worker Exploitation, Survival, and Storytelling of the Bracero Program." *East Texas Historical Journal* 59, Vol 59: Issue 1, Article 4. 21; Varden Fuller, "A New Era for Farm Labor?" *Industrial Relations* 6, no. 3 (1976): 286-290; Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom*. (UNC Press Books, 2016); Neil Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014: 126. All the noted sources overtly discuss the positives of the Bracero Program for workers and businesses.

[3] Penalosa, Fernando, and Edward C. McDonagh. "Social Mobility in a Mexican-American Community." *Social Forces* 44, no. 4 (1966): 498–505.

[4] Henry Pope Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*. The Chicano Heritage. New York; 4: Arno Press, 1976. Anderson's book was originally presented in Congress, focusing primarily on housing, sanitation, and healthcare mistreatment.

[5] Esparza, *The Roots of Oppression*, 27; Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America*, 128.

[6] "Inquiry Vowed in Salinas Crash." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995),* Sep 19, 1963; Juan D. Martinez, "Bracero Memorial Highway." *Bracero History Archive*; Meléndez Salinas, Claudia. 'BRACERO PROGRAM Attorney recalls '63 Chualar tragedy - Robert Ames defended driver of bus that carried 32 to their deaths." *Monterey County Herald, The (CA)*, September 18, 2016: 1. *NewsBank: Access World News Research Collection*.

mobility was intentionally designed to enhance agribusiness profits and maintain the disposability of Mexican workers.[7]

Historiographical Silence in Bracero Mobility

As previously mentioned, the Bracero Program has been thoroughly documented, analyzed, and neatly complicated. However, scholarly discussions have predominantly focused on the program's humanitarian concerns regarding health, living conditions, immigration, and union activities. Seminal works by Debora Cohen, Mireya Loza, and Frank Bardacke have explored the various structural and widespread factors contributing to labor exploitation and the experiences of braceros, influenced by state policies and transnational identities.[8] While the foundational works of these scholars, and many others, highlight the racialized profiteering that took place during the program's implementation, they often relegate transportation infrastructure to a footnote or categorize it more broadly under "worker exploitation," thereby obscuring its critical role as a distinct and racialized mechanism within the racialized capitalist framework.

Research by Lori A. Florez, Niel Foley, and Mateo Carrillo has concentrated more on transportation infrastructure than work by other academics. Florez even allocated a chapter titled "A town Full of Dead Mexicans: The Salinas Valley Bracero Tragedy of 1963" in her book *Grounds for Dreaming* (2016), along with a separate article named "Slow and Sudden Deaths: Reflecting on the Chualar Tragedy of 1963 in Persisting Traumas of the Bracero Program" framing transportation as a continual issue.[9] Collectively, Carrillo, Florez, and Foley have framed bracero mobility and the negligence faced by braceros within the broader context of California and the widespread implementation of the program, but, barring subtextual references, they do not approach it through the lens of racial capitalism. In Cedric J. Robinson's *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance* (2019), Robinson describes racial capitalism as the mechanism by which economic systems take advantage of racial divisions to create profit and sustain power dynamics.[10] This concept is significant to the execution and implementation of the Bracero Program as it highlights systemic neglect, logistical demands, and how transportation was utilized to exploit and marginalize.

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[7] Cedric J. Robinson, "Fascism and the Intersections of Capitalism, Racialism, and Historical Consciousness," in *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. H. L. T. Quan (Pluto Press, 2019): 88–90.

[8] Cohen, *Braceros;* Loza, *Defiant Braceros*; Neil Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America*. Other notably written scholarship includes Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*. Verso Books, 2012; Esparza, *The Roots of Oppression*; N. Ray Gilmore and Gladys W. Gilmore, "The Bracero in California." *Pacific Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (1963); Andrew Kopkind, "The Grape Pickers' Strike: A New King of Labor War In California" *New Republic* 154, no. 5 (January 29, 1966); Lori A. Flores *Grounds for Dreaming*; Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Swords. "The Bracero Program, 1942–1964." In *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*, 3–24. University of Toronto Press, 2011.

[9] Lori A. Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (Yale University Press, 2016): 135-162; Lori A. Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths: Reflecting on the Chualar Tragedy of 1963 and the Persisting Traumas of the Bracero Program." *Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal* Vol. 19 No. 2 (2016): 79–85.

[10] Robinson, "Fascism and the Intersections of Capitalism, Racialism, and Historical Consciousness," 88-90.

The Bracero Program: Beyond Borders and Contracts

Beyond the lived experiences of exploitation and the symbolic devaluation of bracero labor through transportation, the Bracero Program's operational framework, including its transportation logistics, was itself a subject of varying interpretations and categories. Historians have constructed the program into three distinct phases from 1928 to 1964, while others concentrate exclusively on the formal U.S. contracts from 1942 to 1964, but all emphasize the contradiction between U.S. diplomatic assurances and the exploitation of labor.[11] Although the program was often defended as a solution to agricultural labor crises during World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War, historians and scholars have since argued that the perceived labor shortages were exaggerated.[12] Instead, agribusiness sectors took advantage of the wartime urgency to establish a dependable, compliant, and low-wage workforce.[13] This exaggeration was exacerbated by an accompanying urgency to regard the Bracero Program as a temporary and mutually beneficial arrangement.[14] The logistics surrounding bracero transportation obscured the delineation between federal regulatory oversight and privatized exploitation. Although the initial phases of transport were managed by U.S. agencies, which facilitated the movement of braceros via a subsidized railway from Mexico to the U.S. border and reception centers, subsequent transportation was largely privatized.

From the outset, braceros faced mobility as both a necessity for economic opportunity and a profound vulnerability. Many traversed considerable distances—from rural municipalities in Empalme, Michoacán, and Sonora—to processing centers, often possessing limited knowledge of their contractual rights and protections, making braceros susceptible to exploitation during transit and upon arrival. To be a bracero occasionally required bribes, and once accepted, agribusinesses misled braceros regarding their wages, often imposing deductions for essentials such as food, housing, and healthcare.[15] Upon their arrival in the United States, braceros were subjected to perilous working conditions, further compounded by unsafe transportation practices driven by agribusinesses seeking to maximize profits. The lives and safety of braceros were devalued to optimize cost, leading to frequent use of decommissioned school buses, stake-bed trucks, and other unsafe vehicles to transport laborers to their job sites.[16] This practice underscored that transportation was not solely a logistical matter; it was a vital and intentionally neglected mechanism within racial capitalism through which bracero labor was both physically endangered and symbolically devalued, reinforcing their marginalization and disposability. Public portrayals of braceros precariously clinging to the backs of trucks or packed into trailers were not mere observations; they were culturally potent visual elements that compounded the

[11] Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*; Esparza, "Roots of Oppression."
[12] Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths: Reflecting on the Chualar Tragedy of 1963 and the Persisting Traumas of the Bracero Program." 130; Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America*, 126, 132; John C. Williamson, "The Bracero Program and its Aftermath: An Historical Summary." April 1, 1965. Calisphere, The Regents of the University of California. 2.
[13] Esparza, "Roots of Oppression," 22-24.
[14] Cohen, *Braceros*, 53.
[15] Esparza, *The Roots of Oppression*, 27; Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America*, 128.
[16] Mateo Jesus Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration: Constructing Technologies and Mythologies of Mobility, 1940 to 1964." Dissertation, [Stanford, California]: 242-246.

devaluation of bracero labor, reinforcing negative stereotypes of Mexicans as transient, disorderly, and inferior.[17]

The Chualar Tragedy

> "They [braceros] are viewed as commodities, as objects, as chattels … the average bracero holder probably has less respect for his chattels than the average slaveholder had for his a hundred years ago … you *rent* a bracero for six weeks or six months, and if he gets damaged, you don't care. You'll never see him again. You get next year's model – a newer, younger, healthier one." – Henry Pope Anderson, Advisory Board of Citizens for Farm Labor.[18]

The culmination of systemic failures and the disregard for bracero lives throughout the program was repeatedly illustrated by tragic events, but despite some coverage on the overarching issue of transportation, the Chualar Tragedy serves as the most significant example of health and safety protocol breakdowns. On the morning of September 17, 1963, California's "worst non-aviation vehicle tragedy" occurred when a "driver unfolded at an intersection between a local road and railroad in Salinas, California."[19] As dawn approached, a bracero bus driver named Francisco Espinosa was transporting a group of bracero workers. Between 4:20 and 4:25 AM, Espinosa approached a railroad crossing. In the pre-dawn darkness, he neither saw nor heard any indication of an oncoming train. Inching forward, the driver suddenly heard the piercing whistle of an approaching seventy-one-car Southern Pacific Railroad freight train. In a split-second decision, Espinosa drove forward, attempting to clear the tracks. Onlookers working in nearby fields watched in horror as the events unfolded before their eyes. One account vividly described the moment of impact: "the passenger compartment detach[ed], sending bodies, pieces of wood, and work tools flying."[20]

The aftermath of the collision was a scene of unimaginable carnage. Upon arrival, emergency personnel found a tableau of devastation. Eyewitness accounts painted a gruesome picture of "one body [being] intersected by the wheels of the train … others [being] dragged along with the debris of the bus."[21] Other victims of the tragedy also suffered impalement by their onboard tools. However, Espinosa emerged as the sole occupant who left the scene relatively unscathed. The immediate death toll of twenty-nine at the scene was not the end of the tragedy. Some of the survivors, who were hurriedly transported to nearby hospitals, succumbed to their injuries during emergency surgeries, raising the death toll to thirty-two. The grim reality of the situation was starkly illustrated as ambulances arrived at medical facilities. One observer noted, "[T]hey opened the back doors, and the blood flowed out like water," a chilling testament to the severity

[17] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 291-293.
[18] Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming,* 125.
[19] "Henry P. Anderson Scrapbook on Texas and California Farm Workers," Internet Archive, January 18, 2024; Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths," 126; Ernesto Galarza. "The original 'Report on the Farm Labor Transportation Accident at Chualar, California on September 17, 1963.'" *United States*, 1977. 10; Martinez, "Bracero Memorial Highway;" Livia Gershon. "The Tragedy That Transformed the Chicano Movement." *JSTOR Daily*, November 22, 2024.
[20] Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths," 126-130.
[21] Galarza, "The Original 'Report,'" 10-11.

of the injuries sustained.[22] A total of thirty-two braceros lost their lives, with twenty-seven others sustaining debilitating and/or life-threatening injuries. The Chualar Tragedy sent shockwaves not only within the state of California but throughout the nation and even to international levels.[23]

In the immediate hours and days following the incident, many agribusinesses pushed back against the growing public criticism, denying that the Chualar Tragedy reflected any systemic failure within the Bracero Program. Agricultural leaders argued that "the accident could have happened anywhere and had nothing to do with the program."[24] In response, Ernesto Galarza, along with several state and independent agencies, launched a probe into the events surrounding the crash. Initially, Galarza's investigation focused on the Southern Pacific Railroad Company and its safety protocols. However, multiple investigative bodies confirmed that the train involved had undergone recent inspections and met all federal safety standards.[25] In contrast, the truck transporting the braceros, provided by growers, had missed its scheduled inspections by several months and would have failed them outright due to mechanical deficiencies.[26] During the trial of Espinosa, the truck driver, the state found him guilty of manslaughter and ordered compensation for the victims and their families, ultimately approving a $1.5 million settlement.[27] While the case brought national attention to unsafe transportation practices, it also exposed the agribusiness sector's disturbingly indifferent—if not entirely negligent—attitude toward bracero lives.[28] The immediate aftermath left the city of Salinas, the bracero community, and the families of the fallen in shock and mourning. A public funeral was held at a local high school on September 25, 1963, where all thirty-two victims' coffins were displayed in a collective act of remembrance and resistance.

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[22] Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths," 127.

[23] Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths," 128. No less than 24 hours after the event, major American newspapers from coast to coast carried detailed reports. On the East Coast, the *New York Times* featured the story prominently, while in the Midwest, the *Chicago Tribune* provided extensive coverage. The *Washington Post* offered analysis from the nation's capital, and on the West Coast, where the incident occurred, the *Los Angeles Times* delivered in-depth, local reporting. The story's impact extended beyond U.S. borders, resonating deeply in Mexico. Leading Mexican publications swiftly picked up the news, demonstrating the incident's importance to their readership. *Novedades de México*, one of the country's most respected dailies, prominently featured the story. *Excélsior*, known for its comprehensive international coverage, provided detailed accounts, while El Día offered an analysis of the event's implications for Mexican workers abroad. This widespread media attention in both countries fanned the flame of debate on the efficacy of the program.

[24] "Train Crash at Chualar." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 5, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif; Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths," 131.

[25] "Bracero Bus Called Safe by Growers." (Oct 09, 1963). *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, 1; "Five Agencies Investigate Train-Bus Crash Cause." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 11, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif; "Inquiry Vowed in Salinas Crash." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995),* Sep 19, 1963.

[26] "Southern Pacific Railroad Report." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 7, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

[27] Chualar Bus Crash Settlement," *Newspapers.Com*. June 13, 1967. Meléndez, "BRACERO PROGRAM;" Stanford Law. 2024. "The Honorable Robert H. Piestewa Ames | Stanford Law School." Stanford Law School.

[28] "There Are Too Many Accidents Involving Mexican Farm Workers." *Calexico Chronicle 15 December 1949 — California Digital Newspaper Collection*; Flores, "Slow and Sudden Deaths," 136.

Agribusiness Narratives and the Management of Bracero Labor

The immediate reactions to Chualar and subsequent investigations occurred within a broader context of racialized perceptions that fundamentally shaped the management of bracero labor by agribusiness. Historian Deborah Cohen identifies three "essential elements": first, braceros were expected to possess specific agricultural skills and a particular demeanor; second, these attributes were perceived as "biologically determined"; and third, certain racial groups—in this case Mexican bodies—were deemed to inherently possess the aptitude for agricultural work, while "white Americans" have transcended this role.[29] This prevailing narrative functioned to reinforce racial hierarchies, render Mexican laborers as disposable, and facilitate their exploitation within the agricultural sector.

During the introduction of the Bracero Program, many white Americans invoked the romanticized image of family farms as symbols of democracy and self-reliance. For Americans, this practice was symbolic and "emotional[ly] reason[ant]" of family farms, embodying the "virtues of democracy and hard work."[30] The once-celebrated American values associated with bracero agricultural labor rapidly diminished. As the realities of their work conditions, living circumstances, and modes of transportation became more visible, the perception of braceros shifted towards vilification, casting braceros' identities as foreign and inferior. By the 1950s, political and public discourse had increasingly labeled them as "aliens."[31] And this labelling fueled American fears of a so-called "invasion," especially in 1955, when "nearly 98,000 Mexican nationals were transported by common carrier and automobile, while 110,000 were transported by truck."[32]

In 1954, the implementation of *Operation Wetback* represented a critical juncture in American immigration policy, reflecting a federal effort to alter the sociopolitical landscape of the U.S. through extensive deportation practices.[33] This system, operated within the racial capitalist framework, further marginalizes Mexican laborers, blurring the lines between legal braceros and undocumented workers, which agribusinesses exploit to maintain a cheap and easily controlled workforce, often using transportation as a tool for both employment and expulsion. Although this operation was intentionally aimed at removing "illegal aliens," it frequently targeted Mexican-Americans as well.[34] Despite the legal status of braceros as authorized temporary laborers, the visibility of Latinx individuals within agricultural contexts obscured the lines between legality and illegality. This contradiction was significant, as agribusiness heavily relied on bracero labor; the potential mass removal of these workers would have profound implications for agricultural productivity and the broader economic framework dependent on their contributions. However, because the prevailing narratives framed braceros as unreliable, expendable, and incompetent, they were seen no differently than chattel.[35]

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[29] Cohen, *Bracero,* 51.

[30] Cohen, *Braceros*, 49.

[31] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 173. Ana Elizabeth Rosas. *Abrazando El Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2014. 41, 45-46.

[32] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 289.

[33] During this time, Latin non-citizens were often referred to as "wetbacks." This specific term has since been understood as derogatory and will be replaced by the contemporary preference of "non-citizen."

[34] The term "Illegal Aliens" is not one that this author agrees with. However, it is important to use this specific language since historical language and legislature also practiced this language.

[35] Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 126. Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America*, 133.

Additionally, certain agribusinesses sought to exploit *Operation Wetback* by employing a mixed-bracero system that frequently included non-bracero contract workers and/or non-visa laborers. This strategy aimed to reinforce prevailing racist narratives of Mexican disposability while simultaneously capitalizing on the deportation of workers. Agribusinesses would often notify border enforcement just before payday, facilitating the deportation of workers without the financial obligation of compensation.[36] A Texas farmer remarked, "[T]he sooner they [non-citizens] get to Mexicali… the sooner they can re-cross the border and get back to work."[37] This cyclical process of deportation and re-employment functioned as a highly exploitative labor strategy underpinned by state inaction. This system allowed agribusinesses to thrive by using the mobility of laborers as both a mechanism for resource extraction and a means of expulsion, thereby ensuring a labor force that was easily replaceable and economically advantageous.[38]

Known, But Not Addressed: The Precedents to Chualar

Despite the exploitative conditions perpetuated by agribusiness narratives and public perceptions, the dangers inherent in the transportation of braceros were not unknown; in fact, injuries and fatalities were already well-documented by state and federal agencies before Chualar. This event was neither unprecedented nor particularly shocking; rather, its distinguishing factors were its magnitude and public visibility, not the underlying conditions. The media's framing of Chualar as an anomalous event served to exonerate those accountable, enabling deeply entrenched systemic flaws to persist largely unchallenged. From 1950 to 1961, the *California Division of Labor Statistics and Research* meticulously chronicled transportation-related injuries across agricultural regions, categorizing the incidents by vehicle type—including trucks, buses, automobiles, and tractors—as well as detailing the causes of these casualties.[39] Despite the thoroughness of these records, they failed to catalyze public awareness or lead to substantive systemic reforms. Investment in California's road infrastructure was disproportionately allocated, primarily benefiting agribusiness interests rather than promoting equitable public access.[40] This prioritization reinforced a narrative wherein Latinx individuals were viewed as transient laborers, meant to be relocated rather than integrated into communities.

Between 1950 and 1963, there was a marked increase in transportation-related injuries and fatalities among the bracero population. California state records indicate that between 1,000 and 2,500 braceros suffered injuries resulting from transit-related incidents, with trucks being the most prominent source of harm, closely followed by automobiles, buses, and tractors.[41] These fatal outcomes followed discernible patterns. The years from 1950 to 1955 specifically exhibited a staggering increase of 200-300% in transportation injuries, predominantly stemming

[36] Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor* (McNally & Loftin, 1964), 154–156.
[37] Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America*, 124-125.
[38] Cohen, *Braceros*, 51.
[39] California. Department of Industrial Relations. Division of Labor Statistics and Research. *Work injuries in California agriculture (1950-61)*. State of California, Agriculture and Services Agency, Dept. of Industrial Relations, Division of Labor Statistics and Research, 1976.
[40] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 75.
[41] California Department of Industrial Relations, *Work Injuries in California Agriculture, 1950–1961*.

from inadequate oversight regarding vehicle capacity and mechanical condition.[42] In 1953, a bus carrying Mexican nationals collided with a train at an unguarded crossing, resulting in seven fatalities and eleven injuries.[43] Just two years later, in 1955, another train-related collision involved a truck, which claimed the lives of nine braceros.[44] Such occurrences were not isolated incidents; they occurred against a backdrop of overlooked safety warnings, insufficient enforcement of regulations, and considerable resistance from employers toward the implementation of safety measures. Both agribusiness and government entities had been alerted to the dangers associated with these transportation practices. Yet, instead of reallocating resources or enhancing infrastructure to mitigate risks, government agencies permitted the continuation of this system, often rationalizing it under the pretexts of agricultural necessity or wartime labor demands.

Following the documentation of transportation injuries and the limited substantive reform, 1950-1955 witnessed a notable surge in transportation-related injuries among California braceros; and to understand the factors contributing to the increase requires a closer examination of the program's operational context. This decade was marked by a substantial and sustained recruitment of contracted laborers, leading to increased pressure on the regional transportation infrastructure.[45] During this period, each calendar year recorded the highest volumes of laborers to date, resulting in a corresponding strain on transportation systems. Concurrently, the regulatory environment was lacking; comprehensive transportation safety legislation did not begin to take shape until the latter half of the 1950s. The federal government initiated some efforts to establish safety standards with the enactment of regulations in 1956, but California did not implement robust safety measures until 1959. Prior regulations were minimal, narrow in scope, and frequently unenforced.[46] While injuries were prevalent across various modes of transport, California's response to the crisis remained largely reactive. One idea to mitigate fatalities and enhance operational efficiency was to transition from open trucks to buses during the 1950s.[47] However, it was quickly found to be less frequent but more destructive in nature.

The years 1955 to 1956 represented a pivotal moment in the evolution of labor legislation. In 1955, an amendment to the Interstate Commerce Commission Act of 1935 introduced comprehensive safety protocols governing the transportation of migrant workers.[48] This framework was further bolstered by the enactment of Public Law 939 in 1956, which specifically

[42] "Safety Violations." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 5, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Standford, Calif; Galarza, Ernesto. *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947-1960*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977; Henry Pope Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*. The Chicano Heritage. New York; 4: Arno Press, 1976. 113.

[43] California Department of Industrial Relations, *Work Injuries in California Agriculture, 1950–1961*, 3 (1953).

[44] California Department of Industrial Relations, *Work Injuries in California Agriculture, 1950–1961*, 19 (1955); "Four Mexican Laborers Die in Crossing Crash Near Tracy'" Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 11, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Standford, Calif.

[45] "Work Injuries in California." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 17, Folder 1, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif; California Department of Industrial Relations, *Work Injuries in California Agriculture, 1950–1961*. It is also notably to mention that federal oversight primarily focused on interstate bracero travel and regulation, instead of internal state regulation.

[46] Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 133.

[47] California Department of Industrial Relations, *Work Injuries in California Agriculture, 1950–1961,* (1953-1954).

[48] Through the amendment of the Interstate Commerce Commission Act to establish transportation safety standards, the Federal government solidified the notion that braceros were treated as commodities. Within states, they existed solely as a product.

addressed the regulation of interstate transport for migrant farm laborers.[49] In response to these federal initiatives, California enacted Assembly Bill (A.B.) 49 in 1959.[50] This legislation is recognized as one of the most rigorous transportation safety statutes of its era, establishing strict standards to protect the welfare of migrant workers during transit.[51] The provisions of California's legislation included:

a) No bus or truck covered by the law may carry more passengers than the maximum number of passengers for such buses or trucks (where California eventually rides off all buses and solely allows for truck transportation).
b) All cutting or sharp objects must be placed in a protective container or box
c) And "every passenger compartment shall be provided with at least two exits, remotely located from each other."[52]

Despite the legislative advancements aimed at improving transportation safety for migrant workers with the enactment of A.B. 49, enforcement mechanisms remained inadequate, leading to shifts in how agribusinesses managed bracero mobility. This transition resulted in recurrent instances where braceros were apprehended by law enforcement for alleged "inadequate" or "unsafe" driving practices.[53] Local police frequently encountered dilemmas, usually choosing to send braceros back to their work sites without enforcing penalties. Agribusiness solidified this domestic transportation model by requiring braceros, many of whom lacked proper training or licenses, to self-navigate the commute between labor camps and agricultural fields.[54] Federal protections were predominantly limited to the transit between reception centers and job sites, leaving much of the daily travel unregulated. Although California was known for having "unusually rigorous standards for transportation of workers," enforcement of these regulations was notably lax.[55] This leniency arose from inspectors' connections to agribusiness interests and their dominant conviction that preserving this transportation system was crucial for the U.S.'s economic development.

The enforcement challenges encountered in the agribusiness sector cannot be wholly attributed to the industry. State inspectors in the 1950s were assigned the critical role of monitoring vehicle safety and performing routine inspections; however, these processes are characterized by inconsistency and often face delays extending over several months. Some officials candidly acknowledged their reluctance to impose penalties on violators, with one California inspector remarking, "[H]ell, we've got to live with these guys," alluding to the agribusiness

[49] Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 11, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif; Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 133; "Twelve Farm Workers Perish in Flames." Anderson*, The Bracero Program in California*, 123.

[50] Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 115.

[51] "Imperial Valley Truck Safety." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 16, Folder 11, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif; Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 115.

[52] "Safe Transport in California." Ernesto Galarza Papers, M0224, Box 17, Folder 1, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif; Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 125; Breed, Allen G. AP National Writer. 2016; "Unsafe Transport Leads to Death: Farmworkers 'Disposable'?" *Associated Press: Governmental News Report*, December 22.

[53] Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 114, 119-120; Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 132.

[54] Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 117.

[55] Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 118.

proprietors.[56] This sentiment expresses the intricate interrelationship between regulatory authorities and the sectors they were supposed to regulate. This practice, coupled with insufficient inspection protocols, had fostered an exceedingly hazardous transportation environment for braceros, significantly undermining state efforts to enforce safety standards effectively.[57]

The challenges in effectively enforcing transportation safety regulations did not go unnoticed. Key figures like Ernesto Galarza and Henry Pope Anderson played crucial roles in investigating and critiquing the exploited bracero condition, including transportation. Their extensive research focused on various dimensions of labor abuse, including inadequate housing, insufficient medical screening, and violations of labor rights. Significantly, they highlighted the critical yet often-overlooked issue of transportation within the program, which they categorized as one of its most perilous and misunderstood components.[58] Galarza adopted a more confrontational stance, advocating for the program's complete abolition. He utilized transportation records to illustrate the systemic neglect of bracero welfare, revealing the hazardous conditions under which laborers were moved. In contrast, Anderson approached the issue from a broader national perspective, advocating for the establishment of clearer standards and enhanced federal accountability in transportation practices. Both activists recognized transportation as an essential framework for understanding the broader dynamics of labor exploitation within the bracero program.

Their findings were echoed by federal officials who acknowledged the limitations of U.S. jurisdiction over bracero travel. One official from the U.S. Department of Labor admitted:

> I wish there were something we could do about the way they haul the Nationals up to the border [and from Migratory States to Reception Centers]. Something needs to be done. It is the weak link in the chain. But the matter is taken out of our hands. The U.S. Government pays the National Railways of Mexico, and from that point on, we don't dare say anything. If we do, it's considered a breach of the good relationships between the governments.[59]

The Chualar Tragedy was not an isolated event; it was the culmination of over a decade of avoidable accidents, ignored reports, and failed oversight. The evidence revealed that transportation safety was not a fundamental concern in the Bracero Program, and that the legal and regulatory systems took considerable time to address these issues, only reacting decisively in response to public outcry.[60] Even when legislation was passed, its enforcement was often halfhearted, allowing agribusinesses to retain power and profit at the expense of human lives. The systemic neglect revealed through transportation injuries is not just a footnote in bracero history; it is a central element that exposes how racialized labor systems operate under capitalism. Bracero mobility

[56] Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 65.

[57] Don Irwin, "Report Urges Reforms in Farm Bus Rules." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995),* Apr 21, 1964.

[58] Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 113.

[59] Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 111.

[60] In discussing the Bracero Program as a whole, there is often a driving conversation of *silence*. For many officials and Braceros alike, silence seemed like the best solution to protecting the program. Although there was later recognition that the program had many exploitative principles and practices, many braceros and officials believed it had produced some of the aspirations of the program.

was engineered for efficiency, not safety, and its dangers were accepted by those who had the power to prevent them.

The Marginalized Bracero: Exploitation Through Capital and Control

While the realities of the Bracero Program were marked by systemic neglect and exploitation, the program was often presented under a contrasting narrative, framing it as a pathway to socioeconomic advancement: an extension of the "American Dream" to transcend barriers of race, class, and creed.[61] However, this narrative was intricately tied to a process of racial capitalism that functioned to amplify exploitation within the framework of capitalist economics.[62] The vehicles used by braceros and the contexts in which they were employed conveyed powerful cultural messages. Media portrayals of braceros precariously positioned on trucks or clinging to agricultural machinery permeated public consciousness, thereby shaping and perpetuating racial stereotypes associated with Mexicans and Mexican Americans.[63] Such representations reduced braceros to faceless entities and reinforced negative perceptions surrounding lawlessness, overcrowding, and a lack of discipline. For many white Americans, these visual portrayals fostered assumptions not only about the laborers themselves but also about the vehicles they operate, ultimately leading to the social tendency to associate dilapidated or run-down vehicles with Latinx migrants.[64]

The marginalization of braceros, especially regarding their transportation, is symptomatic of a broader infrastructural paradigm that prioritizes economic productivity over worker protection. The expansion of highways and road networks, often heralded as progress, serves as a mechanism for rural displacement, designed not for community integration but for the extraction of labor. These infrastructure projects, developed by state planners, aimed to connect agricultural regions with export markets, thus facilitating the controlled movement of Mexican laborers instead of empowering them.[65] This purported mobility is largely illusory, manifesting in a highly exploitative framework wherein braceros are transported between work sites with scant consideration for their safety, dignity, or long-term stability. And when in conversation with racial capitalism, it suggests that infrastructure actively bolsters systemic inequalities. For this instance, it subjects rural Mexican and Mexican-American demographics to conditions of hypermobility, risk, and exclusion, reinforcing existing socio-economic disparities.[66]

Beyond the immediate implications for the braceros themselves and the infrastructural paradigm prioritizing economic productivity, the visual representation of Latinx laborers and their vehicles had broader sociopolitical ramifications, shaping public perceptions and reinforcing discriminatory attitudes. As Latinx laborers drove pre-owned vehicles or crowded into trucks, media depictions framed them as both foreign and menacing. Braceros and undocumented migrants were not only construed as economic rivals but also as embodiments of societal disorder

[61] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 256.
[62] Robinson, "Fascism and the Intersections of Capitalism, Racialism, and Historical Consciousness," 88–91.
[63] Leonard Nadel, "Bracero Photographs," Smithsonian Institution, 1956; "Group of Bracero Workers Descend From Back of Truck;" "Bracero Workers Riding in Truck Bed Alongside Orchard."
[64] Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 114.
[65] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 10.
[66] Carrillo, "Driving Mexican Migration," 12.

on “our highways,” thereby threatening the white, middle-class paradigm of the American dream.[67] Media coverage perpetuated a sensationalized narrative surrounding the “illegal” influx of undocumented Mexicans, reinforcing the association of Latinx presence with transgression and illegitimacy.[68] These narratives illustrated an escalating belief that Latinx workers, irrespective of their immigration status, were unworthy of the dignity afforded to their white counterparts. Consequently, there emerged a confluence of visual culture, legal frameworks, and economic imperatives—all functioning within racial capitalist theory.[69]

Conclusion

The Bracero Program, often presented as a mutually advantageous labor exchange, unveils deeper, systemic issues through its transportation methodologies, which exemplify the exploitation and racialized neglect of migrant workers. The logistics associated with transportation transcended mere operational logistics, evolving into a conduit for continuous physical and symbolic harm. Braceros routinely encountered hazardous conditions, regulatory indifference, and narratives that reinforced their perceived disposability within the labor market. The apathy exhibited by both state and federal entities, despite substantial evidence documenting injuries among these laborers, reflects the principles of racial capitalism, where economic optimization is contingent upon the expendability of migrant labor forces. Events like the Chualar tragedy do not stand as isolated incidents; rather, they epitomize a pervasive pattern of negligence, highlighting the erasure of such injustices from the prevailing narratives of labor history. By dissecting the transportation dimension of the Bracero Program, this analysis critiques the sanitized accounts of the program, revealing how the interplay of mobility, race, and regulatory frameworks delineates protections for certain workers while perpetuating vulnerability for others. This examination prompts a reconsideration of both historical and contemporary labor systems to more comprehensively grasp the complexities of risk and protection they encompass.

[67] Carrillo, “Driving Mexican Migration,” 291-293.
[68] Carrillo, “Driving Mexican Migration,” 287.
[69] Robinson, “Fascism and the Intersections of Capitalism, Racialism, and Historical Consciousness,” 91.

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