

Employment and Social Spaces: The Legacy of the Bracero Program in Southern California

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Abstract

The Bracero Program (1942-1964) was a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexican governments that allowed Mexican citizens to migrate to the United States as temporary contract workers. Out of the twenty-four states that participated in the program, California received the greatest number of braceros. Currently, there is minimal scholarly material on the impact the Bracero Program had on the Mexican American community of Southern California. My analysis examines the Bracero Program through a lens that puts culture and social interaction at the forefront. Employing primary and secondary source materials, this paper investigates the effects the Bracero Program had on employment and how this created inter-ethnic animosity between braceros and Mexican Americans. Ultimately, understanding the historical effects of the Bracero Program will allow us to better understand how labor impacts culture.

Introduction

The Bracero Program allowed Mexican citizens to migrate to the United States as temporary contract workers. Out of the twenty-four states that participated in the program, California received the greatest number of braceros. Even though, at the time, a total of 200,000 Mexican Americans were already working the fields of Southern California. Consequently, the Bracero Program created inter-ethnic animosity between braceros and Mexican Americans. Social spaces also became contested spaces where animosity manifested itself visibly. Ultimately, the Bracero Program created competition between braceros and Mexican Americans for employment which caused a division between braceros and Mexican Americans.

Historical Context: Mexican American Labor

Prior to World War II in the 1930s, Mexican American field workers began organizing to gain fair wages and consequently a series of strikes ensued. Farm owners reacted by creating the Agricultural Producers Labor Committee in 1937 with the intent of breaking these strikes. Carey McWilliams, a pioneering historian of Southern California, highlighted in *Brothers Under the Skin* the development of power of the Agricultural Producers Labor Committee. This committee became the primary lobbying force for imported labor and later managed the Bracero Program.¹ McWilliams argues that Mexican American workers' demands for higher wages and better working conditions created a backlash against them and employers chose to instead import "stoop" Mexican labor.²

The United States lobbied the Mexican government for a temporary guest worker program because farmers claimed World War II created a shortage of field labor. A large population of workers departed to fight in the war effort or left to work in the burgeoning defense industry. In an effort to meet the demand for industrial labor, President Franklin Roosevelt enacted Executive Order 8801, which banned racial discrimination in the wartime defense industry. Hence, Mexican Americans, especially those working agricultural jobs, were granted the opportunity to compete for higher paying industrial jobs. Working industrial jobs raised consciousness among Mexican Americans of the meager wages paid to field hands. However, when the war ended, many Mexican Americans returned to their original jobs in the fields.³

Historical Context: Mexican Labor

The Mexican government agreed to the Bracero Program because it faced an unstable economy and high unemployment rates caused by the Mexican Revolution. Furthermore, officials believed that by sending Mexican workers to the United States, they would learn modern farming techniques. Upon return of workers to Mexico, these techniques could be implemented to help modernize the country. Independent of the Mexican government's vision, for many Mexican men migration to the United States was an investment to save their families from inevitable poverty

ravaging Mexico.⁴ Former bracero Don Ignacio stated, “Well there was a lot of poverty, much poverty, and one had to leave [Mexico] out of necessity, not because of pleasure, for necessity so that one could progress a little (Garcia, 170).”⁵ Braceros had family back in Mexico who depended on their wages for survival. The cost of living in Mexico for the average Mexican family was \$10 American and in theory many braceros would earn triple this in the United States. Ultimately, the implementation of the Bracero Program from the years 1942-1964 did benefit the Mexican economy because braceros sent money home.⁶

Braceros were employed as temporary contract workers for a period of six months. After the contract expired braceros could stay in the United States working, if employers renewed their contracts. The contracting process to allow Mexican men the right of passage to the United States as braceros required several processes. First, Mexican men had to be sponsored by the *alcalde* (mayor) and receive a written recommendation letter. In order to receive sponsorship they had to prove at least six months of unemployment, which in many cases meant bribing the *alcalde* (mayor). Managing migration became a lucrative business for Mexican government officials; some braceros admitted paying \$20-\$80 in exchange for sponsorship. After receiving written sponsorship, they had to finance transportation to a recruitment center and later were transferred to a processing center near the U.S.-Mexico border. Following their arrival at the processing center, men had to wait for days, at times even weeks, until the processing matriculated.

The processing stage required the men be given a physical exam to ensure they were capable of doing arduous physical labor. Then they had to be sprayed with the pesticide DDT before being sent to farms in the United States.⁷ In a recent interview with Antonio Martinez Roque, a former bracero, he revealed that many men felt ashamed after the physical examination process. Roque recounts that for he and many of his companions it was the first time they had been subjected to a physical exam. Furthermore, he recollected seeing men cry after the examination; they felt humiliated because they had to submit to white, American doctors. The interview with Roque revealed the anxiety that physical exams produced in the men.⁸

Although it is evident by these personal accounts that braceros endured humiliation and hardship, officials did make attempts to monitor the treatment of these workers. Contracts stipulated several rights and protections to braceros in an effort to prevent abuses. Under the agreement of Executive Agreement Series 278 the United States agreed to the following:

Discrimination against braceros is forbidden. They shall not be used to displace other workers nor to lower wages. Salaries shall be the same as those made to citizens of the U.S.A. and shall not be lower than 30 cents an hour. Braceros will be allowed to form associations and elect a leader to represent them. They shall be guaranteed transportation, food, hospitalization and repatriation. (Sobek, xiii)⁹

In order to ensure Executive Agreement Series 278 be applied to prevent mistreatment of braceros, the Mexican Consulate had the authority to assess braceros living conditions via inspections. However, due to understaffing, the Consulate was unable to effectively evaluate the treatment and/or living conditions of braceros.¹⁰ Therefore, the Consulate was ineffective in providing the braceros any defense or intervening on their behalf.

Failed Attempts to Unionize Field Labor

The end of World War II marked the eventual dwindling of the war industry and led to the return of Mexican American men to their former communities and jobs now populated by an ever growing bracero presence. Furthermore, as the cost of living rose in this post-war period wages for Mexican Americans remained stagnant. The median cost of living for a Mexican American family in the Southern California region during World War II was \$40 a month, and after the war, the cost of living rose to \$68.

In addition to the rising cost of living, the number of Mexican American field workers decreased while the number of braceros dramatically increased. It is estimated that 4.5 million Mexican men migrated to the United States to work as braceros, of these, 54% worked

in California. Most of the braceros worked in the citrus belt in Southern California, which stretched sixty miles eastward from Pasadena through the San Gabriel Valley, San Bernardino Valley, and Riverside. In the year 1954, braceros performed 60% of all picking in California; by 1946, the percentage of bracero pickers dramatically increased to 80%.¹¹ The increased presence of braceros diminished attempts by Mexican Americans to demand higher wages.¹² In comparison to Mexican Americans, braceros worked for lower wages and longer hours. This caused farmers to preference braceros over Mexican American laborers.

Historian Ernesto Galarza chronicled the migratory patterns of Mexicans to the United States during World War II in *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947-1960*. Galarza was one of few scholars who actively worked with braceros and Mexican Americans in attempts to unionize field labor. Working with labor gave Galarza insight of the relationship and tensions brewing between labor and farm owners. Consequently, Galarza coined the term “input factor” to describe Mexican men as deprived of political autonomy and only used for physical labor. According to Galarza, agricultural corporations set up contracts to control braceros. These contracts assigned braceros a six-month expiration date, making braceros disposable.¹³

The braceros contracts rendered them with minimal agency to work in solidarity with Mexican Americans. In theory, the contract protected braceros from abuses and guaranteed them employment. On the other hand, the contract also gave employers the power to control braceros by terminating and renewing contracts. Furthermore, many braceros viewed their contracts as an investment. Many intended on renewing contracts because they invested in their journey to the United States. Braceros could not afford to displease their employers, or they risked losing their contracts.¹⁴ As a result, the contract’s assurance of work and the farmers’ power to renew contracts led to the inability of braceros to work collectively with Mexican Americans.

Low wages and failed attempts to organize a union caused unavoidable tension between braceros and Mexican Americans. Unlike the braceros, Mexican Americans did not have guaranteed job security. Inevitably, Mexican Americans were displaced and replaced by braceros. As Mexican Americans lost their jobs to braceros, they also encountered

racial segregation and marginalization. Despite the fact that braceros were not citizens of the United States, they received legal protections and rights not afforded to Mexican Americans.¹⁵ The Bracero Program ultimately threatened Mexican American workers' job security.¹⁶

Spaces of Exchange

Historians agree that braceros presence in Mexican American communities contributed in shaping culture and space. Historian Matthew Garcia states in *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970*: "Labor transformed the landscape culturally and physically" (Garcia, 183-184). Although braceros seemingly had little control over their job placements, they still vied to exert some agency over their lives.¹⁷ In *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning, and American Cities*, David R. Diaz traces the emergence of the Chicano *barrio* and recognizes the contribution of braceros to culture of the surrounding *barrios*. Even though, braceros were temporary workers their presence shaped *barrio* culture.

Dance halls became spaces where Mexican Americans' animosities towards braceros became visible. According to Candelario Mendoza, a resident of Laverne, California, "Braceros would talk to some of the *chavalas* [young Mexican American women] that they used to see around the barrio here, and I think that was part of the animosity."¹⁸ An oral history interview of a former bracero Antonio Martinez Roque, conveyed the tensions described by Candelario Mendoza. Roque participated in the Bracero Program in 1964, and worked the fields of Southern California. Roque recounts going out to a dance hall frequented by whites with two other braceros in the evening. As Roque and his two other companions watched white couples dance, they were approached by a group of Mexican Americans, among them was labor organizer Cesar Chavez. Chavez demanded the braceros return to their labor camps. Roque and his companions exchanged insults with Chavez; eventually Chavez and his group left the dance hall. The exchange between the braceros and Mexican Americans was emblematic of the tensions between both groups.¹⁹

Mexican American communities feared the presence of outsiders within the fabric of their communities. Braceros caused anxieties with Mexican Americans who saw them as suspicious and a threat to the virtue of women. Braceros' temporary status as contract laborers denied them entry into Mexican American communities. Since braceros were temporary, many feared they would take advantage of Mexican American women in their communities.²⁰ In particular, many Mexican American families feared that their daughters would marry braceros because they viewed it as a step backwards. For those who did marry non-citizens, they often struggled to gain acceptance.²¹

Fear not only developed from anxieties over virtue but also from panic braceros would take advantage of women to attain citizenship. Marriage with a U.S. citizen potentially would give braceros citizenship status. Stories of women falling victim to braceros spread through communities, perpetuating distress over the presence of braceros.

Religion lays at the foundation of Mexican culture. The physical structure of the church is a symbol of community. Tensions between braceros and members of the Mexican community reached a high point, when braceros were refused entry into church by Mexican Americans. The rejection of braceros led priests to perform mass at bracero camps.²² Exclusion of braceros from the church highlights the division caused by competition over employment and courting.

The space of most interaction and visibility between braceros and Mexican Americans was the work space. In the fields, Mexican Americans and braceros started scuffles over which group used better working techniques. Many Mexican American field workers surpassed braceros in experience using modern farming techniques. Even though many braceros worked the fields of their native Mexico, they did not have mastery of American methods of farming. Thus, the different methods of farming between both groups sparked tensions over efficiency.²³

The discontent of Mexican Americans over the employment of braceros is present in the writings of Ruben Salazar, a pioneering Mexican American journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*. Articles by Salazar in the years 1961-1964 report of Mexican American actions to terminate the Bracero Program. The articles' tone suggests Mexican

Americans' superiority over braceros. Salazar's writings are pertinent because they provide insight into growing anti-bracero sentiments held by Mexican Americans during that time in Southern California.²⁴

Eruption of Violent Exchanges

Ultimately the division between braceros and Mexican Americans erupted in violence. On April 19, 1952, five Mexican American youth assassinated twenty-two-year-old Ricardo Gomez, a bracero in the Cucamonga area of Southern California. After the incident, Ignacio Lopez editor of a local Mexican American periodical *El Inspectador* reported, "Mexico of the exterior will exterminate Mexico from the interior (Garcia, 184)." As more Mexicans migrated to the U.S. Mexican American citizens feared that the influx of migrants would create a negative effect on the Mexican American population. This violent incident exposed cultural and class tensions between American born Mexicans and braceros.

The manifestation of violence was not an isolated incident; instead, it reflected a larger trend of assaults towards braceros. Braceros working near the site of the violent outburst signed petitions to be removed from their work camp and terminate their contracts. The braceros petition led to the suspension of the Bracero Program in the area.

By August 1952, four months after the suspension of the Bracero Program in the Pomona area, farm owners successfully petitioned the reinstatement of the program. The successful lobbying of wealthy farmers disregarded braceros petitions and ignored the actions taken by the Mexican consulate. This incident thus shows the influence of farm owners in effecting policy.²⁵

Conclusion

The rise of braceros in the fields negatively impacted Mexican American field workers. Failed attempts to organize braceros and Mexican Americans created tensions between both groups for employment and over courtship. The Bracero Program shows the various intricate complexities and exchanges between braceros and the Mexican American communities of Southern California.

End Notes

¹ Lisbeth Haas, *The Bracero In Orange County, California: A Work Force For Economic Transition* (San Diego: Program in United States-Mexican Studies University of California, San Diego), 28-32.

² Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Utah: Peregrine Smith, 1980), 169.

³ Haas, 29-32.

⁴ Garcia, 159-176.

⁵ Garcia, 170.

⁶ Deborah Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US". *International Labor and Working Class History* 69, no. 1 (2006): 81-86; George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 269.

⁷ Daniel Martinez, "The Impact of the Bracero Program on a Sothern California Mexican American Community: A Field Study of Cucamonga, California" (Pub. 1958), 28-37.

⁸ Antonio Martinez Roque, Oral History: Liliana Montalvo (2011).

⁹ Maria Sobek, *The Bracero Experience: Elitelore Versus Folklore* (UCLA: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1979), x.

¹⁰ Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California 1942-1960* (Santa Barbara: McNally & Loftin Publishers, 1964), 231.

¹¹ Matthew Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (North Carolina :The University of North Carolina Press , 2001),174-176.

¹² Garcia, 176-177; Galarza.

¹³Ernesto Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947-1960* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 101.

¹⁴Galarza, 231.

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- ¹⁵ Oscar Martinez, *Mexican-Origin People in the United States: A Topical History*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 72-75.
- ¹⁶ Ernesto Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947-1960*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).
- ¹⁷ Garcia, 183-184.
- ¹⁸ Garcia, 181-184.
- ¹⁹ Antonio Martinez Roque, Oral History: Liliana Montalvo (2011).
- ²⁰ Raymond E. Weist, *Mexican Farm Laborers In California: A study of Intragroup Social Relations* (San Francisco: Robert D. Reed-and- Adam S. Esterovich, 1977), 28-29.
- ²¹ Martinez, 54-60.
- ²² Weist, 29.
- ²³ George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 251-256.
- ²⁴ Mario Barrera, Mario. *Race and Class in the Southwest: A theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 129.
- ²⁵ Garcia, 182-186.

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