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2016

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

A Constant Threat:
Deportation and Return Migration to Northern Mexico, 1918-1965

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Laura D. Gutiérrez

Committee in charge:

Professor David G. Gutiérrez, Chair
Professor Ross Frank
Professor Natalia Molina
Professor Michael M. Monteón
Professor Eric Van Young

2016

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The Dissertation of Laura D. Gutiérrez is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

DEDICATION

For my family.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGN	Archivo General de la Nación
ATEP	Alien Transfer and Exit Program
CTM	Comité de Trabajadores Mexicanos
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IPS	Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales
PL	Public Law
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
SRE	Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After years of research and writing, the acknowledgments seem the most daunting in many ways as I can never thank everyone enough for all of their advice, help, and support.

I have been fortunate to receive funding throughout my years at UCSD, which allowed me to have time to research and write. In particular, the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies, the Institute for International, Comparative and Area Studies, and the UCSD Department of History provided funding for the initial stages of this research. A dissertation grant from the UC Institute for U.S.-Mexican Studies allowed me to spend an extensive period abroad in Mexico as well in archives in the United States. Funding from the Immigration and Ethnic History Society as well as the Social Science Research Council-Mellon Mays Graduate Initiative Program facilitated the last stages of this project. In my last year, I received a dissertation writing fellowship from the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, which was enormously helpful as it also provided me with an office and a great community of scholars working on Mexico.

My professors and committee members have helped tremendously to shape and sharpen my approaches to the field as I attempted this transnational project. David G. Gutiérrez never stopped asking me the challenging questions and his guidance and mentorship turned my disconnected ideas into a project. Since my first year, Michael Monteón encouraged my interest in migration history, and his advice, support, and careful editing of endless grant applications have been invaluable. Eric Van Young's insightful comments and suggestions pushed me to consider different aspects of the

project while also inspiring me to always try to be a better writer. Beyond Natalia Molina's brilliant comments on this work, her teaching and mentorship serve as models that I hope to someday follow. Ross Frank's methodological questions have helped me to think beyond the boundaries of my field and have improved my work. Christine Hunefeldt not only taught me colonial history, but also helped to make UCSD a better space for students by opening her home and warmly reaching out to our field group.

I am so grateful to have had a wonderful group of friends in the Department of History. The Latin American history field group has been supportive and collaborative since my first year, including Bárbara Zepeda, Michael Lettieri, Megan Strom, Nancy Egan, Gerardo Ríos, Luis Sánchez-López, and Ulices Pina. Throughout this process, Mayra Avitia and Alina Méndez have provided endless support and camaraderie and I am grateful to have had such good friends. Outside of the Latin America group, I had the opportunity to take classes and teach with other graduate students such as Elizabeth Sine, Israel Pastrana, Maki Smith, Mary Klann, Jorge Nicolás Leal, and Amanda Bevers. In particular, Alina, Mayra, Ulices, Luis, Israel and María Balandrán-Castillo all read and generously commented on portions of my dissertation.

Beyond the department, I am thankful to have friends in academia in other departments and at other institutions, including Abigail Rosas, Ana Elizabeth Rosas, Lori Flores, María Balandrán-Castillo, Stephanie Gómez Menzies, Stevie Ruiz and Yuridia Ramírez Rentería. Additionally, Celeste Menchaca and Citlali Sosa served as wonderful writing partners and friends. In Mexico, I found a community of historians and researchers who provided support and camaraderie inside and outside the archives. In particular, Tracy Goode always welcomed me into her apartment and was a great writing

partner on so many evenings and weekends. Also, these last few years would have been so much more difficult without Alejandro Villagordoa, whose support and unfailing confidence in me helped to keep me motivated.

And lastly, I can never thank my family enough for everything. I am so grateful to have such amazing parents and brothers. Attending graduate school a few hours away from them allowed me to drive home whenever I needed to disconnect from work and made the experience much less isolating. My parents' endless hard work and drive serve as inspiration whenever I feel overwhelmed and their love, support, and encouragement throughout this process made this all possible.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Constant Threat: Deportation and Return Migration to Mexico, 1918-1965

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, History

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This dissertation examines nearly five decades of voluntary and involuntary return migration to Mexico to explore how this affected migrants, communities in northern Mexico, and Mexico as a sending country. I approach the study of return migration by focusing on processes of forced removal and repatriation as well as the arrival of migrants in their home country to look at what happened to repatriates, deportees, and

returning guest workers *after* arriving in Mexico. This dissertation begins with the World War I emergency labor program and ends with the return of bracero guest workers to Mexico in the mid-1960s. During this period, returning migrants became associated with disease, crime, violence, and instability, while cities in northern Mexico struggled with the significant demographic and economic changes caused by this migratory movement. Thus, as the threat of deportation functioned to discipline and control Mexican migrants in the United States, returning migrants in Mexico were also perceived as a threat by their compatriots.

A study of return migration provides one way to explore the hidden costs of labor migration on migrants and communities and as I argue, this system of international labor exportation ultimately proved destructive for Mexico and its people. Removal procedures used by both the US and Mexico held ramifications for not only those who returned, but also for those who never migrated and for Mexico itself as the notion of a deportable, temporary workforce affected the sending country in complex ways. Examining the effects of forced removal on Mexico as the original country-of-origin opens up new lines of inquiry and raises important questions regarding ideas of circular migration and labor importation. This project thus sheds light on the consequences of involuntary return migration as the hidden side of an inherently flawed system that exploits laborers at the expense of their well-being and their countries-of-origin.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, an estimated 1.4 million Mexicans returned to Mexico from the United States, surpassing the number of Mexicans migrating to the U.S. Economic changes after the recession in the late 2000s as well as stricter border enforcement policies and increases in deportation contributed to this change. Despite such statistics that illustrate how Mexican migration to the United States continues to decrease, conservative politicians and voters continue to clamor for increased border enforcement, deportation of all undocumented migrants, and a wall to prevent Mexican migrants from entering the country without authorization. The disconnect between reality and rhetoric illustrates how Mexican migrants have become inextricably associated with illegality, crime and deportability although they have become central to how the U.S. economy operates.

The mass removal of so many individuals has torn apart families and communities, but has also led to chaos in migrants' home countries. Voluntary and involuntary return migration has provoked concerns and problems related to public health, local economies, crime, social relations, and politics. As comprehensive immigration reform continues to be debated and policymakers focus on which forms of border enforcement would best address unauthorized immigration, the importance of examining past procedures becomes even more paramount. However, U.S. historical narratives of the deportation and return migration of Mexican migrants largely focus on two periods – the repatriation campaigns during the early years of the Great Depression,

and the mass deportation known as Operation Wetback in 1954. In turn, literature on Mexican history often overlooks the tremendous effects of labor migration on the government.

This dissertation examines how the return of migrants from the United States affected northern Mexico in the post-revolutionary period, beginning with the first World War until the mid-1960s, when Mexican guest workers returned home at the end of the Bracero Program and the US passed a new Immigration and Naturalization Act. I explore how over the course of nearly five decades, the threat of deportation functioned as a powerful tool used to control migrants, while those who returned were often considered a threat to their own countrymen. I focus on three central questions: How did the return of Mexican migrants from the United States change communities and regions in northern Mexico? How does the exploitation of migrant workers affect a sending country? And, what are the lasting consequences of the process of “removal” on migrants?

The “constant threat” of the title (taken from a newspaper article describing the arrival of deportees in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas in 1924) reflects a number of concerns during this period.¹ As coerced removal through both formal deportation and informal processes became the preferred method of disposing of unwanted laborers and migrants, deportation became a threat to both Mexican Americans and Mexican migrants in the United States. While the federal procedure of deportation was rarely applied to Mexicans during the early 20th century, the specter of deportation served to make migrants a pliable, exploitable force. The constant arrival of returning migrants in Mexico also

¹ “Enfermos y en doliente caravana regresan centenares de braceros,” *La Prensa*, October 9, 1924, 5.

became a threat to political and economic stability, as well as to public health. Residents of northern Mexico associated returning migrants with crime, disease, and the failures of the Mexican government. Lastly, as the Mexican population in the United States continued to grow, U.S. officials and citizens worried about how this group could cause irreversible demographic and cultural changes.

Conceptions of race in the United States thus had profound consequences for Mexico as the agricultural labor continued to be composed largely of an underclass of non-white workers.² After Chinese migrants became undesirable in the early 20th century, U.S. employers began to recruit migrants from Mexico, thought of as biologically suited for stoop labor with submissive dispositions that allowed them to be exploited, but then migrants found themselves subject to changing ideas of race that framed ethnic Mexicans as racially inferior and undeserving of belonging in U.S. society.³ This long history of the forced removal of Mexican migrants therefore reflects how ideas of race were imbricated with economic decisions to mold the image of Mexican migrants as disposable.

Understanding the ramifications and meanings of return migration requires focusing on actual processes of forced removal and repatriation as well as the arrival of

² As Otey Scruggs writes, “Whether foreigner or Negro, however, these groups had one thing in common: they were the objects of a racio-ethnic discrimination that precluded any extensive employment outside of agriculture. Anchored to the land, they were compelled to accept the low wage rates and severe working conditions which existed. In a very short time, the stigma of “coolie” and “peon” labor became attached to such work, and sociological considerations combined with economic and physiological factors to deter native Americans from joining the seasonal labor force.” “*Braceros, “Wetbacks,” and the Farm Labor Problem*” (PhD Diss., New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), 8.

³ For a longer study of the connections between race and immigration, see: Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

migrants in their home country. An analysis of this subject provides one way to explore the hidden costs of labor migration on migrants and communities. Ultimately, I argue that the practice of exporting labor proved destructive for Mexico and its people. Removal procedures used by both countries along with Mexico's responses to the returnees profoundly affected both returning migrants and Mexico itself as the notion of a deportable, temporary workforce affected the sending country in complex ways. Examining the effects of forced removal in Mexico allows for an exploration of how Nicholas De Genova's ideas of "deportability" had consequences even for Mexicans who never crossed the border.⁴ He writes, "Migrant "illegality" is lived through a palpable sense of deportability, which is to say, the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the nation-state.... What makes deportability so decisive in the legal production of migrant "illegality" and the military policing of nation-state borders is that some are deported in order that most may remain (un-deported) – as workers, whose particular migrant status may thus be rendered "illegal." During this period, the deportability of Mexican migrants manifested itself in myriad ways as U.S. employers often relied on the Mexican government to repatriate its migrants when they were no longer needed for work. In other cases, workers were left in Mexico when they became ill or injured, making them no longer productive laborers. Throughout this period, the threat of removal continued to keep migrants vulnerable and exploitable. Thus, legal and extralegal processes of removal (not only the formal process of deportation) used by both

⁴ Nicholas P. De Genova. "Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002), 438-439. For other works discussing how deportation affects migrants, see Leo Chávez, *Shadowed Lives*, as well as works by Nathalie Peutz, Roger Rouse, and Josiah Heyman.

the US and Mexico held ramifications for not only those sent to Mexico, but also their compatriots and for Mexico itself as the notion of a deportable, temporary workforce affected the sending country in complex ways. This study of how such processes affect Mexico as the original country-of-origin opens up new lines of inquiry and raises important questions regarding ideas of circular migration and labor importation. This project thus sheds light on the consequences of involuntary return migration as the hidden side of an inherently flawed system that exploits laborers at the expense of their well-being and their countries-of-origin.⁵

Historiography

Some scholars have addressed the return of migrants, yet most studies have tended to focus on sociological observations of particular regions or on legislative changes relating to citizenship or migration policies and tend to only examine brief periods of deportation or repatriation. Focusing on one period or moment of deportation overlooks the longer history of return migration and obscures how such returns were understood by those involved. Acknowledging only emigration and not return migration also contributes to a flawed understanding of migration patterns in Mexico. This project expands the lens to draw in the experiences of those in communities in Mexico deeply affected by the return of those forcibly removed.

⁵ Michael Burawoy's seminal article, "The Functions and Reproductions of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States" offers a complex analysis of the many consequences of systems of migratory labor and their lasting effects. *American Journal of Sociology* 81: 5 (Mar 1976), 1050-1087.

Despite an increase in work on deportation and coerced repatriation, the broader social effects of return migration beyond those on the individual migrant have yet to garner significant attention in history. Recent scholarship in other disciplines has begun to view forced removal both as a legal process and as a lived experience. Spurred by rising levels of deportation and increasing interest in policing borders after 9/11, such work explores the process of removal and raises complex questions relating to citizenship, sovereignty and international law. Within the past few years, anthropologist Nathalie Peutz's call for an "anthropology of removal" has prompted more research on the complex and nebulous processes encompassing coerced return migration.⁶ As Peutz writes,

The deportation of an individual may take only a few days, but the significance of this episode – replicating and engendering as it does histories of suffering and subjection – will continue to reverberate in the lives of the deportees and their kin. As a starting point, it is worth asking whether deportation may be experienced and thus theorized as a kind of reversed refuge-ness: instead of being forced to leave one's nominal home, deportees are forcibly repatriated.⁷

This lacuna is particularly apparent in historical literature on Mexico and Mexican migration. Few Mexican historians have examined the subject, which some argue reflects deeply-rooted classism and racism in which emigrants are viewed as "second-class citizens."⁸ This, Jorge Durand has argued, also reflects the government's own

⁶ Nathalie Peutz. "Embarking on an Anthropology of Removal." *Current Anthropology* 47:2 (April 2006), 217-241.

⁷ Peutz, "Embarking on an Anthropology of Removal," 217-218.

⁸ Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, "Introduction," *Beyond la Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S. Migration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxiv.

indifference and *laissez-faire* approach to emigration.⁹ I explore how this view of emigrants as second-class citizens continued after migrants' return to Mexico as discrimination mounted against them. Today, return migration, coerced repatriation, and deportation continue to present challenges for migrants yet works continue to focus only on deportees and their immediate families, overlooking the larger consequences of forced removal as an obstacle for home countries struggling to maintain economic and political stability. Forced return migration had manifold consequences for Mexico as the particularities of changing deportation procedures led to new internal migration and settlement patterns in the country and presented challenges to communities and the state. As Deborah Boehm argues in her research on more recent deportations in the 21st century, studying the effects of this return "makes visible (albeit partially) the character of state actions" and "demonstrates the potency of state power in everyday lives."¹⁰ In the case of removal from the U.S. to Mexico, the effects of state power and state agents crossed the border into Mexico, influencing border communities and those who never left Mexico..

Tanya Golash-Boza's recently published monograph, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*, engages with the topic of post-removal experiences, and draws on interviews with migrants from four countries (Jamaica, Guatemala, Brazil and the Dominican Republic) to detail the long-reaching consequences of this process in sending countries, as well as how deportation currently

⁹ Jorge Durand, "From Traitors to Heroes: 100 Years of Mexican Migration Policies," *Migration Information Source* (March 1, 2004), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/traitors-heroes-100-years-mexican-migration-policies>.

¹⁰ Deborah A. Boehm "¿Quién Sabe?: Deportation and Temporality Among Transnational Mexicans," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 38:2/3/4 (Summer, Fall, Winter 2009), 347.

functions as a central component of managing the U.S. economy and its labor needs.¹¹

This dissertation places the connection between removal and the control of international labor migration much earlier, however, illustrating how it became a constant predicament for postrevolutionary Mexico.

The following chapters analyze state actions by both Mexico and the United States regarding deportation and thus offer a more thorough analysis than past works that have relied primarily on U.S. sources. This approach, along with a lack of interest by scholars of Mexican history, has led to a skewed perspective in which the experiences of returning Mexicans as well as changes in border cities remain obscured. Similarly, policy-focused studies of migration that prioritize economic change or the efficacy of laws overlook the traumatic, wide-reaching consequences of migration policies. Focusing on individuals and communities affected by forced removal reveals new facets of the complex social, economic, and political problems posed by policies of border enforcement. A systematic analysis of a longer trajectory of return migration reconstructs the historical processes through which Mexicans have been discursively defined and regarded as foreign, temporary, and perennially deportable.¹²

Imported when needed and deported when disposable, migrant workers were subjected to a different kind of “safety valve” that mitigated economic and political strife

¹¹ Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

¹² For a detailed discussion of the longer history behind Operation Wetback, see Juan Ramón García's *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980). Or more recently, Kelly Lytle Hernández's *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*.

through coerced forms of departure.¹³ The safety valve thesis has long featured prominently as one of the most important factors in the traditional “push-pull” framework used to analyze migration.¹⁴ In this thesis, Mexico tacitly permitted emigration throughout the twentieth century to assuage political, economic and social tensions. I subvert this idea to examine how the US wielded the deportation of Mexicans as a safety valve that allowed political and economic interests to control the importation of labor when convenient, at the expense of Mexico and ethnic Mexicans on both sides of the border.

Additionally, studies of U.S.-Mexico migration largely continue to focus on the movement of Mexicans into the U.S. and their immigrant experience north of the border without addressing that for many migrants, increased immigration enforcement and changing economic patterns mean that many do not permanently stay. As Rachel Ida Buff eloquently summarizes, “Scholars of immigration have tended to focus on the “golden door” without attending to exits, clearly marked or otherwise.”¹⁵ In this narrative of immigrant integration, Mexican migrants settle in the U.S. except for a few unique exceptions, and those who return to Mexico remain overlooked. Such a narrative contradicts how Mexican migrants continue to be imported for labor needs. While this aspect of U.S. immigration law and border enforcement as it pertains to ethnic Mexicans

¹³ The development of a deportable workforce began before the increase in Mexican labor migration, however. Carey McWilliam’s early work *Factories in the Field* traces how various ethnicities were imported to California when no longer needed.

¹⁴ Richard B. Craig cited the safety valve thesis in *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), but the theory had already gained traction by then and continues to remain popular when explaining Mexico’s evolving positions on migration control. For a more recent exploration of the thesis and its contemporary effects, see David FitzGerald’s *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages Its Migration*, in which he examines how Mexico has attempted to wrest control over a transborder populace.

¹⁵ Rachel Ida Buff, “The Deportation Terror,” *American Quarterly* 60 (September 2008), 527.

normally gets traced only back to the repatriation campaigns of the 1930s, persons of Mexican descent have been unjustly deported since the 1800s.¹⁶ Even today deportation continues to serve as a tool of control and discipline.¹⁷

Beyond providing a transnational historical narrative of the effects of return migration on Mexico, this work also contributes to interdisciplinary migration studies that tend to examine only voluntary return migration. The more complicated migration cycle of repeat crossings and deportations has thus been relegated to more recent works and journalistic reports. The category of forced return migration, whether categorized as legal deportation or coerced repatriation, offers a useful contrast to studies of circular migration that only examine those who willingly returned as successful migrants. Whereas such individuals might return with useful capital (vehicles, money, tools, etc.), forcibly returned migrants, frequently unable to gather or sell their belongings, often returned in worse conditions than when they left. This process of forced return thus disrupts the accepted model of circular migration: rather than settle in the US or willfully return home, migrants found themselves pushed across the border to an unknown region. The negotiations that led the United States to begin deporting migrants to the interior clearly illustrate the aggressive extension of U.S. policies well beyond the border as well as the Mexican state's complicity in the process.

Of course, not all Mexican migrants suffered in this sustained system of international migration. As other scholars of Mexican migration and Mexican American

¹⁶ José Angel Hernández, "Contemporary Deportation Raids and Historical Memory: Mexican Expulsions in the Nineteenth Century," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 35 (2010): 115-142.

¹⁷ For more on this, see Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism* and Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

history have explored, many migrants repeatedly migrated to the United States and used their saved wages to transform their lives and communities in Mexico. Indeed, those who worked in the U.S. had a higher probability of making a return trip and perhaps permanently staying.¹⁸ Many migrant families settled in the United States with no plans of returning to Mexico. This dissertation, however, focuses on those migrants who did *not* return as planned. This focus on the variegated processes of coerced removal experienced by Mexicans in the 20th century results in a narrative centered more on the concomitant struggles of those who experienced this form of return migration and the broader effects of border enforcement on Mexico.

Chronology and Scope

The decades examined in this dissertation neatly bookend significant events in Mexican history, migration patterns, and policy changes. Stretching over five decades of Mexico's revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, this project begins just after the signing of the Constitution of 1917 during ongoing violence and ends with the termination of the Bracero Program, while in Mexico, the PRI had come to assume political dominance. As this dissertation articulates, the process of negotiating deportation and the removal of migrants was fraught with tension between not only the federal governments but also between migrants and local officials and residents who often had conflicting interests. Examining the longer narrative of return migration is

¹⁸ Douglas S. Massey and Zai Liang, "The long-term consequences of a temporary worker program: The Bracero experience," *Population Research and Policy Review* 8 (1989), 199, 201. "Migration is inherently dynamic and social, so that guestworkers do not just stop migrating when their visas expire, and immigration does not cease when labor recruitment ends. Rather, the act of migration itself changes guestworkers' aspirations, desires, and motivations, as well as the perceived costs and returns of movement, and leads to more migration."

essential to understanding the dynamic nature of these tensions. John Tutino argues that, “underlying continuities in Mexican politics, policies, and economic trajectories helped send Mexican migrants to the United States throughout the twentieth century.”¹⁹ Even during the earliest days of the Revolution, many viewed emigration as a “national disgrace.” Lawrence Cardoso describes how “The nationalism and mestizo consciousness spawned by Madero’s successful overthrow of [Porfirio] Díaz had given rise to their necessary corollary of the repatriation of Mexicans forced to go abroad to earn their daily bread.”²⁰ As the Revolution led to years of violence and economic chaos, however, more Mexicans left the country.

The decade of violence that had marked the Mexican Revolution and had driven significant numbers of migrants north to the US largely ended in 1920, but the first significant numbers of return migrants and deportees had begun to arrive in 1918 with the end of the “First Bracero Program” that brought temporary workers to the US during World War I.²¹ In the 1920s, the US began to increase enforcement of its southern border, and in 1924 created the Border Patrol and passed a new Immigration and Naturalization Act. Mexicans had been deported or coercively repatriated in significant numbers since the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, but the processes of deportation and repatriation employed after the passage of the Act articulated clear ideas of undesirable and desirable immigrants. As David G. Gutiérrez argues, this law served to make Mexican migrants an even more easily controlled labor source: “Indeed, while there is no

¹⁹ John Tutino, “Introduction,” *Mexico and Mexicans in the Making of the United States*, 18.

²⁰ Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931: Socio-Economic Patterns* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980), 55.

²¹ Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, *El primer Programa Bracero y el gobierno de México, 1917-1918* (San Luis Potosí: El Colegio de San Luis, 1999).

question the legal regime erected earlier in the century had greatly increased the risks associated with unlawful entry, in the end, the law functioned not so much to end the employment of unauthorized workers but as a mechanism that ensured both their availability to employers and their vulnerability under American law.”²² As rates of return migration and deportation rose, President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), a Sonora native undoubtedly familiar with the increasing frequency of cross-border migration, attempted to control the country’s exit points. He also discouraged emigration through propaganda and by limiting the financial help available for those desiring repatriation from the U.S.²³

The first two chapters cover the 1920s and 1930s, during which the cultural focus of Callismo gave way to the social and economic reforms of Cardenismo. In the late 1930s the large-scale repatriation campaigns presented a number of challenges for Mexico as the country experienced a rapid succession of presidencies in six years, under Presidents Emilio Portes-Gil (the interim president elected after the assassination of Alvaro Obregón, in office from 1928-1930), Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-1932), and Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1932-1934). Then, Lázaro Cárdenas’ *sexenio* (six-year term) that began in 1934 began to address migration and its underlying causes through a number of reforms, but also inflamed tensions between Mexico and its northern neighbor by expropriating the petroleum industry from foreign investors. The effects of the Great Depression extended to Mexico and to Mexican society, complicated by the mass return

²² David G. Gutiérrez, “Illegal Immigration and Border Enforcement in Historical Perspective,” (forthcoming work) 13.

²³ Jaime R. Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy Prior to the Great Depression, *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 2 (April 2007).

of migrants from the United States. Many headed to urban areas such as Mexico City, leading to an increase in concerns about the social ills of begging.²⁴ This led to efforts aimed at turning beggars into “productive citizens,” but also resulted in the criminalization of the poor.²⁵

In the 1940s, U.S.-Mexico migration entered another era as Presidents Manuel Ávila Camacho and Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed off on the Bracero Program (1942-1964).²⁶ The last three chapters focus on this period. During the Bracero Program, the scheduled return of Mexican guest workers mired both countries in a web of difficulties relating to the movement and transportation so many workers to and from their

²⁴ Enrique C. Ochoa, “Coercion, Reform, and the Welfare State: The Campaign against “Begging” in Mexico City during the 1930s,” *The Americas* 58 (1) (2002), 42. “The official unemployment rate grew by over 350 percent between 1930 and 1932. In the countryside, depressed agricultural prices led to a reduction in wages for field workers. According to the agronomist Ramón Fernández y Fernández, the real wages of field workers fell by 17 percent in 1930 relative to 1929, and did not recoup their 1929 levels until 1934. Such a crisis prompted large numbers of rural people to migrate to Mexico City.... Increased urbanization and its polarizing effects fueled the long-standing negative attitudes of elites toward the poor. This was expressed through increased commentary about the growing numbers of beggars in the city.”

²⁵ Ochoa, “Coercion, Reform, and the Welfare State,” 52-53

²⁶ A number of historians and social scientists have written excellent studies on the subject of the program. For more work on the program and how it functioned in the United States, see: Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican farm workers in California 1942-1960* (San Jose: Rosicrucian Press, 1964); Barbara Driscoll, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1998); Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Gilbert González, *Guest Work or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); and Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

hometowns. Moreover, the mass temporary emigration put into place by the program prompted even more migrants to travel north without contracts, increasing the rates of unauthorized entry to the U.S. During this period, Mexican migrant workers became even more temporary as they often spent as little as six weeks in the U.S., while constantly under the threat of deportation should they fail to be docile, productive laborers. As legal scholar Daniel Kanstroom argues, implementation of U.S. deportation law can fall into two categories: “regulatory border control” and “post-entry social control.”²⁷ The return of guest workers during this period (both contracted and uncontracted) illustrates how deportation and extralegal processes of removal served both of these purposes, with little concern expressed by U.S. authorities as to how these returns were being conducted.

The dissertation ends with the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964 and the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965. Hailed as a progressive reform that did away with the restrictive national-origins quota system, the act actually imposed a quota on Mexican migration for the first time. That same year saw the creation of the Border Industrialization Program that propelled the growth of *maquiladoras* in the northern region and again altered migration patterns in Mexico while further intertwining Mexico with US business interests.²⁸ The U.S.-Mexico border began to garner more attention

²⁷ Daniel Kanstroom, “Deportation, Social Control and Punishment: Some Thoughts about Why Hard Laws Make Bad Cases,” *Harvard Law Review* 113 (2000): 1890-1935.

²⁸ For more on *maquiladoras* and the border region after the Border Industrialization Program, see: Altha J. Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico’s Maquiladoras* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1990); Maria Patricia Fernández Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico’s Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Kathryn Kopinak, *Desert Capitalism: Maquiladoras in North America’s Western Industrial Corridor* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); and Jesús Tamayo and José Luis Fernández, *Zonas Fronterizas (México-Estados Unidos)* (México, D.F.: CIDE, 1983).

after the implementation of the Border Industrialization Program in the mid-1960s, which officials hope would ease high unemployment rates, but instead the program only led to increased migration to the border, and from there, more migration to the United States. This dissertation's focus on the pre-*maquiladora* period draws attention to an understudied era of border history and traces how U.S. economic interests, outside of investments and industrialization, affected northern Mexico through the process of forcibly returning unwanted migrants.²⁹

Uncovering the History of Return Migration

During much of this time, U.S. authorities did not follow formal deportation procedures and thus the removal of migrants left no permanent record. Often migrants left of their own accord, fearing the possibility of apprehension and deportation as anti-immigrant sentiment rose. While such returns can be considered coerced, they also left few records. In many cases, U.S. agents used informal processes in which they rounded up unauthorized migrants or unproductive workers and left them at the border or just across the border in Mexico. When this proved problematic as some migrants simply recrossed the porous border, agents attempted to return migrants farther south on trains, planes, and even ships. This incursion of US border enforcement into the interior of Mexico had lasting consequences for residents of northern Mexico who viewed the continuous arrival of deportees with concern.

²⁹ Although he does not focus on return migration, Mario Cerruti provides an economic history of the region from 1848 until the late twentieth century in *Proprietarios, Empresarios y Empresa en el Norte de México* (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2000).

The informal, extralegal processes often used by U.S. authorities, as well as the variety of methods use to coerce repatriation, mean that often no official documentation of migrants' return exists, nor do accurate numbers. To address this methodological quandary, this dissertation draws on a variety of sources including letters, oral histories, government records, periodicals, and public health reports. Instead of focusing primarily on archival documents from Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores as many migration scholars have done, I extended my search to look at thousands of documents housed at other archives in Mexico including the Archivo General de la Nación, the Archivo Histórico del Instituto Nacional de Migración, the Biblioteca Lerdo y Tejada, and the Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca. Exploring this variety of sources has allowed me to examine what happened to migrants *after* leaving the U.S., not only on the actual diplomatic negotiations surrounding the process of returning them to Mexico.³⁰ However, U.S. archival sources relating to return migration provide perspectives often missing in Mexican documents, and thus I also incorporate archival sources located at several California universities, the national archives in Washington, D.C. and College Park, Maryland, as well as oral history collections based at universities in California and Texas.

³⁰ While focusing on the effects of this migration on northern Mexico, this work also engages with literature and concepts in migration studies and Chicana/o studies. As one historian of return migration in the 19th century argues, "Archival documents located in Mexico provide the key to linking the expulsions of the past with the deportations of the present, thus illustrating the possibility of employing Mexican archives to write Chicana/o history." José Ángel Hernández, "Contemporary Deportation Raids and Historical Memory: Mexican Expulsions in the Nineteenth Century," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 35:2 (Fall 2010), 117.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter contrasts the frequency with which Mexican migrants were repatriated from the United States with the comparatively small number of formal deportations of the same group. From the beginning of World War II until the beginning of the Great Depression, the structure of U.S. border enforcement changed dramatically although large numbers of Mexican migrants continued to head north. Some were recruited by U.S. employers through *enganchadores*, while others fled the lingering chaos of the Revolution. While emigration from Mexico to the U.S. remained minimal in the 19th century, rates skyrocketed in this period due to a number of factors including increased transportation options to the border and political violence. Perhaps most importantly, however, the U.S. government formally developed a unilateral guest worker program that imported Mexican migrant workers during World War I. As I argue in this chapter, the 1920s proved a decisive decade as the United States began to increasingly rely on Mexican migration as a source of deportable, affordable labor. The following four chapters then explore the myriad consequences of this restructuring of the labor force on Mexico as a sending country.

When the U.S. stock market crashed in October of 1929, the U.S. economy plunged into deep depression that left large portions of the country unemployed and destitute. The Mexican population, in particular, faced enormous difficulties as anti-Mexican sentiment simmered and led to public raids and mass repatriation campaigns. The second chapter analyzes the mass repatriation campaigns of the 1930s as part of a larger decade of increasing border enforcement to explore how the return of hundreds of thousands of migrants affected cities in northern Mexico. Beyond the repatriation

campaigns, I also explore how border officials negotiated the return and deportation of migrants as well as how increased attention to securing the border facilitated the growth of migrant smuggling across the border through *coyotes*.

The third chapter turns to the Bracero Program to examine how deportability functioned in the context of a guest worker program. In this chapter, I look at the first twelve years of the program from 1942 to Operation Wetback in 1954, and examine how the conditions in which braceros lived had lasting consequences for workers after their return to Mexico. While scholars of migration have focused extensively on Operation Wetback as period of mass deportation that resulted in the removal of one million Mexican migrants, I argue that the operation actually functioned in more complex ways. Not only did it reinforce the idea of Mexican migrants as deportable, but it also emphasized the Border Patrol's ability to conduct such a mass operation.³¹ Through an examination of oral histories, official reports, and documents that examine the changes in border areas, I argue for a different interpretation of the campaign, one in which U.S. authorities and employers collaborated to create the perception of a secure border while still relying on undocumented Mexican labor.

The next chapter addresses the issue of health during the guest worker program and examines not only braceros' individual health concerns, but also how the constant emigration and return migration of laborers created a public health crisis for Mexico.

While the program required a physical examination to allow braceros to enter the

³¹ This analysis of Operation Wetback parallels Peter Andreas' study of recent border policing. He writes, "Thus, one can argue, as I do, that "successful" border management depends on successful image management, and that this does not necessarily correspond with levels of actual deterrence. From this perspective, the escalation of border policing has been less about deterring than about image crafting." *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 9.

country, no such examination ensured that migrants returning to Mexico were in good health. In Mexico, citizens attributed outbreaks of tuberculosis and polio to braceros, referring to such epidemics as a “bracero plague.” In the later years of the program, employers recruited border authorities to participate in efforts to dispose of ill or injured Mexican migrant workers – a practice colloquially referred to as “dumping” them across the border in cities such as Mexicali. I explore how these practices of disposing of workers deemed “unproductive” had destructive consequences for migrants and for communities.

The last chapter considers how the last decade of the Bracero Program intersects with the trajectory of Mexican history and the coalescence of the PRI into the dominant, repressive political party. By this period, decades of involuntary return migration had contributed to building resentment against deportees, which led to violence enacted against them by both officials and local residents. Migrants forcibly removed from the United States experienced a change in their participation in the Mexican nation-state. While legally citizens, they encountered discrimination and violence upon their return. Instead of releasing returning migrants and deportees at the border or allowing them to return to their hometowns, removal procedures shipped migrants to isolated areas in Mexico’s interior with the goal of preventing immediate re-crossing. This chapter posits that such practices should be considered as part of the broader narrative of PRIístia political violence beginning in the 1950s.

Conclusion

Nicholas De Genova argues that by the end of the 20th century, “deportation had become utterly banal”; often articulated as a necessary part of controlling borders and ensuring national sovereignty.³² The contrast between this banality and the tragic experience of forced displacement drives this exploration into the historical process by which U.S. border enforcement has acutely affected Mexico and its people. Deportation and repatriation continue to remain important and politically volatile subjects.

Unfortunately, scholars have only begun to examine how the process of removal affects migrants and their home countries. Despite the traumatic experiences shared by many deportees, the U.S. continues to rely on deportation procedures that prioritize deterring future crossings over the safety of migrants and security in Mexico. These programs continue to make deportation a risky and dangerous procedure, especially if proposed immigration reforms further criminalize illegal entry. An analysis of nearly fifty years of return migration to Mexico, this dissertation explores how the U.S.’s deportation regime has profoundly affected Mexico and its people.

³² Nicholas De Genova, “The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement,” in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, Ed. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 34.

Chapter 1: Exodus and Return:

Pre-Depression Mexican Emigration and Deportation

This chapter traces how the U.S. manipulated its own immigration and deportation policies to strategically import and deport Mexican migrant workers when needed. This treatment of Mexican migrants as a commodity caused significant problems for Mexico as it attempted to construct a functioning government in the wake of a violent revolution and during ongoing rebellions. (Indeed, the U.S. imported Mexican workers even when it did not officially recognize the Mexican government.) Detailing the many uses of deportation during this time, and the state actors involved in the process, illustrates how even before the Great Depression, Mexican workers had already become commodified as disposable labor. During the 1920s, the U.S.-Mexico border became further policed as the U.S. government increasingly used deportation to expel foreign nationals. However, deportation alone does not account for the mass return migration that Mexico experienced at this time. This chapter focuses on two central questions: 1) How did the return migration of Mexican migrants, through both formal and informal processes of removal, shape northern Mexico and the border in the 1920s? 2) How does this illustrate how the formal process of deportation and its attendant construction of Mexicans as illegal serve as principal actors in the longer history of Mexico-U.S. migration? I draw on archival sources and newspapers in the U.S. and Mexico to illuminate how processes of removal functioned to regulate migrant labor during this period, as well as the ramifications of return migration for Mexico.

The frequency with which Mexican migrants were detained and deported served not only as a challenge for those sent back, but also worked to instill fear and

apprehension among other ethnic Mexicans in the U.S. Moreover, U.S. authorities did not restrict this strategy of forced removal and intimidation to border regions. Across the country, Mexicans could be rounded up and sent to border cities where they would then be expelled to Mexico. In other cases, sick Mexicans in need of medical care found themselves subject to deportation proceedings, resulting in public health challenges for border cities as migrants with tuberculosis were particularly targeted. In many ways, this decade proved pivotal in the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Mae Ngai writes, “During the 1920s immigration policy rearticulated the U.S.-Mexican border as a cultural and racial boundary, as a creator of illegal immigration.”³³ However, migrants continued to head north, and as this chapter illustrates, the majority of migrants sent back to Mexico were not formally deported. Instead, the laws passed during the 1920s worked to construct the idea of Mexican migrants as temporary, illegal, and thus, desirable workers. Immigration policy did not serve as the one decisive factor in the rising numbers of deportations to Mexico in the 20th century. Economic factors and labor demand functioned as the driving forces in how border enforcement operated. As this dissertation explores, the border remained open to migrant workers for much of the 20th century, even after the formation of the Border Patrol. However, informal and formal processes of removal functioned both as methods of post-entry border control as well as a strategy of manipulating the labor pool. Moreover, the coverage of these procedures in the United States served to paint the Border Patrol as an effective guardian of the border that could manage the unauthorized entry of unwanted racial groups.

³³ Ngai, “Strange Career of the Illegal Alien,” 85.

Nicholas De Genova articulates how this image of migrants central to their continued use as laborers: “It is precisely their distinctive legal vulnerability, their putative “illegality” and official “exclusion,” that inflames the irrepressible desire and demand for undocumented migrants as a highly exploitable workforce – and thus ensures their enthusiastic importation and subordinate incorporation.”³⁴ When unemployment levels rose or anti-immigrant sentiment surged, Mexican migrants could be easily removed, a process facilitated by the proximity of the border and the Mexican government’s complicity in the process. While historians of Mexican migration emphasize the importance of migration networks, immigration laws, and recruitment patterns before 1930, the significance of *return* migration to Mexico has been largely overlooked during this time.³⁵ The 1920s proved a crucial decade as the U.S. and post-revolutionary Mexican government navigated how the removal of migrants would be negotiated and how Mexican migration could be managed in an era of anti-immigrant legislation.³⁶ Processes of removal helped to control this labor and regulate a migration cycle in which migrants ideally eventually returned to Mexico.

To explore this subject, this chapter focuses on three interrelated themes, beginning with an exploration of deportation policies and strategies of migrant removal at

³⁴ Nicholas De Genova, “Theoretical Overview: The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement,” in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement*, Ed. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 38-39.

³⁵ Lawrence Cardoso’s monograph, *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931*, is one exception. While it centers on migration to the U.S., it also addresses the post-WWI recession and the resulting repatriation movement to Mexico.

³⁶ As explored later in this chapter, the movement of ethnic Mexicans during this period reflects a much longer pattern of labor importation established during the Porfiriato. Thus, Mexican migrants had already become an accessible source of labor for American industries that expanded after the Southwest became U.S. territory in 1848.

the time. The prevalence of raids during this period as well as ongoing discussions of how to make the forced removal of unwanted Mexicans more effective broaden the narrative of deportation in U.S. history. The majority of Mexican migrants in the U.S. during this period lived in states bordering Mexico, but a large number of migrants were contracted to work in industries far from the border. Consequently, once economic troubles emerged after World War I during the 1921 recession, officials from Colorado, Kansas, New York and other states resorted to deportation raids to expel these workers or called on Mexico to help in repatriating its citizens. Considering the repatriation and forced removal of Mexican migrants throughout the decade reveals how forced removal happened frequently (before the campaigns of the Depression) and emphasizes the liminal position of Mexicans at this time. Recent scholarship ties “racialized deportability” to late twentieth century economic restructuring and the influence of neoliberalism, but as this chapter shows, the proximity of the U.S.-Mexico border and the racialization of Mexicans combined to make them deportable migrants even during the early part of the twentieth century.³⁷ While the border remained permeable, increases in deportations, more stringent immigration laws, and simmering anti-Mexican tensions contributed to further focus on the need for border enforcement.

I then turn to an examination of how processes of migrant removal affected Mexico during this period, and the challenges for Mexican border states as migrants regularly returned. Organized raids accounted for some of these deportees, but many other migrants had few options during economic downturns as anti-Mexican sentiment

³⁷ Raymond Rocco, “Disposable Subjects: The racial normativity of neoliberalism and Latino immigrants,” *Latino Studies* 14 (2016): 108.

led to discrimination, unemployment and isolation. Additionally, the threat of possible deportation served to instill in Mexicans a sense of worry that this fate could befall them. Rather than wait for deportation, many left the United States but had few resources to facilitate the passage back. At this time, cities in northern Mexico such as Tijuana, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo and Ciudad Juárez remained small, chaotic towns on the border and were unprepared for the deluge of returnees. Nogales, Laredo, and Ciudad Juárez found themselves receiving migrants deported or otherwise pressured to leave through their neighboring cities of Nogales, Arizona; Laredo, Texas; and El Paso, Texas, respectively. Without a railroad connecting it to the rest of Mexico, however, Tijuana in many ways found itself more closely linked to cities in California such as San Diego and Los Angeles than to the rest of Mexico. Consequently, returning migrants who ended up in Tijuana faced a number of challenges as they could not easily leave Baja California to go to other parts of the country.

The chapter ends with an exploration of how forced removal became a preferred solution for dealing with sick Mexican migrants in the U.S. Southwest, creating serious problems for northern Mexico. Unemployed Mexicans in the U.S. were increasingly portrayed as a menace to the population, not only associated with violence and crime, but also with poor hygiene and illness. As a result, officials attempted to send them to Mexico, which at this time had few resources to help sick deportees. This sense of Mexicans as a health “menace” blended ideas of race science with the reality that Mexican migrants often had no choice but to live in substandard housing, exposing them to more health risks. Discussing deportation in the context of health in Mexico adds to the literature on science, policing of bodies, and exclusion at the border.

Narratives of U.S.-Mexico migration largely frame the repatriation campaigns of the Great Depression as the first significant wave of return migration back to Mexico. In this chapter, I contextualize the campaigns of the 1930s against a longer history in which U.S. immigration restriction laws deliberately omitted Mexican migrants in order to maintain a source of pliable, removable labor. Moreover, the frequent deportations and repatriations placed significant demands upon a nascent Mexican government – a factor often overlooked in histories of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexico.³⁸ During this era, the existence of a *población flotante* – a floating population – becomes increasingly prominent in the border area as Mexican migrants find themselves moving back and forth across the border, and Mexico's northern cities expanded as a result. By the end of the decade, a number of immigration acts had intensified the policing and enforcement of the border. As Mexican migration to the U.S. increased, so did repatriations and official deportations. Throughout this period, Mexico continued to expend resources and funds to address this pressing issue. The government did not pay for the return of all migrants, leaving others to walk to the border or pay for their own fare to the border. However, once the stock market crashed in the eleventh hour of the decade, policies and procedures had already been set into place to make Mexicans a disposable source of labor.

³⁸ As one example of this, Alan Knight's seminal text, *U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1910-1940: An Interpretation*, makes no mention of the effects of the increase of deportations or the 1930s repatriation campaigns. Instead, Mexico-U.S. relations are framed as a subject far from the border, much more focused on diplomatic and economic concerns centering in the nations' capitals. Alan Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1910-1940: An Introduction*, San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexico Relations, 1987.

Chronology

This chapter examines the role of deportation in the latter years of what migration historian Gilbert Gonzalez refers to as the first major wave of Mexican migration to the U.S, beginning in 1876 and ending in the mid 1920s.³⁹ It begins in 1917, which marked a pivotal year on both sides of the border. An end to the Mexican Revolution seemed to be on the horizon, with the 1917 Constitution ending a months-long congress and Venustiano Carranza emerging as the new leader of the nation. North of the border, the U.S. passed the Immigration Act of 1917 – also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act – in February. Two months later, the U.S. entered World War I and masses of U.S. citizens joined the war effort at home and abroad. As a result, the agricultural industry struggled and restrictions on the entry of Mexican migrants were lifted, resulting in the influx of both contracted and non-contracted laborers to meet demands.

With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, the border became further policed with more restrictions and an entity tasked with controlling it. The Act allocated one million dollars of funding for patrolling of the boundary, formally creating the Border Patrol.⁴⁰ As Mae Ngai describes, “Deportation was not invented in the 1920s, but it was then that it came of age.”⁴¹ While the National Origins Act of 1924 excluded the Western hemisphere and therefore the quotas it imposed did not apply to Mexican migrants, they had already been racialized as undesirable migrants by nativist forces and

³⁹ Gilbert G. Gonzalez, “Mexican Labor Migration, 1876-1924,” in *Beyond La Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S. Migration*, Ed. Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: 30.d

⁴⁰ Lytle-Hernandez, *Migra!*, 26.

⁴¹ Ngai, “The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien,” 71-72.

supporters of eugenics.⁴² By 1929, deportation rates had increased by more than eight-fold, from 1,751 to over 15,000.⁴³ However, this number represents only a small percentage of the large numbers of migrants circulating between the two countries. The numbers increased substantially, yet a few thousand deportations pale in comparison to the well-established migration patterns begun in the nineteenth century that had resulted in the Mexican-origin population in the U.S. hovering at nearly half a million by 1920. This population was concentrated in certain regions and industries; for example, Mexican workers accounted for the majority of California's agricultural workers.⁴⁴ When economic crises hit the U.S. in the 1920s and unemployment rates rose, the Mexican population (beyond imported temporary workers) became an easy target. Thus, the increase in deportations proved important, but the economic and social pressures that prompted the *informal* return and removal of Mexican migrants created a more pressing problem for Mexico.⁴⁵

In 1929, Mexico faced the end of years of more bloodshed, including the assassination of two presidents (including the aforementioned Carranza) and the deaths of over 100,000 citizens during *La Cristiada*. From 1926-1929, this religious uprising tore apart Mexico's traditionally migrant-sending states, and led to an exodus of many migrants hoping to escape the violence. Julia Young describes how both Cristeros and military troops contributed to the violence and destruction during this period, with

⁴² Lytle-Hernandez, *Migra!*, 28-29

⁴³ Ngai, "Strange Career of the Illegal Alien," 85. This number includes both formal deportations and voluntary departures.

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 45.

⁴⁵ In reference to official deportations, Kelly Lytle Hernández argues: "the deportation of unsanctioned border crossers transformed the challenge [for Mexico] from one of maximizing the potential benefits of mass emigration into one of managing the problems that came with mass deportation." "Persecuted Like Criminals," 225.

townspeople being expelled from their homes and pushed into reconcentration camps, after which “soldiers would then destroy their houses and possessions, and would sometimes use fighter planes to bombard the evacuated area. Anyone who refused to leave was killed.”⁴⁶ Noted historian Jean Meyer attributes the emergence of Mexican *colonias* in Chicago, Los Angeles and Detroit to emigration as a result of this rebellion.⁴⁷ At the end of October of 1929, however, the stock market crashed, plunging the U.S. economy into the Great Depression and setting the stage for an intensification of its deportation strategies through massive repatriation campaigns.

The Mexican Peon and the Development of the U.S. Southwest

Mexican migrants at the time served as the latest group in a long history of disposable workers in U.S. Imported African slaves served as easily replaceable labor until the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves passed in 1807. Decades later, the Mexican-American War resulted in the loss of almost half of Mexico’s territory, and California became part of the United States, prompting a need for new workers. In the late nineteenth century, immigration to the United States surged both from Europe and from China. Again, racialized and ultimately disposable labor formed an essential part of this system as Chinese “coolies” worked in backbreaking conditions that many did not survive.⁴⁸ As Chinese migrants continued to arrive on the West Coast, tensions arose. The

⁴⁶ Julia Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 33.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Young, *Mexican Exodus*, 35.

⁴⁸ Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* 15 (2004), 157; Donna Gabaccia, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ and the ‘Chinese of Europe’: Global Perspectives on Race and Labor, 1815–1930,” in *Migration, migration history, history: Old paradigms and new perspectives*, Ed. Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 177-196.

Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (later known as the American Federation of Labor), formed at this time and at its inaugural convention in 1881, delegates signed off on a statement that began by describing Chinese migrants and the risk they posed to “free white labor” as “one of the greatest evils with which any country can be afflicted.”⁴⁹ Thus, when migration and potential demographic change became too threatening, the Chinese exclusion act effectively ended this period of labor migration.

In this absence of disposable labor, Porfirio Díaz’s friendly relationship with the United States facilitated the introduction of Mexican migrants as the next group of exploitable labor. Mexicans, unlike Chinese migrants or slaves, could easily be formally or informally sent back to Mexico, and the emigration and recruitment of Mexican migrants rose precipitously in the late nineteenth century. U.S. employers came to rely on Mexican labor particularly in the construction of the railroads of the Southwest and in agriculture. At the end of the century, Mexicans comprised the majority of the labor force for railways in the Southwest, leading to the emergence of Mexican settlements along rail lines. When American railroads connected to Mexican railroads in 1884, thanks to Díaz’s profitable dealings with U.S. and European investors, the process of labor importation became even easier as contracted workers could travel from the interior of Mexico to the border by train.⁵⁰ As Coatsworth argues, the spread of railroads across Mexico and the linking of the Mexican rail system to that of the United States at key points including Nogales, Laredo, and especially El Paso led to more travel and facilitated

⁴⁹ Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 219-220. Nayan Shah explores the discrimination Chinese migrants faced after the exclusion act in *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ Jorge Durand, “Enganchadores, braceros y contratistas: sistemas de reclutamiento de mano de obra Mexicana en Estados Unidos,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 7 (1999): 129.

communication, leading to increased rates of migration.⁵¹ Mario Garcia describes how recruiters would target potential migrant laborers at the Santa Fe Bridge in El Paso and “literally pounced on immigrants as they crossed the border,” convincing them they would hire them or set them up with jobs. Not all recruiters came from the U.S., however. Mexican citizens also participated in this process and recruiting migrants to work north of the border. In 1907, El Paso police arrested nearly a dozen Mexican agents for disturbing the peace with their aggressive recruiting tactics.⁵²

The need for agricultural workers in the Southwest contributed to significant increases in the Mexican population in states such as California and Texas, which already had established Mexican *colonias*. Elsewhere in the United States, labor demand for crops such as the sugar beet drove migration up from Texas through the Midwest and the Great Lakes region, where Mexicans settled in unlikely states such as Minnesota and Michigan.⁵³ In the early twentieth century, booming construction and the steel mill industry drew migrants who began to form large Mexican communities in Chicago.⁵⁴ By the 1920s, Mexicans had left the border region and had begun to settle across the country,

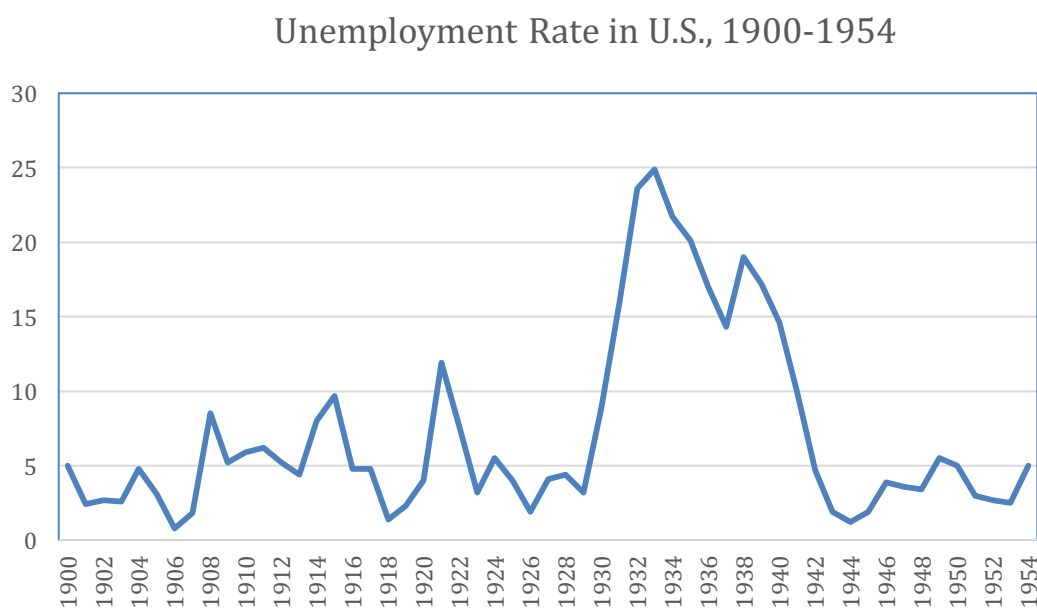
⁵¹ “The cost of prerailed travel for Mexico’s poor included the anguish of permanent separation from home and family ties and the uncertainties of following old news over long distances. The railroad’s speed did not save its passengers much money, but it did allow them to travel hundreds of miles from their homes (or back) in a matter of hours rather than weeks. In a society that still depended on word-of-mouth communication, railroads carried the people who spread the news of higher wages and a better life elsewhere. And there were fewer risks, For obvious reasons, train robberies were far less common than stagecoach holdups and highway muggings. The comfort, speed, and relative safety of the railroads made the decision to leave home a far less serious affair than it had ever been.” Coatsworth, “Indispensable Railroads in a Backward Economy,” 952.

⁵² Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 55.

⁵³ Dennis Nodin Valdes, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Nodin Valdes, *Mexicans in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005); Kathleen Mapes, *Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁵⁴ Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity and Nation, 1916-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Michael Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

worrying nativists. When unemployment rates rose, tensions simmered and Mexican communities provided a target.



*Figure 1.1: Unemployment Rate in the United States, 1900-1954*⁵⁵

As seen in Figure 1.1, peaks in unemployment rates parallel increases in deportation and coerced removal. This can be seen in 1908, the early 1920s, and the Great Depression in the 1930s. (Even during these periods, however, recruitment of Mexican labor often continued.) One of the first significant waves of return migration to Mexico in the twentieth century occurred just before the outbreak of the Revolution, in the midst of the 1908-1910 financial crisis, which struck northern Mexico particularly

⁵⁵ Data taken from Stanley Lebergott, "Annual Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1900-1954," in *The Measurement and Behavior of Unemployment*, Ed. Universities-National Bureau (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1957), 211-242.

severely. The Wall Street Panic of 1907 and a subsequent decline in silver and copper prices led to the closure or downsizing of U.S.-owned mines in states such as Chihuahua and in the mining Southwest of the United States, including Arizona. Additionally, Mexican banks faced a credit shortage due to the lack of capital from the U.S., the export economy suffered, and two years of drought had left agricultural borrowers unable to pay of their debts.⁵⁶ These factors left many Mexicans in the north of the country unemployed, some of whom headed to the U.S. to seek work. In response to the crisis, however, the U.S. imposed a restriction on the immigration of Mexicans, and an estimated 2000 Mexicans working in the U.S. were given train tickets to go to El Paso, from where they then crossed into Chihuahua (the Mexican state most affected by the crisis).⁵⁷

Although the Panic of 1907 had serious ramifications for northern Mexico that reverberated for years, the demand for Mexican labor in the U.S. quickly returned. During a period of only eight months in 1908 and 1909, over 16,000 Mexican workers were transported by El Paso labor agencies to railroad companies.⁵⁸ By the time the Mexican economy recovered, it was too late for Porfirio Díaz. Frustrations with his repressive decades of rule and the economic crisis had caused leaders and the country to lose faith in him. As the situation worsened, President William Taft sent 20,000 American troops to guard the border, Ciudad Juárez was overtaken by revolutionary

⁵⁶ Kevin J. Cahill, "The U.S. Bank Panic of 1907 and the Mexican Depression of 1908-1909," *The Historian* 60 (1998): 795-811.

⁵⁷ Katz, *Life and Times of Pancho Villa*, 54.

⁵⁸ Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 54.

forces in May 1911, and by the end of the month, Díaz resigned and fled into exile.⁵⁹ Despite the onset of the Revolution, U.S. demand for Mexican labor remained high (although the violence led to recruiting problems for contracting firms in the U.S. for some time).⁶⁰ In other words, Mexican labor formed the basis of the labor force in the Southwest.

In spite of the political and social turmoil, rail companies continued to recruit workers from Mexico as they had since the nineteenth century. According to one official in the U.S. Department of Labor in 1912, the majority of Mexican workers in the U.S. before World War I had at one point or another worked in the railroad industry.⁶¹ The pull of work in the U.S. largely contributed to estimates that over a million Mexicans crossed the border, most of whom stayed, between the years of 1890-1930.⁶² Sources from the turn of the century describe the “tractable, willing, and physically very strong” peon, touting how “it is hardly probable that cheaper labor can be found anywhere in the world – China excepted.”⁶³ After the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the Gentleman’s Agreement (1907) closed off migration from China and Japan, respectively, the Mexican migrant provided an ideal replacement for these no longer accessible workers. Gilbert Gonzalez frames the importation of Mexican workers and the longer history of U.S. investments in Mexico as the central factors contributing to the development of a “colonizer mentality” by the U.S., a sort of Orientalized view of the country’s southern

⁵⁹ Paul Garner, *Porfirio Díaz: Profiles in Power* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2001): 218-219.

⁶⁰ Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 54-55.

⁶¹ Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 168-169.

⁶² Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 213.

⁶³ Laurence M. Terry, “Coffee Culture in Mexico,” *Overland Monthly* 37 (1901): 707.

border. In this mentality, Mexicans became viewed as a different sort of human – the disposable and paradoxically lazy yet hard-working peon.⁶⁴

As Mexican workers continued to serve as a flexible labor force, U.S. employers and citizens struggled with how they fit into a society fixated on racial divisions. As Mark Reisler writes, “The intrusion of Mexicans into new areas and new occupations prompted Americans for the first time to ponder seriously the nature of the Mexican immigrant, his relationship to American society, and his possible place within it.”⁶⁵ Despite the fact that the majority of Mexican migrants were traveling to areas that had only decades before been part of Mexico, they were still regarded as a new population in many regions. Ideas of race science and eugenics complicated the matter, as ideas of Mexican laborer became imbued with certain characteristics believed to be tied to their blood:

Both camps [those favoring and those opposing restriction] believed that most Mexican immigrants were Indian peons whose characteristics and potentialities were racially determined. Both groups, as well as many social scientists interested in immigration, described Mexicans as docile, indolent, and backward. . . . From the earliest appearance of Mexicans on the railroads and farms of the Southwest, Anglos commented on their seeming docility, and employers cheerfully contemplated the benefits of having an easily manipulated labor supply.”

Despite the violent revolution occurring south of the border, this idea of Mexican docility made Mexican workers attractive to U.S. employers. Farmers viewed this as a result of a “lack of mental development,” but the Mexican migrant nonetheless remained tractable,

⁶⁴ Gonzalez, “Mexican Labor Migration, 1876-1924,” in *Beyond La Frontera*, 36-37.

⁶⁵ Mark Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant During the 1920s,” *Pacific Historical Review* 45: 2 (May 1976): 233.

exploitable, and most importantly – deportable.⁶⁶ In a House Immigration and Naturalization Committee, anti-restrictionist George Clements stated “In the event that labor demand diminished or the Mexican did create serious racial or social problems, he, unlike blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos, who were not legally aliens, could easily be deported.”⁶⁷ Meanwhile, as many migrant workers continued to enter and exit the U.S., the Mexican population in U.S. cities continued to grow, forming an estimated forty percent of the population in Los Angeles by the 1920s, for example.⁶⁸

The Mexican Revolution

The year before the Immigration Act of 1917, the U.S. began to patrol its southern border more heavily. This had little to do with migration, and more to do with Pancho Villa’s attack on Columbus, New Mexico. Suddenly, attention was drawn to the prevalent smuggling of arms into Mexico, and authorities began to pay more attention to who and what crossed the boundary. Carrancista troops (supporting then-military leader and future president Venustiano Carranza) guarded the border on the other side.⁶⁹ In retribution for Villa’s attack on U.S., President Wilson approved an intervention, and General John Pershing invaded northern Mexico with 5,000 troops as part of the “Punitive Expedition.”⁷⁰ U.S. businesses in Mexico hoped the expedition would lead to a full occupation of the country, but the looming threat of Germany and World War I led to the withdrawal of Pershing and his troops. Violence from the Mexican Revolution and fears

⁶⁶ Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen,” 233-234.

⁶⁷ Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen,” 252.

⁶⁸ Spickard, *Almost All Aliens*, 216.

⁶⁹ Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 655-656.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 567-568.

of war with Germany likely did more to impede migration at this time than any immigration restriction.

Despite Villa's controversial reputation in both countries, one scheme as late as 1917 involving the then-senator of New Mexico aimed for Villa to establish a separate Mexican country, composed of the six Mexican states along the border and part of the oil-rich state of Veracruz.⁷¹ Contextualizing the border at this time helps to convey how chaotic the international frontier zone was at this point, and how U.S. interests clashed with each other for control of Mexico's resources. Border enforcement fixated much more on violence and less on the possibility of illegal immigration, especially since Mexican migrants continued to be desired as low-paid workers. Understanding this context also frames Mexico's position vis-à-vis migration and its struggles to address repatriation in the following years more clearly. The so-called "First Bracero Program" was thus necessarily unilateral, as no stable government existed in Mexico. Nonetheless, U.S. authorities and leaders continued to push Mexico to pay for the return of its migrants.

While employers had contracted workers from Mexico for years, the violence of the Revolution apparently curtailed the emigration of migrants for a period of time, with rates decreasing from 1912-1916.⁷² Despite this statistic, some regions experienced major demographic changes as residents fled the violence through numerous waves of internal migration. The state of Morelos, for example, "lost a quarter of its population through

⁷¹ Ibid., 666-668.

⁷² Gonzalez, "Mexican Labor Migration, 1876-1924," in *Beyond La Frontera*: 39. Gonzalez writes "The violence of the Revolution broke out in 1913 and rather than spur migration (as has been the general conclusion), migration was seriously curtailed, decreasing to 11,000 in 1913 and not resuming its former numbers until the violence had subsided.

death and emigration” in 1918, and by the end of the decade, had lost a total of two-fifths of its people.⁷³ After the assassination of President Francisco I. Madero, the country entered several more years of violence that were tempered with the election of Venustiano Carranza in 1921, during which time many Mexicans began to once again head north.⁷⁴

“Food Will Win the War”: The First Bracero Program

The 1917 Immigration Act (the Asiatic Barred Zone Act) was passed in February of that year and imposed new restrictions on immigration into the U.S. It restricted the entrance of many groups of immigrants, barring those from most of Asia (except for Japan, Korea and a small part of China), while also imposing a head tax and literacy test for immigrants over the age of sixteen.⁷⁵ Two months later, the U.S. entered World War I, and over the course of the war, sent over two million military troops abroad. An estimated 25 percent of the American male population between the ages 18-31 was enrolled in the military at this time, leading to significant challenges back at home.⁷⁶ An emerging focus on domestic science led to an emphasis on food conservation efforts and meatless meals, and Americans grew their own “victory gardens” under the rallying cry that “Food Will Win the War.” This politicization of food embraced American women as

⁷³ Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution, Volume 2: Counter-revolution and Reconstruction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 371.

⁷⁴ Francisco Saúl Alanís Enciso, *El primer program bracero y el gobierno de México, 1917-1918* (San Luis Potosí: El Colegio de San Luis Potosí, 1999).

⁷⁵ 1917 Immigration Act, H.R. 10384; Pub.L. 301; 39 Stat. 874, 64th Congress; February 5th, 1917.

⁷⁶ U.S. War Department, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War for the Fiscal Year, 1918*, Vol. 1 (1918) p. 11, referenced in “They Answered the Call: Military Service in the United States Army During World War I, 1917-1919,” by Mitchell Yockelson, in *Prologue* 30 (1998).

part of “the American army of housewives,” but canning and conservation efforts could not alone resolve the potential agricultural crisis that faced the U.S.⁷⁷ Recent immigrants were called upon to help conserve food, with messages distributed in Yiddish, Italian, Spanish and Hungarian stating “You came here seeking Freedom/You must now preserve it.”⁷⁸ Often overlooked, however, is the role of temporary migrants in the war effort. To address labor shortages in the fields, the U.S. facilitated the entrance of Mexican workers, even then called *braceros*, who served as an imported labor force during the war. It also sought to keep Mexican migrants already in the country. When the U.S. began to conscript troops, waves of Mexicans fled in the fear that they might be drafted as part of the war effort. In response, U.S. officials launched what Reisler refers to as a “counterpropaganda” campaign to ensure that labor forces in the Southwest would not be drastically diminished.⁷⁹ After decades of reliance on this labor force, the U.S. could hardly afford to lose such workers along with its own citizens.

⁷⁷ Celia M. Kingsbury, “‘Food Will Win the War’: Food and Social Control in World War I Propaganda,” in *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 37-38.

⁷⁸ Poster: “Food Will Win the War,” US Food Administration, ca. 1918, World War I Collection, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

⁷⁹ Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976): 26-27.



Figure 1.2: “Food Will Win the War,” Image from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

The ninth proviso of Section 3 of the 1917 Immigration Act functioned as a loophole for cases in which foreign labor was needed, allowing the Commissioner General of Immigration to admit otherwise inadmissible aliens for a temporary period. To meet the agricultural demands of the country, Secretary of Labor Wilson waived the literacy and head tax provisions for Mexican workers in what has been termed “the first bracero program.” The recruitment of these workers (officially prohibited under U.S. immigration law) was also permitted, with the understanding that should these migrants pursue employment in other industries after admission, they would be subject to arrest

and deportation.⁸⁰ This provision placed Mexican migrants into an even more precarious situation as they could not pursue alternate forms of work should their employer refuse to pay them as agreed or exploit their labor in other ways. One official suggested that employers use this to their advantage by immediately deporting workers who quit: “A strict enforcement of the rules and a few deportations early in the game will have a salutary effect for it is very important that the laborers understand that the rules *will* be enforced and an actual example is the only thing they understand.”⁸¹ Although this suggestion went unheeded, migrants in the U.S. had few other options than to keep working even in terrible conditions with the ever-present possibility of forced removal. Many could not write (likely increased by the lifting of the literacy requirement) and thus could not write for help if abusive situations did arise. Even if they did, only a semblance of a Mexican government existed at the time, thus making the chances of intervention almost non-existent.

Originally, employers withheld a portion of workers’ wages to ensure that workers would eventually return but would not leave their jobs before the ends of their contracts. By 1918, twenty-five cents per day was withheld, up to a maximum of one hundred dollars, reflecting the reality that many workers stayed well after the initial six months of their contracts. On November 11, 1918, World War I officially ended, and soon thereafter, American troops began to return home. However, the de-facto guest-worker program created during the war did not immediately end. During the first year of the program, only 9,401 Mexicans entered the U.S. under the temporary admission

⁸⁰ United States Committee on Public Information, “Will Admit Aliens from Mexico to U.S. to Provide against Farm-Labor Shortage,” *Official U.S. Bulletin*, Vol 1 (1917): 4.

⁸¹ Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 37.

program, which growers deemed entirely inadequate for their needs. In response to these demands and pressure from Herbert Hoover, the nation's Food Administrator, Secretary of Labor Wilson expanded the program significantly in 1918. Mexican migrants could now work in the mining and railroad industries, not only in agriculture. In December of that year, the month after the end of World War I, Wilson officially terminated the program, but an actual end to the admission of temporary migrant laborers came much later as agricultural interests continued to demand access to the inexpensive labor force. The government extended special permissions and extensions to certain regions and industries until 1920, when Wilson left office. Even then, workers were allowed under the provisions of the program until early 1921. Despite Wilson's reluctance to do so, "the temporary Mexican migrant was a lesser racial evil than the permanent Oriental," and Mexicans would ostensibly return home.⁸²

While many men worked in agricultural, mining, and railroad industries, other sectors of the economy sought migrant labor, including women. In 1918, the Employment Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor set up an office in El Paso with local officials to help address the need for labor in the region. Domestic workers represented a sizable number of those employees processed through this office. During a period of less than three weeks in 1919, "the bureau interviewed 14 American women and directed 6 of them to work. On the other hand, it interviewed 1,740 Mexican women and dispatched 1,326 of them to work."⁸³ These numbers illustrate how El Paso residents relied on Mexican labor even beyond the needs of the war effort, and how Mexican

⁸² Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 29-35.

⁸³ Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 60.

women had also become desired domestic workers. In response, both women and men continued to migrate north in search of work.

Mexico was in the midst of reconstructing a government at this time while violence and battles over control of the land raged on. Despite some attempts to limit emigration, large numbers of Mexican men went north to the U.S. to work in fields and on the railroads, their passage facilitated by the need for such workers and the lifting of certain provisions of the 1917 Immigration Act. Mexican migrants continued to work in many industries while U.S. employers recruited more from Mexico, while some were promptly forced back home. In Mexico, their compatriots criticized the factors that had contributed to the difficulties this “*población flotante*” faced after being recruited to work in the U.S. as part of the war effort. Only a month after the end of World War I, *El Pueblo*, a Mexico City based newspaper, published a front-page article on the deportation crisis for Mexicans in the U.S. The author stated that the publication had always opposed the emigration of Mexican nationals to the U.S. for the purpose of work and described the difficult challenges that deportees would face in Mexico:

...all those braceros once they cross the border and return home, will have to take refuge in Laredo, Ciudad Juarez and other border towns, building in them a ... population of some thousands of souls, which will lack the resources to survive and, what is worse, they will not find work because these towns cannot provide it for all of those returning from the United States. Our deported compatriots will offer a distressing spectacle and will be plunged in utter penury, and the government will then be forced to take action on the matter and seek to distribute the floating population throughout the national territory, for which it would have to make large contributions, which, due to the situation of the treasury, will be quite a burden.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ “Despues de prestar sus servicios van a ser deportados nuestros compatriotas, de Estados Unidos,” *El Pueblo*, Dec 20, 1918, 1-2.

At the time, these cities maintained relatively small populations. As of 1920, Laredo only had a population of about 23,000 residents, while Ciudad Juárez was considerably larger at 43,000.⁸⁵ Much of this growth owed to recent changes, as statistics from the previous decade show that Ciudad Juárez had more than doubled from 10,000 to 24,000 by 1916.⁸⁶ In less than five years, it had nearly doubled again. The possible arrival of thousands of deportees would significantly strain towns of that size, especially after such rapid growth in the twentieth century. The recovering Mexican economy's inability to provide for so many deportees only led to further worries and critique of labor migration.

Additionally, the public health crises that swept Mexican cities during the Revolution had in many cases not ended by 1917 and 1918. Border states like Chihuahua suffered epidemics of smallpox, measles, and the Spanish influenza of 1918, leading to a 100 percent increase in the mortality rate that year. In 1917, Chihuahua's southern neighbor Durango faced "great suffering among the poor, much hunger, sickness, and many deaths from inanition, typhus, fever and smallpox." Elsewhere in northern Mexico, 300 people reportedly died of the flu in only days in the Laguna, an important agricultural region that stretched across the Coahuila-Durango border.⁸⁷ Although Mexico ostensibly had a president and government in place, epidemics and violence continued to plague the border region and large sections of the country. For a nation still embroiled in violence and chaos, the arrival of thousands or tens of thousands of poor, hungry deportees threatened to only intensify these conditions and further destabilize cities.

⁸⁵ Population for Ciudad Juarez found in *Cities and Citizenship at the U.S.-Mexico Border: The Paso Del Norte*, Ed. Kathleen Staudt, César M. Fuentes and Julia A. Monárrez Fragoso, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 105.

⁸⁶ Knight, *The Mexican Revolution, Volume 2*, 523.

⁸⁷ Knight, *The Mexican Revolution, Volume 2*, 420-422, 624.

Many employers failed to see to ensure transportation home for their migrants, while others continued to use these workers. Once demand for migrant workers had subsided, problems arose as Mexicans became an undesirable presence. Officials from the U.S. Department of Labor in El Paso, Texas, sent letters to employers in early May of 1921, informing them they needed to “take some action towards disposing of the cases of their laborers, either by returning them to Mexico or by applying for an extension of time.” Despite these notices, many failed to heed these warnings and continued to employ former braceros.⁸⁸

Official statistics on the status of the program provided in July 1920 help to understand the gravity of the situation regarding workers who had not been sent back: “a total of 50,852 such laborers were imported, 327 died, 10,691 deserted their employment, 17,186 returned to Mexico, 11 had their residence legalized and there remained, charged to original importers a balance of 32,637.”⁸⁹ In other words, over three out of every five workers remained in the U.S. The next year, statistics cited significantly higher numbers, with 72,862 workers imported during the duration of the program, 34,922 of whom had returned to Mexico. However, even government officials had little faith in these figures, acknowledging that the actual number of temporary migrants and those who remained could be different as employers were “exceedingly lax” when it came to keeping tabs on migrant workers. No representatives or regulations ensured that employers ensure the return of their workers, and the terms of the program failed to require them to pay for

⁸⁸ Correspondence, May 28, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, DC.

⁸⁹ Correspondence, May 17, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

travel back.⁹⁰ In addition to these numbers, years of importing workers from Mexico during a period of sustained violence in their home country helped to set into motion a much larger wave of migration north.

In the years following this program, deportations of Mexicans continued to increase as U.S. companies employed Mexican migrant workers across the country, only for such workers to become unwanted when economic changes left them without work. Once the need for Mexican workers subsided, U.S. authorities and citizens viewed the repatriation of migrant workers as Mexico's responsibility. Over the course of the decade, the overwhelming response to "the Mexican situation" was that Mexico should pay for the repatriation of its citizens, in spite of the ongoing recruitment of Mexican workers and the fact that Mexico had never agreed to the program.

After World War I: Recession and Repatriations

After the end of the war, the U.S. experienced a sharp downturn in the economy that led to a number of problems as Mexicans once again became an undesirable presence. In 1921, a Red Cross official complained about "the Mexican situation" stating "there are hundreds of them in Kansas City, Topeka, Fort Worth, and Dallas, out of work and no money and they are being deported to Mexico. The situation will be doubly acute along the border towns unless great care is taken to limit the service to those of the town in which they reside." Residents also worried about the "health menace" that this group of "underfed, impoverished aliens" presented.⁹¹ A telegram sent earlier that month had

⁹⁰ Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 38.

⁹¹ Correspondence, May 9, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

warned that fifteen thousand Mexicans were currently in Fort Worth, Texas – a figure that represented nearly one-seventh of the city’s population at the time.⁹² According to the telegram, of this group of Mexicans, one third was in dire financial straits, and 2,500 were starving.⁹³ Many of these migrants had been brought into the U.S. to work on railroad construction projects, but others had arrived through other recruiters or of their own volition. Others had been working in the coal mines in Thurber, Texas (75 miles west of Fort Worth).⁹⁴ Once railroad locomotives began to switch to oil from coal in the early 20s, however, the mining town suffered, mines closed, and migrant workers were left over 300 miles from the border.⁹⁵ The decline of the coal mining industry led to problems for Mexican nationals working across the Southwest, including New Mexico and Arizona. For those working in the mines or in smelters, some employers provided transportation to the border and Mexican consuls sometimes did as well.⁹⁶

Farther north in Michigan, the U.S. Department of Labor worried about what to do with hundreds of Mexican migrants who had worked in sugar beet fields but found themselves destitute or in need of help when the post-WWI recession hit. At this time, US authorities worked with charities to arrange passage to the border for migrants, with reports stating that the Mexican government would then take charge of them to return them to their homes. One report on the situation of Mexicans as public charges details

⁹² “Texas Almanac: City Population List from 1850-2000,” Texas State Historical Association, University of Texas at Austin.

⁹³ Telegram, May 2, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁴ Correspondence, April 30, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁵ For more on the history of Thurber and mining, see MD Rhinehart, *A Way of Work and a Way of Life: Coal Mining in Thurber, Texas, 1888-1926*, Texas A&M University Press, 1992.

⁹⁶ Correspondence, April 30, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C. Monica Perales’ monograph *Smelertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community* offers more information on the smelter industry in El Paso and the experiences of Mexican and Mexican American workers.

how the recession after World War I resulted in large numbers of unemployed workers. Local charities contributed to provide for them, and then cooperated with other groups to pay for transportation to Laredo for 400 migrants. Inspector Short noted that the St. Vincent DePaul Society, in particular, had donated over eleven thousand dollars to the efforts and was still paying for ten more trips every day. Representatives from the organization informed immigration officials that they did not want help paying for transportation for these migrants if formal deportation proceedings would follow. In cases where charities or other groups paid for transportation south to the border, the Mexican government was tasked with paying for their passage to their hometowns.

However, correspondence reveals how US authorities regarded the wintertime as an opportune time to deport these migrants before the weather warmed up again. As an inspector noted on February 22, 1921, "It seems that if anything is to be done by the government to assist in returning these people to Mexico, it should be done soon and completed with the greatest possible dispatch, for as soon as the weather warms up and spring near, they will scatter to the four ends of the earth, and it will be an impossibility to keep track of them."⁹⁷ Other regions sought to remove Mexicans quickly as well. The day before this letter was written, the S.S. Antonio Lopez had disembarked from New York with 110 Mexicans aboard, their repatriation paid for by the Mexican consul.⁹⁸ Such actions and statements convey the fear that officials felt about the possibility of bands of Mexicans roaming the country. Once agricultural seasons had ended or work

⁹⁷ Letter from Inspector in Charge to Montreal Commissioner of Immigration, Feb 22, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁸ Letter from Assistant Commissioner of Department of Labor, February 24, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

had subsided, these migrants presented an imminent threat until they could be sent back to Mexico.

In Philadelphia, the Mexican government was sending funds to pay for the lodging of over one hundred Mexican migrants. Officials determined that these migrants had likely entered the country through El Paso, as a result of the lifting of the 1917 Immigration Act provisions, to work for the Pennsylvania or the Baltimore & Ohio railroads. After being transported two thousand miles to Philadelphia, however, the companies reportedly refused to pay the wages they had promised. Given the high demand for labor in these years, the recruited migrants promptly secured work in other industries in the region. With the onset of the recession, however, they were now “entirely destitute, without money with which to purchase food or shelter.” The boarding houses that housed these workers sent weekly bills to the Consulate for their stay and two meals a day, and the Mexican government sent money to pay for these costs. Officials called for lists of all unemployed Mexicans in Philadelphia and its surrounding cities (where numbers were believed to be even higher). As the Immigrant Inspector in Philadelphia concluded, he believed that all of these migrants were deportable.⁹⁹ After losing their jobs and faced with bleak employment options, many migrants accepted charity, likely not realizing that taking such help placed them in the category of “likely to be a public charge” and thus subject to formal deportation proceedings. Across the country, this scenario repeated itself, and in virtually every case, the Mexican

⁹⁹ Letter from Immigrant Inspector in Philadelphia, February 24, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

government and Mexican consulates worked with the U.S. government to organize and pay for the costs incurred by “the Mexican situation.”

A report from Chicago detailed how 443 Mexican individuals, 212 of whom were women and children were tracked down by local groups. The inspector reported that, “It seems quite likely that the peculiar severity of a few days of the early winter and the real and threatening conditions of unemployment produced a panicky mental condition which drove some and perhaps many of those who did, to seek relief.” The “panicky mental condition” mentioned by Inspector James Hogan surely also resulted from being over a thousand miles away from Mexico, with few options or resources.¹⁰⁰ Unemployed and far from the border, migrants had few options, and bitterly cold weather did not help.

The recession did not affect all industries equally, however. After a bumper sugar beet crop in 1920, industry officials resisted sending back their foreign workers, “for fear they might not be able to recruit them again.”¹⁰¹ Other employers took advantage of Mexican laborers and continued to recruit them from Mexico through *enganchadores*. In 1922, *El Universal* published a telegram from the Mexican Consul in Hidalgo, Texas, reporting on the lack of workers in that area and the consequences:

I understand that tricksters make very liberal promises to our citizens, who, with incorrect views of conditions, come to American territory clandestinely, by way of [La Grulia, Los Ebanos, Penitas and Río Bravo], thus running great risk of being captured by American immigration authorities. Also, those who enter into contracts with them, as soon as they are through with their services abandon them without paying them their wages, as a result of which they are forced to request aid of the [M]exican government for their repatriation.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Immigrant Inspector James Hogan, March 21, 1921, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰¹ Kathleen Mapes, *Sweet Tyranny: Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 140-141.

Essentially, employers sought Mexican workers who would cross the Río Bravo in South Texas, put them to work, and then fail to pay them while leaving them in the U.S. without resources to return. J.R. Harold, the Immigrant Inspector of the U.S. Department of Labor in Hidalgo, Texas, replied that he had investigated the matter, and while the claims were true in the year prior that many had crossed that way and that the Mexican government had paid their repatriation, such acts had not happened in 1922.¹⁰² By 1922, the recession had somewhat subsided, but the 1921 repatriation and deportation raids across the country had important implications for Mexican migrants and migration policy throughout the 1920s.

Deportation Drives and Starving Mexicans in Denver

Even far from the border, authorities in the U.S. worked to deport Mexicans and viewed this as an effective strategy to instill fear in other ethnic Mexicans. Exploring the situation of Mexican migrants in Denver, Colorado offers one example of how this population faced discrimination and forced removal as a result of changing economic and social pressures. In late 1921, the Inspector-in-Charge of the Department of Labor in Denver wrote to the Commissioner General of Immigration in Washington, D.C. to describe the problems the city was facing and how deporting Mexicans could address these issues. In a meeting held with other officials in the city, the Mexican Consul reportedly stated that “he was aware that many of the Mexicans here were of the very worst type and that they were a menace,” and that he had attempted to convince many to

¹⁰² Correspondence, July 13, 1922 and August 23, 1922, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

return to Mexico, with some success. However, his attempts to receive funding from the Mexican government had not been successful due to a lack of financial resources.

One week after this meeting, the Denver Police Department conducted a raid in which 300 Mexicans were arrested, 35 of whom were deemed aliens subject to deportation. Despite the fact that only slightly over 10% of those arrested were deportable, the raids served the purpose of instilling fear in other ethnic Mexicans in the Denver area. As a result, train ticket sales shot up after these raids as a result of more tickets being purchased by Mexicans.¹⁰³ The names of more migrants were given to the Holly Sugar Corporation, which then sent 37 Mexicans to El Paso for subsequent expulsion. Others had been reported to the Garden City Sugar Company, of Kansas, with the goal of having them removed. The Inspector-in-Charge cautioned that this was no guarantee that the problems would not resume, but emphasized the need for raids as a means to threaten Mexicans, writing:

I do believe it is necessary to act, to a certain extent, in order that the aliens may be impressed with the fact that the Immigration Laws are effective against them and will be enforced. Deportation to Mexico, of Mexicans, in my opinion, only serves to rid the locality in the United States, where the aliens are found, of such aliens. Mexicans consider deportation as a means by which they are enable [sic] to make a visit to their homes in Mexico at no expense to themselves. After finishing their visit they make surreptitious entry into the United States, going to a new location.

While recognizing the permeability of the border, he still argued that deportation raids served an important purpose given the increases in migration from Mexico.¹⁰⁴ Migrants endured harassment in the streets, and police raids were was deemed “beneficial” by

¹⁰³ Correspondence, December 6, 1921, Records of the INS, NARA, Washington, D.C., 55091.6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

officials as such experiences pushed Mexicans to leave. One agent argued that for all of those filling the county jails under vagrancy charges, “The best solution is to charter a train and ship the *hombres* back to their fatherland below the Rio Grande.”¹⁰⁵

A little more than a year later, the situation of Mexicans in the Denver area continued to worry locals and officials, with newspapers running headlines warning that, “DENVER’S SAFETY IS MENACED BY 3,500 STARVING MEXICANS.”¹⁰⁶

Estimates stated that every day, Mexicans in the region were responsible for two crimes, while lodging houses had to turn away multitudes of Mexican men after so many needed accommodations that there were no longer beds available for white men.¹⁰⁷ In response to this pressing issue, officials called for the Mexican government to help with repatriating its citizens, which was a challenging task for a country that was struggling to rebuild itself after the Revolution.

At the end of the recession, these repatriation and deportation drives had made several lessons abundantly clear to employers, recruiters, and agribusiness interests. First, ample evidence pointed to the fact that U.S. immigration law could be flouted when economic pressures trumped nativist concerns, reinforcing the image of Mexico as an attractive source of cheap, exploitable labor. As Kathleen Mapes writes in her study of the sugar industry, “Michigan’s urban and rural residents alike saw Mexicans as a labor force that could be recruited and excluded at will, not as immigrants to be assimilated.”¹⁰⁸

Second, despite agreements that employers would pay for transportation home, the new

¹⁰⁵ Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁶ Article from *The Denver Post*, January 19, 1923, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Mapes, *Sweet Tyranny*, 141.

post-revolutionary Mexican government would still pay for the repatriation of its people when employers failed to do so, contributing an estimated 1 million dollars for the repatriation of 50,000 migrants. When Mexico could not or would not pay for the entire cost, U.S. charities and associations would also pay for significant portions of the transportation costs to take migrants to the border. Comisiones Honoríficas formed to contribute when the government could not.¹⁰⁹ Thus, many employers freed themselves of the obligation to transport workers back – a pattern that continued during the WWII Bracero Program. Lastly, U.S. officials recognized the power of the threat of removal. The formal deportation of even a small group of Mexican migrants could instill anxiety and worry throughout Mexican *colonias*. These lessons continued to inform recruitment and employment strategies north of the border and set the stage for the massive repatriations of the Great Depression.

Repatriation and Deportation from the Southwest

As sources from the era show, many Mexicans also voluntarily left the United States due to economic difficulties and social tensions during the recession. Some of these tensions came from Mexican Americans who distrusted “*los recién llegados*.” The use of immigrant workers as strikebreakers also contributed to resentment against Mexican migrants, which was exacerbated by the economic situation prompted by the post-war recession.¹¹⁰ Thus, many migrants faced hostility during this period and sought to return to Mexico.

¹⁰⁹ Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 55.

¹¹⁰ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 71.

Although the Mexican government and consuls helped migrants in the Midwest and Northeast of the U.S., workers in the Southwest often received no help despite their proximity to the border. Multiple reports detail how desperate migrants left California on foot, after waiting months for some sort of help from Mexico with no response from the government. A telegram to future president Plutarco Elías Calles, then the head of the Secretaría de Gobernación, describes the situation at the time in Southern California: “Mexican *colonia* unsustainable. Hungry and homeless families. Yesterday families that we had asked to be repatriated three months ago left on foot. We ask you to represent us in front of Gobernación on the matter of repatriation.”¹¹¹ A letter sent from the president and secretary of the Los Angeles Repatriation Committee in April of 1921 described the situation in further detail:

On the 12th of this month, various Mexican families left for Mexico on foot, forming one of the saddest and most painful pictures imaginable: men carrying huge bundles of rags to provide warmth at night and the women similarly carrying kitchen utensils, many with their young in their arms and others holding by the hand their young children, from 4-6 years old, nearly naked and barefoot, suffering the severity of misfortune.¹¹²

The images of worn-down, hopeless families making the trek by foot conveys the severity of the situation of many migrants at this time. However, the descriptions of women and children also emphasize that this was not solely the outcome of an exodus of single male laborers traveling for short period of time. Many families had traveled north and settled in the U.S., some to escape the violence of the Revolution, others drawn to the work opportunities in the U.S.

¹¹¹ Telegram from Felipe Carrillo to Plutarco E. Calles, April 15, 1921, PEC Collection, Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elias Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFT), Mexico City, Mexico.

¹¹² Excerpted in letter from Felipe Carrillo to Plutarco E. Calles, May 4, 1921, PEC Collection, FAPECRT.

For these migrants, the journey back to Mexico represented only the beginning of a difficult journey as many had begun to settle into *colonias* in the United States and establish new lives. Traveling back to Mexico on foot meant leaving behind connections and possessions, and making the journey on foot would take days if not weeks. The closest destination was Tijuana, then a growing city in the territory of Baja California, but no railroad connected Tijuana to the rest of Mexico, presenting even more difficulties for those who wished to return to their hometowns elsewhere in Mexico. Indeed, Tijuana remained relatively disconnected from the rest of the nation until the completion of the Sonora-Baja California railroad in 1948. Before this, however, trains connected it to the South Pacific Railroad's San Diego Yuma line did not have its own station.¹¹³ The nature of the railroad lines in Mexico during the 1920s illustrate how repatriates and deportees were funneled through certain border points, while others walked to the border.

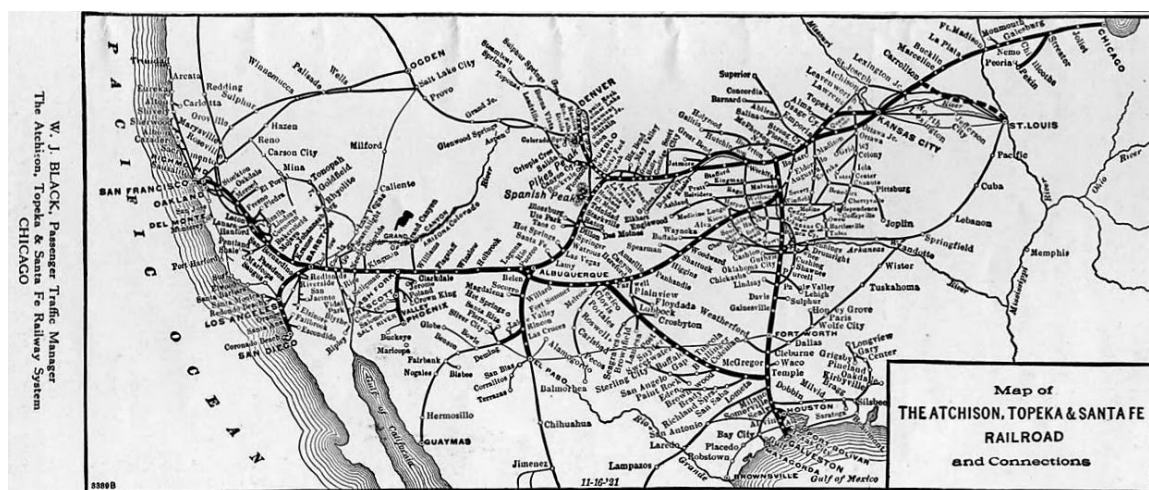


Figure 1.3: 1922 map of the railway lines in Northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest

¹¹³ Tim Girven, "Hollywood's Heterotopia: U.S. cinema, the Mexican border, and the making of Tijuana," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 3 (1994), 96.

Throughout 1921, the numbers of repatriates continued to remain high, prompting Mexico to expand its services for those who wished to be repatriated. Consulates served migrants in Los Angeles and San Francisco in California; Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and in seven cities in Texas (El Paso, Eagle Pass, Laredo, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Galveston).¹¹⁴ By May, trains would run between cities, picking up repatriates en route to the border. One group of repatriates filled a sixteen-car train with a reported five hundred and seventy-nine migrants, passing from city to city in Texas before arriving in Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas. From there, groups would travel to their hometowns with help from the government.¹¹⁵

Some businesses tried to capitalize on the exodus of Mexicans heading south. One photography company strategically located on the same floor as the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles published a promotion aimed at “los que regresan a Mexico.” For those who brought in the clipping, *Fotografia Mexicana* offered a fifty-cent discount on portraits that would only take fifteen minutes, targeting individuals visiting the consulate who needed the photos quickly for passports.¹¹⁶ The need to arrange for passport photographs suggests that while deportation rates rose in the 1920s, other Mexican migrants perhaps wished to return to Mexico temporarily, but with documentation to facilitate a future re-entry into the U.S.

In Arizona, the collapsing cotton market forced the Arizona Cotton Growers' Association to shutter its doors, after having recruited some 13,000 Mexican workers

¹¹⁴ “Empezaron a Ser Repatriados Los Mexicanos Muy Necesitados Que Están En Dallas Y Fort Worth,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, May 20, 1921, 1, 7.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ “Interesante a Iso que regresan a Mexico,” [ad] *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, December 18, 1920, 11.

during the temporary admissions program. A reported 800 migrants were left destitute, and the company could no longer pay for their return to Mexico – a situation that an immigration official described as “vexing and annoying.” Even before it ceased operations, the company had never paid some workers, while others were given checks that bounced. Mark Reisler summarizes the situation as various groups and officials debated over who would pay to return them to Mexico:

The labor group demanded that the secretary of labor deport the Mexicans. Some Arizona state legislators seconded this demand and appealed to Congress to appropriate special funds for deportation. The Immigration Bureau, however, steadfastly maintained that it was the responsibility of growers, not the federal government, to return the penniless Mexicans to their homeland. The Mexican government, having failed to obtain for the workers either financial redress from the growers or aid from state or federal authorities, was compelled to appropriate funds toward the relief of its unemployed nationals in Arizona.¹¹⁷

In a sense, these actors engaged in what resembles the children’s game of hot potato as the responsibility for nearly one thousand hungry migrants was thrown from office to agency, each one quickly tossing it to the next player. In the end, the music stopped, Mexico lost, and it paid to transport its citizens back.

This exodus did not end when the U.S. economy recovered, and despite increased attention to the issue from the Mexican government, other repatriates continued to walk back to Mexico when faced with no other options. One article published in June, 1926 (years after the recession) described the struggles migrant workers experienced in the U.S. Entitled “Painful Exodus of Mexican Braceros,” the author described how many migrants recruited by U.S. employers were smuggled across the border, then detained, deported, and warned that should they attempt to cross again, they would be sent to jail.

¹¹⁷ Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 50.

While some could pay for their train fare back to the border, they spent the last of their funds in border cities, and had “to rely on illicit means to get back to their lands.” Those without money for a train ticket made the trek on foot. The author recounted an encounter from the prior week, in which he and the assistant to the state governor came across a man walking along the Saltillo-Monterrey highway. Deported from the Matamoros, NL border crossing, the man had walked to Monterrey and was en route to Saltillo, Coahuila. In June, temperatures in the region easily exceed 100 degrees, yet he had walked for nine days, traversing nearly two hundred miles of desert. With limited options and only twenty-seven cents to his name, he planned to find temporary work in cities and continue his journey until he reached Celaya, Guanajuato – a journey of over five hundred miles in total. The man described how he and other migrants in the U.S. had suffered, and now he had been deported for the third time and threatened with jail time should he cross again.¹¹⁸

As the 1920s drew to a close, anti-Mexican sentiment remained strong among many as nativists and restrictionists argued over whether to tighten border controls even more. In South Texas, these debates contributed to very real consequences for migrants. The year before the stock market crash, U.S. authorities launched a wave of deportation raids, and as John Weber describes, “These were not simply random sweeps but arose directly from nativist desire to cut off immigration from Mexico.”¹¹⁹ They did not spontaneously emerge, however. They built upon previous ideas of race and migration

¹¹⁸ “Penoso Exodo De Braceros Mxicanos [sic]. Un trabajador tuvo que regresar a pie a los Estados Unidos.” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, June 12, 1926, 2.

¹¹⁹ John Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation: Exploitation of Mexican Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 104.

(and what Weber describes as “arguments over the proper place of Mexicans in the hierarchy of racial desirability”), but also upon the ongoing removals of Mexican migrants throughout the decade.¹²⁰

Deportability and Illegality

After the economy recovered from the 1921 recession, U.S. employers once again began to recruit and import Mexican migrants. The Southern Pacific Company continued to employ Mexican migrant workers in its railroad construction project in Nevada for years after the end of the wartime program, but one letter of complaint from a local argued that, “we find that some of them have criminal tendencies and some are insane.” W.J. Mathew, the District Attorney of Elko County, NV, wrote to the Secretary of Labor in 1923 to denounce the importation of Mexican men to work on the project, describing the problems being attributed to them: “We have had, in the past week, two Mexicans on our hands who are insane and violent, another committed a homicide and is in jail here waiting trial.”¹²¹ Such depictions of Mexican migrants were not unusual, and by this time, the deportability of Mexican migrants had been well established. While on the one hand, Mexicans served as inexpensive, disposable labor, on the other hand, the presence of large groups of temporary workers also led to fears that Mexicans, as racially inferior migrants, could be dangerous criminals and a threat to society. With the creation of the Border Patrol in 1924, U.S. officials facilitated the deportation of Mexicans and responded to the demands from many to enforce the border, albeit in small numbers

¹²⁰ Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation*: 103.

¹²¹ Correspondence, April 3, 1923, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

given the meager budget and staff on hand. With the passage of new immigration laws and the restriction of undesirable groups, after 1924, Mae Ngai argues that “Mexicans emerged as chronic illegal aliens. Illegal status became constitutive of a racialized Mexican identity and of Mexicans’ exclusion from the national community and polity.”¹²²

However, the Immigration Act passed that year excluded migration from the Western Hemisphere from migration quotas, leaving the pathway relatively open for migration from Mexico. This contradiction reflects the needs of employers and politicians in the U.S. who wanted to maintain an image of securing the border while still facilitating access to cheap, replaceable labor. Migrants’ legal and symbolic illegality functioned to make them even more tractable labor, as the immigration laws passed during the 1920s further criminalized unauthorized entry. The Immigration Act of 1924 drew more attention to the ongoing migration of Mexicans in and out of the country, and despite regulations, more Mexicans subsequently entered both legally and illegally.¹²³ While significant numbers of Mexicans had been pressured to leave the country, legislation during the 1920s and the creation of the Border Patrol further cemented ideas of illegality by criminalizing unauthorized entry and expanding the scope of border enforcement. The nature of this expansion had consequences that reached far beyond the border, as ethnic Mexicans became increasingly associated with deportability.

Mexican migrants had evolved in the eyes of the American public from “homing pigeons,” only a short trip away from their home country, to a threat. Lawrence Cardoso

¹²² Ngai, “The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien,” 72.

¹²³ Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen,” 241.

describes U.S. conceptions of Mexican migrants during the Porfiriato: “The Mexican was a “safe” worker to bring into the bosom of the American nation for short periods of time. He would not settle permanently near his place of employment, would cause no threat to the status quo, and would create no social problem as had the Chinese and the Japanese.”¹²⁴ Increasing rates of Mexican migration changed this perception in the early twentieth century. While the border remained porous in many ways to incoming migrants, social and economic factors subjected Mexican migrants to post-entry processes of coerced return, often accomplished through repatriation funded by the Mexican government.

Thus, the formation of the Border Patrol in 1924 cannot alone explain the forced removal of Mexican migrants during the 1920s. While formal deportations occurred, often in the case of migrants convicted of crimes other than unauthorized border entry and who had served time in American jails, these numbers do not represent the entirety of return migration. In fact, focusing on only formal deportations obscures how the removal of Mexican migrants became an integral part of how the U.S. economy functioned. In this system, the repatriation of migrants during economic downturns or at the end of agricultural seasons created an underclass of temporary workers. Despite immigration policy, their crime was not crossing the border without authorization – it was existing after they were no longer needed, thereby posing a threat to American citizens.

¹²⁴ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States*, 22. Michael Piore also discusses the concept of migrants as “birds of passage” who work temporary, lower paid jobs in a dual labor market, and then presumably return home. Michael Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

While migrants' disposability remained integral to their desirability for U.S. employers, the methods used to "dispose" of them varied during this decade.

Mexico's Response

While some employers paid for contracted workers' transportation to the border after the end of the season, this still required the Mexican government to fund transportation or leave large numbers of unemployed migrants languishing in border cities. In response to this issue, the Mexican consulate of Phoenix published a report in 1920 directed to the Arizona Cotton Growers' Association of Tempe. In this statement, Eduardo C. Gonzalez, the Mexican consulate, and Abelardo B. Sobarzo, a representative from the state of Sonora, criticized U.S. employers for not paying for the full passage back for Mexican workers they had recruited within Mexico. They wrote: "we therefore believe it is entirely fair and reasonable, in cases such as these deportations, that the Company cover expenses until the deportee reaches the place where he was recruited because the Mexican government, under no circumstances must confront these expenses."¹²⁵ This perspective echoed that of many Mexican citizens, who resented the financial burden that repatriation placed upon the country.

Alvaro Obregón assumed the Mexican presidency in late 1920, after the interim presidency of Adolfo de la Huerta that followed the assassination of President Venustiano Carranza six months earlier. In addition to this turmoil, Obregón was also faced with the task of achieving recognition of the new government by foreign countries. Although the

¹²⁵ "Obtuvo Buen Exito La Comision Investigadora de la Situacion de los Mexicanos en el Valle del Rio Sabado," *El Tucsonense*, Tucson, AZ, August 10, 1920, 2.

United States had soliciting Mexican workers for years, it had yet to recognize the government. Thus, the political climate of the early 1920s was even more fraught with tension.¹²⁶ While the policy of repatriation had existed since the end of the Mexican-American War, Obregón took a different approach that proposed more involvement of consulates.¹²⁷ In 1921, he began to establish a system for how to handle the process of repatriating so many citizens from the US. The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores worked with its consular officials to transport migrants to the border, as per guidelines. From there, the Secretaría de Gobernación took charge of transportation within the country to make sure that repatriates returned home. To ensure that repatriates would be able to find employment when they returned, in February of 1921, Obregón and other government officials signed an accord to prevent immigration of foreigners to Mexico during this period.¹²⁸ However, the costs of funding repatriations weighed heavily on the state. According to Lawrence Cardoso, the government spent over one million dollars on transportation, food, and other expenses to approximately fifty thousand migrants during this period. They returned to a country still in recovery and unable to absorb so many workers, however, prompting yet more emigration north as “notices abounded that the repatriates were for the most part unemployed and unemployable in their native land.” He

¹²⁶ Jaime R. Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy Prior to the Great Depression,” *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 2 (April 2007). A number of other issues, including claims against Mexico by US citizens and businesses, complicated this process. As Aguila writes, “These issues and recognition were addressed during the 1923 Bucareli Agreements. Nonetheless, during 1921-1923, the migration stream remained unencumbered by the lack of formal diplomatic ties between the two nations, and except in a very few instances this process remained the same until 1929.” 215-216.

¹²⁷ Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy”: 216.

¹²⁸ Cardoso, “La repatriación de braceros,” 584.

estimates that the majority of those helped by the government under Obregón shortly thereafter returned to the United States.¹²⁹

Once Plutarco Elías Calles entered office at the end of 1924, he made efforts to restrict further emigration of Mexican nationals. Months after entering office, he worked to establish migration offices in two cities in Coahuila, Saltillo and Torreón. As “two of the busiest points of departure for the United States,” these two cities were positioned along railway lines and migrants regularly passed through on en route to or from the border points at Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros. During his time in office, representatives also attempted to education migrants about “immigration laws, their rights, and how to contact the nearest consulate.” A third initiative in the efforts to address the migration crisis focused on restricting the exit of migrants from Mexico. As a result, rail travel in northern Mexico was restricted and those attempting to migrate to the U.S. could only purchase tickets to Torreón and Saltillo (the locations of the new migration offices) in an effort to make sure that they would be informed of the above matters. When such efforts failed to address the issue, the presidential administration launched a campaign to inform Mexicans that the government would no longer pay for repatriations, and that migrants would have to shoulder the burden.¹³⁰

Mexican leaders had viewed emigration as a way to modernize the nation, hoping that returnees would bring back new skills and capital.¹³¹ During the 1920s, new irrigation projects were proposed for areas of northern Mexico, with the idea that

¹²⁹ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States*, 102-103.

¹³⁰ Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy”: 222-223.

¹³¹ Such ideas experienced a resurgence in the 1930s as hundreds of thousands of migrants returned and Manuel Gamio remained a proponent of such ideas.

“repatriation would bring modern agricultural knowledge and practices and help jump-start development in the new irrigation districts. These were the perfect colonists for the new Mexican agriculture planned by the government.”¹³² Despite these hopes, the majority of repatriates continued to return with few possessions after experiencing financial difficulties and the threat (or reality) of forced removal from the U.S. In turn, resentment built and efforts increased to discourage migrants from leaving the country. One propagandistic piece written by Alfonso Fábila and printed by the Secretaría de Gobernación in 1929 warned Mexicans of the dangers that a life in the United States presented, mentioning the effects of the climate and work conditions on one’s health, as well anti-Mexican racism that could lead to murder. Additionally, he argued, one quarter of all Mexican women who had migrated to the U.S. had turned to prostitution after being corrupted by American morals.¹³³ The range of efforts aimed at discouraging emigration ultimately did not make much difference in the face of ever-present labor demands from U.S. employers and the higher wages they offered.

Samuel J. Treviño, professor and consul of Hidalgo, Texas, took a different approach and published a guide for Mexican emigrants and those wishing to leave Mexico. *El Mexicano en el Extranjero*, published in 1928, provided useful information regarding the paperwork required to cross and a list of Mexican consuls in the U.S. However, he also mentioned the risks at the border as well as problems with racism and violence in the U.S., including segregation in some regions of the country. At the border, he warned, enterprising criminals took advantage of migrants by overcharging them for

¹³² Aboites Aguilar, *The Transnational Dimensions of Mexican Irrigation, 1900-1950*: 74.

¹³³ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United State*, 110.

transportation or currency exchanges, while others recruited individuals to smuggle alcohol across the border. Additionally, he pointed out that *coyotes* targeted migrants, and after stripping them of their possessions, these thieves would throw them into the Río Bravo instead of helping them cross. *Enganchadores* presented another problem for Mexicans, and he warned that migrants “should also not let themselves be guided by the first recruiter they see who intends to delude [the migrant] with flattering promises of good salaries, magnificent homes, and unsurpassable treatment.”¹³⁴ While published as a guidebook, the short booklet also served as another effort by Mexican officials to warn of the dangers of emigration.

The Mexican Health “Menace”

As John McKiernan-González argues, public health concerns contributed to border enforcement measures even during the overlooked period of the nineteenth century. While Mexican migration continued to increase, ideas of disease became increasingly racialized.¹³⁵ The spectacle of violence from the Revolution contributed to worries about what could cross the border. One public health report from 1917 described the fears that Mexico’s health problems could spread to the U.S.: “The disturbed political conditions in Mexico for the past five years and the consequent migration of refugees, soldiers, and their families, with the attendant misery, poverty, and absolute lack of sanitary measures, have resulted in spreading typhus fever to all parts of Mexico, its

¹³⁴ Samuel L. Treviño, *El Mexico en el Extranjero: Guia de suma utilidad para los ciudadanos mexicanos residents en los Estados Unidos y en la República Mexicana* (McAllen, TX: Diogenes, 1928), 13-14.

¹³⁵ John McKiernan-González, *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas-Mexico Border, 1848-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

prevalence in border towns near the States being a recognized menace.”¹³⁶ That year, nearly 130,000 Mexican migrants faced an extensive screening while crossing the border, including delousing, bathing, and mental examinations with the goal of preventing contagious diseases from entering the U.S.¹³⁷ However, fears of this “menace” also resulted in the coerced removal of Mexicans in the U.S. throughout this period.

The construction of Mexicans as a racialized other, tainted by indigenous blood, influenced perceptions of the risks they presented to Americans in the U.S. Mark Reisler writes,

Being Indians, immigrants from below the border had no appreciation of even the most elementary standards of cleanliness and decency. As a result, Mexicans contributed greatly to crime, health, slum, and welfare problems. The cost of Mexican labor to greedy employers might be low, nativists argued, but the cost to American society was immeasurable. At the same time that municipalities were forced to subsidize Mexican farm workers during the off-season, the presence of those very workers threatened the well-being of taxpayers who supported them.¹³⁸

Again, the entrance of Mexican laborers into the country did not pose a problem – it was their presence after labor demand had subsided that threatened society. Stereotypes of Mexican migrants as docile, subservient workers contributed to fears that they would

¹³⁶ C.C. Pierce, “Combating Typhus Fever on the Mexican Border,” *Public Health Reports* 32 (1917): 426. Alan Knight discusses the horrifying effects of the Revolution on public health in *The Mexican Revolution, Volume 2*: “But disease, apart from being the single biggest killer, also contributed to the redistribution of population, as people quit poor, hungry, unhealthy regions in search of something better. Thereby they spread disease – the greater mobility as well as the greater destitution of the revolutionary years ensured that these epidemics would outstrip their Porfirian predecessors – and they joined that great army of *déracinés*: migrant workers, refugees, soldiers, deserters, bandits, beggars, which represented one of the main human legacies of the Revolution.” 420.

¹³⁷ S. Deborah Kang, “Implementation: How the Borderlands Redefined Federal Immigration Law and Policy in California, Arizona, and Texas, 1917-1924,” *California Legal History* 7 (2012): 248. The previous year, a match was lit near the baths in an El Paso jail and resulted in the gruesome deaths of 27 prisoners, and in 1917, Carmelita Torres resisted the kerosene baths and was soon joined by thousands of protesters in what became known as the Bath Riots.”

¹³⁸ Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen,” 245.

accept living in substandard, unhygienic conditions, which could create further problems should they intermingle with society.¹³⁹ However, given the limited options available to Mexican migrant workers during this period and the rules of the temporary admission program, a complaint about living conditions or attempts to find other employment could easily result in formal deportation. In turn, employers spent as little as possible on lodging and housing for their temporary, alien workers since migrants could be easily replaced

The deportation of migrants suffering from illness or with other physical conditions became an issue for Mexico even before the first Bracero Program ended. In 1918, the Mexican consul in Brownsville wrote to the Mexican ambassador in Washington D.C. as well as the head of the consular department in Mexico City. He reported that the U.S. frequently and inhumanely deported migrants who became ill or suffered from dementia. Additionally, prostitutes received the same treatment.¹⁴⁰ While such groups were inadmissible under U.S. law, the consul pointed out that in the case of sick migrants, they had become sick while in the United States, and thus their deportation was unjust. Regardless of how long they had lived in the U.S. or their connections to the country, a Mexican migrant who became physically or mentally ill faced forced expulsion from the country. For those who had resided in the U.S. for years, deportation could leave them separated from any community or source of support. Nonetheless, they had become physically undesirable and thus deportable.

¹³⁹ Reisler, "Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen," 235.

¹⁴⁰ Correspondence, September 9, 1918, File 17-17-265, SRE, Mexico City.

While Mexico had begun to recover from the Revolution and the serious epidemics that plagued the country during the previous years, the practice of deporting sick migrants in the U.S. worried many Mexicans and led to more criticism of labor migration north. During the 1920s, the racialization of Mexicans and increases in deportation contributed to problems in northern Mexico with the arrival of sick, contagious deportees in border cities. As Jaime Aguila cites, in December of 1921, “the Mexican consul in Detroit, Michigan reported that the most common reasons for deportation were the violation of American immigration laws, indigence, and tuberculosis.”¹⁴¹ Fears of a typhus outbreak had diminished, but in the U.S., Mexican migrants and U.S. citizens alike continued to suffer from tuberculosis. However, the race of patients determined the options available to them. Even during the 1920s, few African Americans received treatment in U.S. institutions for the disease and many sanatoriums still excluded them as patients.¹⁴² Mexican migrants suffering from the illness did not only face discrimination or segregation, however, they also faced deportation as officials viewed it as the easiest method of handling the problem.

Immigration laws at the time allowed migrants who had been in the U.S. for more than five years to stay. However, in the case of Alfonso Camargo, a man suffering from leprosy who had been in the U.S. for eighteen years and was therefore not deportable, immigration officials worked with health authorities to expel him to Mexico. He had lived in Jerome, Arizona, for 15 years, but when a doctor reported him to the State Board of Health in 1921, he was effectively quarantined while local authorities strategized how

¹⁴¹ Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy”: 213-214.

¹⁴² Barbara Bates, *Bargaining for Life: A Social History of Tuberculosis, 1876-1938* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 291-292.

to send to Mexico. Sterling C. Robertson, the Inspector in Charge of the U.S. Department of Labor, “suggested that if the alien was willing to return to Mexico voluntarily there was nothing to prevent the county from assisting him to return.” Soon thereafter, Camargo was transported to Nogales, and thereafter returned to Mexico. Camargo’s case was not unusual, and in fact became increasingly common as authorities sought ways to dispose of sick and contagious Mexicans by sending them to Mexico without violating immigration laws.¹⁴³

Attempting to track down extralegal and coerced removals of migrants presents a number of issues. Notably, Mexican and U.S. sources often present quite different accounts of events. In 1922, for example, the U.S. Department of Labor attempted to find out what had happened to an estimated 200 Mexicans who had been reportedly mistreated while working in the mining industry in the San Francisco area, and subsequently deported in terrible conditions without due process. The Mexico City-based newspaper *Excelsior* had reported on the case, but U.S. authorities did not find any record that they had been formally deported. One official maintained that no record of such a large deportation existed, but that of a smaller group of deportees returned through El Paso, “two of these aliens... were confined in the Southwestern Insane Asylum immediately prior to their deportation and are possibly the two referred to as being “found in a state of dementia as a result of their sufferings along the way”.”¹⁴⁴ In another letter, a U.S. official reported that physicians determined that they had likely been insane since before entering the U.S., but this deportation of migrants with mental health issues

¹⁴³ Correspondence, July 19, 1921, Records of the INS, NARA, Washington, D.C., 55091.6

¹⁴⁴ Correspondence, June 10, 1922, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

was hardly unusual during this time.¹⁴⁵ Both this case and that of Camargo illustrate the problem with only focusing on statistics of formal deportations. American authorities often sought other methods of expelling undesirable Mexican migrants that were never recorded as deportations, and these removals often posed serious problems for Mexican border cities.

Conclusion

Many migrants who returned to Mexico did help in the nation's recovery after the Revolution, bringing back ideas and capital from the U.S. that led to the development of new projects. In Michoacán, those who returned to Paracho were said come back with "a spirit of order and enterprise," ready to help update the city's plumbing and electrical systems after having experienced life in the U.S., while in Cherán, former braceros "formed the basis of the town's anti-clerical faction," which had important ramifications during the Cristiada.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, returning migrants later were reported to be prominent leaders in the Cristero movement. However, the forced removal that many migrants experienced during the 1920s also had significant consequences for Mexico as a sending country and for future Mexican migrants.

The World War I temporary admission program contributed to the racialization of Mexicans as "peons," particularly suited to manual labor due to their supposed indigenous blood, as well as their presumed short stature and lower levels of intelligence. At the same time, the frequent repatriations during this period, largely funded by the

¹⁴⁵ Correspondence, May 22, 1922 and May 24, 1922, 55091.6, RG 85, NARA, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴⁶ Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Volume 2, 324.

Mexican government, worked to reify Mexicans as disposable labor force. This association of Mexican ethnicity with deportability extended to other ethnic Mexicans in the U.S., setting the stage for the repatriation campaigns that soon followed.

Meanwhile, cities northern Mexico faced a seemingly unending influx of migrants expelled from the U.S. due to economic conditions or being deemed physically undesirable. Officials and residents reacted with fear and discrimination, but U.S. employers' manipulation of international labor migration through recruitment and coerced repatriation ensured that migrants would continue to circulate while many became part of the growing *población flotante*. While President Calles (known as the *jefe máximo*) attempted to minimize emigration and control the border throughout his presidency and his subsequent influence during the *Maximato*, such policies could not address the growing inequality in Mexico that prompted emigration or the decades of cyclical migration that continued to push migrants north.¹⁴⁷

In early 1929, another immigration law attempted to restrict the entry of Mexican migrants into the U.S. and criminalized illegal entry with fees or jail time for second-time offenders.¹⁴⁸ This capped off a decade of increasing attention to the border, not only because of Mexican migration, but also due to worries that Chinese migrants would enter the U.S. through Mexico.¹⁴⁹ On October 29, 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed and plunged the nation into a decade-long depression that reverberated throughout the

¹⁴⁷ For more information on Calles and the *Maximato*, see Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); and Michael Monteón, "The Child is Father of the Man: Personality and Politics in Revolutionary Mexico," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 10 (2004), 43-61.

¹⁴⁸ Kelly Lytle Hernández, "Persecuted Like Criminals," 229.

¹⁴⁹ Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Americas. In response to widespread unemployment, anti-Mexican sentiment only increased. While the numbers of Mexicans repatriated during the Great Depression was unprecedented, the campaigns and raids conducted across the United States emerged as a continuation of policies and procedures used during the 1920s, not as a new strategy. By this time, the ease with which Mexican migrant workers could be imported and deported had already cast the Mexican migrant as a temporary figure, one that could be easily disposed of when economic and social pressures made its presence no longer desired. For many Mexicans south of the border, the repatriation campaigns during the Great Depression served as yet another example of the U.S.'s exploitation of its compatriots and recognized the detrimental effects that labor migration had on Mexico's border regions.

While studies of U.S.-Mexico migration and forced removal offer policy-relevant conclusions and details, they also help us to understand the struggles faced by Mexican migrants exploited by systems of labor migration.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, understanding the scope of return migration and extralegal deportations during the 1920s highlights how U.S. immigration policy has influenced the Mexican government and its economy even as it attempted to emerge from the rubble of the Revolution.

¹⁵⁰ The focus on migration studies and their relevance for public policy raises a number of problems, as Nicholas De Genova argues: "The concern of such researchers with policy-relevance, now as then, entails presuppositions through which research is effectively formulated and conducted from the standpoint of the state, with all its ideological conceits more or less conspicuously smuggled in tow." "Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 419 (2002), 421.

Chapter 2: “Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire”:

Deportation Policy, Return Migration, and the Mexican Border, 1930-1942

Introduction

Along with hundreds of thousands of other Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Alberto S. Muñoz and his family were repatriated from the U.S. after the onset of the Great Depression. He wrote a letter to President Abelardo Rodríguez soon after arriving in Mexico to ask for help for him and his family and explained that he, his wife, and their five children had been abandoned in Los Mochis, Sinaloa after leaving the U.S. His young daughter had just died, and his wife remained in grave health. He asked the president for passage for himself, his wife, and their four surviving children. He received a response from the government informing him that the matter had been turned over to the Secretaría de Gobernación. In his next letter, he pled for help and revealed that since his last communication, his wife had also passed away. As a result, he would only need a few fares to transport him and his remaining children to Chihuahua, Chihuahua, his hometown.¹⁵¹ No archival sources offer insight into what happened to Muñoz and his family after this, but his desperate requests to the government reflect the experiences of many repatriates at the time. After arriving in Mexico, repatriates were no longer the responsibility of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. They had now arrived in Mexico and were no longer an international concern, so the Secretaría de Gobernación handled their cases. However, the office often failed to act on behalf of these migrants who then became lost in a web of internal bureaucracy. Consequently, many found

¹⁵¹ Correspondence, ALR 244.1/29, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico

themselves stranded elsewhere in the country and unable to return home while their situations became increasingly desperate.

The experiences of these migrants rarely emerge in the scholarly literature on Mexican repatriation, which has largely drawn on oral histories and archival sources based in the United States or in the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. In focusing only on well-organized repatriation campaigns during the early years of the Great Depression what gets left out? Exploring the experiences of repatriates and deportees after they returned to Mexico sheds light on the many difficulties experienced as migrants returned to Mexico, yet remained far from home. An exploration of what happens to returning migrants challenges the focus of circular migration in the historiography, in which migrants work in another area for a period of time but continue to return to the same place, and ignores the violent processes of forced removal that have continued to form the basis of U.S.-Mexico border enforcement. In this chapter, I investigate how various forms of return migration during the 1930s had a number of other consequences not only for returning migrants, but also for Mexico and for Mexicans living in the U.S. The border underwent further surveillance during this period, altering everyday life in border cities, and Mexicans in the U.S. faced violence and exploitation at the hands of U.S. authorities. During the early part of the decade, Prohibition made the border even more contentious as agents attempted to stop smuggling attempts, and immigration policies contributed to ideas of certain groups of migrants as illegal and deportable.

Kelly Lytle-Hernández argues that after 1924, “the deportation of unsanctioned border crossers transformed the challenge from one of maximizing the potential benefits of mass emigration into one of managing the problems that came with mass

deportation.”¹⁵² As the Mexican state enacted major reforms related to public health, culture, education, and land, return migration presented yet another demographic crisis.¹⁵³ This chapter focuses on Mexico’s northern cities, in particular Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Nogales, Sonora, and Torreón, Coahuila, to explore how border enforcement policies and return migration (both voluntary and involuntary) affected northern Mexico. Ciudad Juárez and Nogales were two of the three border cities through which officials stated they would deport migrants, and Torreón became a city flooded with repatriates.¹⁵⁴ Revolutionary violence had not yet ended by this point, however, and repatriates arrived in areas deeply divided by fierce political disagreements. For example, the onset of the Great Depression only intensified debates over land reforms and the presence of Communists in Coahuila’s Comarca Lagunera, an important cotton region, leading to a massacre in Matamoros (close to Torreón) in June of 1930.¹⁵⁵

Framing return migration and border enforcement as part of Mexican history in this period illustrates how U.S. migration policies affected northern Mexico. The aftermath of border enforcement efforts in the 1920s combined with the arrival of masses of returning migrants presented serious challenges for cities, as well as for the government. This resulted in increased crime, homelessness, public health concerns, and discrimination against migrants, among other consequences. During the 1930s,

¹⁵² Kelly Lytle-Hernández, “Persecuted Like Criminals,” 225.

¹⁵³ Mary Kay Vaughn writes of the Revolution as a demographic crisis: “the spectacle of masses of people, urban and rural, in military rebellion and social movement, marked often by hunger, violence, dislocation and rapid mobility.” *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 11

¹⁵⁴ Correspondence from Lic. José López Lira to Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, August 4, 1931, File IV-343-19, SRE, Mexico City, Mexico.

¹⁵⁵ Jocelyn Olcott, “Mueras y matanza: Spectacles of Terror and Violence in Postrevolutionary Mexico,” in *A Century of Revolution*, Ed. Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 62-66.

deportation and border enforcement policies also opened up opportunities for authorities and criminals (often not exclusive of each other) on both sides of the border to profit from the vulnerable status of Mexican migrants.

The second part of this chapter addresses how deportation served as a way to profit from migrants. On the border, coyotes took advantage of recent immigration restrictions and anti-immigrant sentiment to develop booming businesses in helping migrants cross illegally. In particular, I focus on one case involving a Mexican coyote and web of associates, including a U.S. Consul official who served as his partner-in-crime. While Mexican migrants wrote frequently to complain of their abuses and Mexico's secret police agency launched multiple investigations into these activities, the U.S. government dismissed such concerns. Comparing declassified documents from both sides of the border illustrates how the voices of Mexican migrants can so easily be erased and silenced, and stresses the importance of incorporating documents from Mexico's archives when looking at migration and border issues. Additionally, an analysis of how the increasing rates of deportation changed border areas such as the Sonora/Arizona region offers more perspective into the early history of *coyotaje* and unauthorized Mexican migration, which in this period tend to be considered mostly in the context of passages across the Río Grande.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ “During the first half of the twentieth century, most of them swam across the Rio Grande into Texas. By the 1960s, more of them were headed to work in California, and so most began to cross on foot through Tijuana into neighboring San Diego.” David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009): 1. Another recent work that examines the long history of smuggling across the Río Grande is: George T. Díaz, *Border Contraband: A History of Smuggling Across the Rio Grande* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015). Grace Peña Delgado's work focuses on the Sonora/Arizona border, but in the context of Chinese migration from Mexico to the United States.

This chapter ends with an analysis of deportation as a diplomatic issue between the two countries and traces how federal and local governments negotiated deportation policy during this turbulent period. Throughout the 1920s, Mexico frequently paid for the repatriations of its migrants, even though the U.S. had unilaterally lifted immigration restrictions to allow cheap laborers to enter the country. At this time, Mexico's state leaders continued to struggle with how to gain control of a nation recovering from a revolution. During the 1930s, the government coalesced into its eventual one-party system, but the process encountered major challenges and hiccups. Far from the powerful one-party state that would later emerge under the PRI, the government at this time remained what Mary Kay Vaughn describes as "a fledgling institution subject to persistent contention in a context of intense sociopolitical mobilization around competing projects."¹⁵⁷ Although it funded repatriation efforts, overall, a hodgepodge of conflicting ideologies made the narrative of return migration more complex than a nationalistic project. The challenge of returning migrants shaped the post-revolutionary state's policies and approaches to U.S.-Mexico relations. Examining Mexico's official response to return migration and the everyday resistance by Mexican officials on the border reveals how various state actors negotiated the process with U.S. officials and worked to address the difficulties of an unceasing labor migration.

During the Great Depression, Mexico again contributed a significant amount to fund the coerced return of its migrants. After Lázaro Cárdenas enters office, however, the government began to resist foreign influences, resulting in the much-vaunted oil

¹⁵⁷ Mary Kay Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants and Schools in Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 8.

expropriations of 1938. However, the country also began to contest border policies and a number of debates arose as Mexican officials resisted the frequent deportations of Mexican migrants that resulted in unwanted Mexican migrants being left in border regions. If deportation procedures during the 1920s formed the basis for repatriation campaigns during the early 1930s, then the late 1930s represented in a period in which Cardenas' more nationalist Mexico began to push back against its neighbor's exploitative deportation practices. At the same time, the experiences of deportees and repatriates in Mexico's northern states reflect the government's ambivalence towards its emigrants.

The Significance of Repatriation in Mexican and Chicana/o History

In the 1930s, Carey McWilliams argued that Mexican labor even throughout the era of repatriation campaigns passed through a cycle, writing, "Beginning in February, 1931, thousands of Mexicans, many of whom were citizens of the United States, were herded together by the authorities and shipped back to Mexico, to get them off the relief rolls... Many Mexicans have been "repatriated" two and three times, going through this same curious cycle of entry, work, repatriation."¹⁵⁸ In later scholarly works on the subject, however, the campaigns increasingly became represented as unprecedented and devastating to Mexican communities in the US.

Within the past few decades, Chicana/o Studies historians and scholars have pushed the analysis of repatriation campaigns beyond coverage of the movement's effects

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 129-130. McWilliams interpreted the increase in repatriation as the death knell of Mexican labor, which he writes had a heyday from 1914-1934, but his observations of the cyclical nature of the US's approach to deporting migrant labor continues to remain relevant.

on repatriates to examine its significance for those who remained in the United States.¹⁵⁹ While actual numbers of returnees vary, most generally agree that somewhere around half a million individuals and families of Mexican descent left the United States during the decade of the 1930s.¹⁶⁰ During this period, migrants developed ideas of political consciousness, citizenship, and belonging that stemmed in part from experiencing sustained exclusion in the US's entrenched racial hierarchy. Rather than simply crossing the border for higher wages, they considered a multitude of other factors that speak to their understandings of Mexico and the borderlands vis-à-vis the US. Throughout these decades, migrants evinced particular ideas of their relationship to the state as well as to other ethnic Mexicans. While works that center exclusively on return migration remain few, the subject of repatriation remains a popular topic for historians seeking to reconstruct the experiences of ethnic Mexicans before World War II and the changes that the post-war period brought.

Statistics on how many Mexicans were repatriated vary wildly, and estimates by Mexican historians skew considerably lower. Mercedes Carreras de Velasco's text on the subject cites 331,717 and Victor Urquidi's *Otro siglo perdido* claims 312,000.¹⁶¹ Works written with the last two decades as well as the majority of works by Chicana/o historians argue for anywhere from 400,000 to over one million. One recent article analyzing the

¹⁵⁹ Many of these works cite inspiration from Stuart Hall's writings on identity formation, and in these books, repatriation becomes a central site for reevaluating one's identity and belonging. (See: *A World of Its Own*, García; *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, Guerin-Gonzales; and *Becoming Mexican-American*, Sánchez; among others.)

¹⁶⁰ Mexican historian Fernando Saúl Alanis Enciso has produced one of the most recent pieces on repatriation statistics, concluding that repatriations after 1933 are largely insignificant.

¹⁶¹ Mercedes Carreras de Velasco, *Los mexicanos que devolvió el crisis: 1929-1932* (México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1974). Victor L. Urquidi, *Otro siglo perdido* (México: Colegio de México, 2005).

variation in statistics states that the number most likely hovers closer to 400,000.¹⁶² However, the process of counting individuals presented a number of problems, not only due to the nebulousness of qualifying who fell under the category of repatriate, and who left the U.S. willingly or due to other factors. Many rural regions of Mexico distrusted officials, including census-takers and other government representatives. Residents of one village in Jalisco stated that the Mexican state, increasingly eager to collect data on its people and land, “*nomás quiere chingar.*”¹⁶³ Thus, the numbers provided during this period vary wildly.

According to estimates of what happened to repatriates after arriving in Mexico, 80% of those repatriated the early 1930s returned to towns where their relatives lived, and another 15% went to cities.¹⁶⁴ These numbers describing the ultimate destination of returning migrants refer to official repatriation trips and government records during the early years of the Depression, however, leaving out those who returned on their own or those who went to Mexico after 1934. Even given conservative estimates of 400,000 repatriates during this period, approximately 80,000 migrants went to other parts of Mexico. Others spent some time in the border region before being able to make it home.

However, studies of return migration’s effects on northern Mexico in this period remain few. Casey Walsh’s recent work on the role of repatriates in settling parts of

¹⁶² Brian Gratton and Emily Merchant, “Immigration, Repatriation and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950,” *International Migration Review* 47 (2013), 949.

¹⁶³ José Eduardo Zárate Hernández, *Procesos de identidad y globalización económica: El Llano Grande en el sur de Jalisco* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1997), 175; Alan Knight “The Weight of the State in Modern Mexico,” in *Studies in the Formation of the Nation State in Latin America*, Ed. James Dunkerley (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2002), 217.

¹⁶⁴ Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, “Nos vamos al norte: la emigración de San Luis Potosí a Estados Unidos entre 1920 y 1940,” *Migraciones Internacionales* 2:4 (July-Dec 2004): 83.

northern Mexico and on irrigation projects offers one narrative of how this movement shaped the region, but the majority of other works on the subject continue to focus on the experiences of repatriates who ultimately returned to their hometowns.¹⁶⁵ According to Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso, one of the few Mexican historians who has written about repatriation, oral histories demonstrate that repatriates, even children born in the U.S. with no experience of Mexico, acclimated quickly to life in Mexico.¹⁶⁶ In Alan Knight's assessment of Mexico during the Great Depression, he states that "Surplus workers – their numbers increased by the 300,000 returning from the United States – could to some extent be absorbed into the subsistence sector (they could, it was said, "go back to the *quelite*"), returning to the 70,000 villages scattered across the face of the country where – in the absence of state social security systems – local and family self-help remained the principal source of welfare." Ultimately, he claims "perhaps for the last time in its long history, rural Mexico served as a sponge to soak up unemployment and compensate for the downswing in the urban, industrial, export economy."¹⁶⁷ However, this focus on rural populations in Mexico's central and southern region overlooks the experiences of those in border regions, whose economies differed in notable ways. Returning migrants and deportees who remained in northern cities or stranded along railroad lines after entering

¹⁶⁵ Casey Walsh, *Building the Border: A Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton Along the Texas-Mexico Border* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁶ Based on his field research in the 1930s, James Gilbert comes to a very different conclusion and explores how those born in the U.S. struggled with material differences. James Gilbert, "A field study in Mexico of the Mexican repatriation movement," Ph.D. Diss, University of Southern California, 1934. Alanís Enciso, "Nos vamos al norte," 84.

¹⁶⁷ Alan Knight, "The Character and Consequences of the Great Depression in Mexico," in *The Great Depression in Latin America*, Eds. Paulo Drinto and Alan Knight (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 220.

Mexico, such as Alberto Muñoz and his family, often faced a much more tumultuous transition into life south of the border.¹⁶⁸

In numerous works, Alanis Enciso has argued that the Mexican government's welcoming attitudes toward repatriates were no more than attempts to mold a positive image – in reality, he summarizes their attitude as “*que se queden allá*,” or “let them stay there.”¹⁶⁹ He critiques the idea that Cárdenas supported repatriation campaigns, and argues that the state often disassociated itself from its migrants and intervened only in extreme situations throughout the early part of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁰ Although Mexico espoused a policy of welcoming back emigrants, he pinpoints the state's actions as more of a response to criticisms on high rates of Spanish migration, rather than a concerted attempt to successfully repatriate Mexican nationals. For Alanis Enciso, repatriation was a primarily local experience as regional governments handled the task of reincorporating migrants. Moreover, he states that there are no indications that repatriation affected the social or economic life of the nation as an entity, dismissing ideas of the “nationalist and paternalist politics of Mexican repatriation.”¹⁷¹

Lore Diana Kuehnert has argued in her study of newspaper coverage from 1928-1936 that in the 30s,

The United States' insult to Mexican pride became a rallying point for patriotic sentiment. Writers characterized repatriates as long lost “sons

¹⁶⁸ Casey Walsh's monograph, *Building the Borderlands*, is one notable exception that shows how repatriates became a useful source of labor as the border region became more fertile due to irrigation.

¹⁶⁹ Fernando Saúl Alanis Enciso, *Que se queden allá: El gobierno de México y la repatriación de mexicanos en Estados Unidos (1934-1940)* (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2007).

¹⁷⁰ Fernando Saúl Alanis Enciso, “No cuenten conmigo: La política de repatriación del gobierno mexicano y sus nacionales en Estados Unidos, 1910–1928,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 19 (Summer 2003): 403.

¹⁷¹ Alanis Enciso, *Que se queden allá*, 127, 140, 148.

and daughters” who had never lost their nationality – their Mexicaness – regardless of citizenship or place of birth. They extolled the repatriates as people who came with tools, small sums of money, cars, appliances and experience with American technology, in ways similar to the proponents of other immigrant groups.”¹⁷²

While this represents some of the discourse circulating around the return migrants, it does not quite address the intricacies of such coverage and the knowledge production that it created. Repatriates simultaneously emerged as prodigal sons, economic threats, traitors, or as culturally advanced progenitors of a modern Mexico. For residents of border regions, however, the ongoing waves of return migration in which repatriates and deportees often arrived in desperate conditions led to feelings of discrimination and resentment.

Debates over Repatriation and Discrimination against Repatriates in Mexico

As repatriates began to arrive in Mexico *en masse*, newspapers reported on migrants’ travails in the US, their passage back, and those left stranded in northern cities such as Torreón and Nuevo Laredo. However, they also discussed how repatriates could be reincorporated into society in projects such as repatriation colonies. President Álvaro Obregón attempted to start two colonies for repatriates in Oaxaca and Mexicali, which were intended to serve as economic projects where middle-class farmers could grow cotton. The colonies also served as examples of the influence of eugenics theory on ideas of belonging, however, as only families were recruited to live in these planned

¹⁷² Lore Diana Kuehnert, “Pernicious Foreigners: Mexican newspaper debates over immigration, emigration and repatriation, 1928-1936,” (PhD diss, University of California, Riverside, 2006) 28.

communities away from the regressive influence of other Mexicans.¹⁷³ As anthropologist Manuel Gamio described, “we suggest that a group of repatriated laborers be used to make an experiment in colonization...the influence of those groups will work automatically and effectively in the great social mass which is still retarded.”¹⁷⁴ These individuals would provide a basis for developing a better Mexican populace that could serve as an example for others. Gamio echoed the sentiments of many regarding the benefits of return migration that was perceived to also result in additional skills, technologies and cultural changes that could benefit Mexico. Not only did this fail to address the impoverished circumstances that migrants arrived in, but it also failed to predict the future waves of repatriates.

Several programs sprung up to help the repatriates, however. Leonardo Macias argues that two of the largest – the National Repatriation Committee and La Campaña de Medio Millón (subsumed under the larger committee) – helped to deflect criticisms from the government that found itself fending off complaints over migration policies while also struggling to maintain political stability. La Campaña de Medio Millón, occasionally mentioned in newspapers on both sides of the borders, was a project whose organizers hoped to raise half a million pesos to return repatriates to Mexico. Significantly, the Committee advocated colonization schemes, funding one in Oaxaca (Pinotepa Nacional)

¹⁷³ Of eugenics in Latin American, Nancy Leys Stephan writes: “The desire to “imagine” the nation in biological terms, to “purify” the reproduction of populations to fit hereditary norms, to regulate the flow of peoples across national boundaries, to define in novel terms who could belong to the nation and who could not – all these aspects of eugenics turned on issues of gender and race, and produced intrusive proposals or prescriptions for new state policies toward individuals. *“The Hour of Eugenics”*: *Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 105.

¹⁷⁴ Manuel Gamio, “The influence of migrations in Mexican life,” unpublished article (July 17, 1931): 6.

and one in Guerrero (El Coloso). The existence of these private organizations indicates the power of popular ideologies, as well as political policies, regarding these return migrants. He argues that this was a transnational sentiment, as those who migrated before the Depression “were the *Mexico Lindo* generation who identified strongly with Mexico.” Self-help associations known as *Comisiones Honoríficas Mexicanas* created by the Mexican government dotted the Midwest, with hyper-patriotic names such as *La Sociedad Cuautémoc* and the *Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez*. Meanwhile, those who were not repatriated and those with longer histories in the U.S. tracing back to the nineteenth century became the first “Mexican American” generation.¹⁷⁵

As argued in Chapter 1, repatriation during the 1930s built upon previous systems of deportation and forced return. Outraged citizens in Mexico wrote at length about the costs of labor migration and the struggles that returning migrants would face, while critiquing the fact that Mexico’s already strained government funded many of these repatriations. During the 1930s, repatriates represented a contentious subject as many of their countrymen viewed them as traitors, beggars, and a burden for the Mexican state. Others viewed them as prodigal children, returning to the homeland where they would help the nation progress. They had learned a difficult lesson abroad, but their expulsion had returned them to where they belonged. The repatriation crisis also became subsumed into discussions of immigration control, racial purity, and progress in Mexico.

Other repatriates recall their reception upon return to Mexico, ranging from indifference to rejection. Oral histories and interviews illustrate how Mexican and

¹⁷⁵ Leonardo Macias, “Mexican Immigration and Repatriation During the Great Depression,” MA Thesis. Arizona State University, 1992: 15-17.

Mexican Americans sought to parse out the difference between “repatriado” and “deportado,” and reception ranged accordingly. When asked if she had experienced discrimination upon her return, Theresa Martínez Southard attributed the lack of such treatment to the fact that her father paid for the return of their family. As she explains, she was not a *repatriada*, nor a *deportada*, and “the *repatriados* were taken away because they didn’t belong here [in the United States]...the *repatriados* were the ones that wanted to go back to their country, to Mexico.”¹⁷⁶ In her experience, repatriate status came not from government decisions, but from personal loyalty to a country. However, the distinction was rarely this clear and sources often refer to *repatriados* and *deportados* interchangeably.

As David G. Gutiérrez argues, the procedures often had similar consequences: “Despite the fact that few Mexicans were formally deported, repatriation for most individuals and families was a traumatic, disorienting, and sorrowful course undertaken under extreme duress.”¹⁷⁷ While the formal process of deportation continued to be used to remove Mexicans in increasing numbers, this distinction often did not accurately in discussions and understandings of return migration in Mexico. Herbert Sanchez, whose father was repatriated in 1933, recalls that his father was repatriated because “they told me he don’t want to become American citizen.” According to Sanchez, every state and nation had participated in similar activities; in California the Mexican was especially

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Theresa Martínez Southard, Sept 1, 1971. CSU Fullerton, Oral History Collection, O.H. 753. The majority of CSU Fullerton’s oral histories involving repatriation were conducted by Christine Valenciana in the early 1970s. All of the interviews used in this project were conducted by Valenciana.

¹⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 73.

targeted because “they don’t learn the language well or something like that.”¹⁷⁸ His father’s connection Mexico through language meant that a return to Mexico fell under the category of repatriation, not deportation. The contradictory explanations of how *repatriados* and *deportados* differ and the manner in which they newspapers and officials used the two terms interchangeably both help to demonstrate how confusing migrants and Mexican citizens back in Mexico found the process. (In this chapter, I follow the terminology used in sources, but outside of U.S. government sources, the two terms seem to be viewed as synonyms.)

Not all welcomed returnees with open hands. In an interview, one U.S. employer in Mexico said “I don’t like to employ them once they have been there [to the United States]. They get too smart.... They talk to other workmen and spoil them.”¹⁷⁹ Workers in Mexico viewed repatriates and deportees as competition, as in the case of *camioneros* in Guadalajara. The union wrote a letter of complaint, expressing that returning migrants who returned with cars provided stiff competition, as they entered the business of transporting passengers and cargo at prices that undercut those provided by members of the union.¹⁸⁰ This complaint echoes criticisms of Mexican workers in the U.S., who lower wages for U.S.-born workers, but also represents how once back in Mexico, returning migrants continued to be viewed as outsiders.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Herbert Sanchez, August 29, 1971,. CSU Fullerton, Oral History Collection, O.H. 752.

¹⁷⁹ Betten, N., and R. A. Mohl. "From Discrimination to Repatriation: Mexican Life in Gary." *Indiana, during the Great Depression Steel City: Urban & Ethic Patterns in Gary, Indiana 1950* (1906): 387.

¹⁸⁰ “Petición de los camioneros,” *El Informador*, Jalisco, MX, August 5, 1932, 6.

Modes of Transportation and Crises in Northern Mexico

Even before the stock market crashed in October of 1929, Mexican newspapers reported on how masses of deported Mexicans arrived in terrible shape in border cities such as Nogales, Ciudad Juarez, Villa Acuña and Piedras Negras.¹⁸¹ After the Great Depression set in, the numbers of returning migrants skyrocketed. In this section, I examine what transportation for returning migrants looked like once they had returned to Mexico and the challenges that cities in northern Mexico confronted. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, during 1929-1935, the INS only formally deported about 82,000 Mexicans.¹⁸² The contrast between these records and reports of over a million repatriates presents myriad challenges when examining the effects of this return migration on northern Mexico. Other sources from the period help to reconstruct the haphazard processes of deportation and return migration via the border. Delving into the experiences of returning migrants after arriving in Mexico reveals how the process created various problems not only for the migrants themselves, but also for city officials and residents in northern Mexico. Local responses to the arrival of masses of returning migrants illustrate how migrants had to rely on residents of these regions in the absence of government action. During this period, authorities also began to experiment with deportations to the interior of Mexico, including by air and sea. An exploration of these methods reveals how Mexico and the U.S. both shifted to a policy of preventing deportees from re-entering the country, even if that meant transporting them far from the border and far from their homes.

¹⁸¹ “Numerosos Mexicanos Deportados Se Encuentran en Malas Condiciones,” *El Informador*, Jalisco, MX, September 23, 1929, 1.

¹⁸² “INS Records for 1930s Repatriations,” uscis.gov, March 3, 2014

To transport such large numbers of migrants and encourage repatriates to leave as part of the campaigns during the early 1930s, rail lines offered low fares for the trip within the United States. Balderrama and Rodriguez describe how “Trains with hundreds, sometimes over a thousand, repatriates aboard regularly left collection centers such as Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Denver, Phoenix, Oklahoma City, and Los Angeles.”¹⁸³ Some employers shared costs with county welfare agencies, often after the picking season had ended which resulted in more problems as large numbers of repatriates needed to be transported at the same time.¹⁸⁴ In other cases, the repatriation campaigns served as a useful method for U.S. employers to hire even more inexpensive workers while counting on the return trips to take unwanted workers back to Mexico.

One letter of complaint from Beet Workers Union, composed of employees from the Great Western Sugar Company in Billings, Montana, reported that the company had left over one thousand Mexican families in desperate conditions. Instead of continuing to employ them or pay for their transportation back to Mexico, Great Western Sugar Co. had left them unemployed in Montana and used *enganchadores* to recruit cheaper workers from Mexico. The financial crisis brought about by the Great Depression had not erased the desire for the cheapest labor available, and Great Western Sugar used anti-Mexican sentiment to its advantage. Meanwhile, the thousand or more families left stranded in Billings, Montana, begged the Mexican government for transportation home. For these migrants, their location left them in an even more difficult situation. Despite

¹⁸³ Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 124.

¹⁸⁴ Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 124.

contacting the nearest consulate in Salt Lake City, Utah, they did not receive help.¹⁸⁵

Their plight represents the complexities of repatriation and deportation - given the wide support and cooperation of agencies and officials to carry out the mass removal of Mexican migrants, companies such as Great Western could simply leave Mexican migrants and import cheaper workers.

Other challenges greeted returning migrants in Mexico. Unscrupulous border officials made the long journey even harder for some repatriates by taking the funds they had left, as in the case of one repatriate who reported a customs official in Naco, Sonora taking all of his remaining money.¹⁸⁶ Migrants described how they struggled during the passage back and sent word back to the U.S. to warn others not to make the trek. In 1931, a social worker at the Detroit International Center wrote: "There is another reason why Mexicans refuse to return [to Mexico] and that is that already many letters have been sent by repatriated Mexicans who left Detroit without any money, that the amount furnished for food is not enough to carry them to their destination and unless there are relatives to receive them, they have jumped out of the frying pan into the fire."¹⁸⁷ While county agencies, governments, charities, and even popular figures such as Diego Rivera contributed to repatriation efforts, these rarely accounted for all of the costs that the trip entailed.

Not every repatriate returned in destitute circumstances, though. Some packed up their belongings and drove to Mexico in their own cars. This did not always protect them,

¹⁸⁵ Letter from Felipe Morales on behalf of the Beet Workers Union, June 22, 1934, ALR 241/5, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico.

¹⁸⁶ ALR 244.7, Correspondence from November 8, 1932, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Norman D. Humphrey, "Mexican Repatriation from Michigan: Public Assistance in Historical Perspective," *Social Service Review* 15: 3 (Sept 1941): 510-511.

however, as dangerous roads and the possibility of theft both presented significant risks for those who traveled through northern Mexico. Repatriates traveling by car were encouraged to carry “twenty extra gallons of gasoline, a gallon of oil, and one of water and bedding or coats in case they had to spend the night on the road.”¹⁸⁸ Despite such advice, some found themselves stranded in the difficult terrain of northern Mexico, as in the case of one group of repatriates who became stuck in the isolated Bachimba region south of Chihuahua. A rescue group embarked from Torreón – over four hundred kilometers away – to bring them gasoline, water, and food, but the situation reflects how residents of northern Mexico devised informal methods of helping returning migrants when local governments and the federal governments did not. As the article described, some repatriates grew tired of waiting for train fare back and made the trek by foot. Many of them collapsed due to exhaustion, and again, they relied on luck and the goodwill of those passing by to help.¹⁸⁹

Torreón also faced an influx of repatriates who arrived on one of the two railroad lines that passed through the city. A member of a Masonic lodge in the city wrote to President Rodríguez suggesting that the government tax the clergy to help the repatriates arriving in “disastrous conditions.” As he argued, the country and lodge had already contributed so much while the clergy had failed to address the situation of these migrants and instead continued to exploit the Mexican people.¹⁹⁰ Such complaints reflected the ongoing anti-clerical tensions in the country, particularly in northern Mexico, as well as the reluctance to contribute even more funds to efforts to help returning migrants. Others

¹⁸⁸ Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 128.

¹⁸⁹ “Caravana detenida en el cañón de Bachimba,” *La Prensa*, April 8, 1931, 4.

¹⁹⁰ Correspondence Feb 18, 1933, ALR 2441.33, Box 24, AGN

remained in the city for weeks or even longer, waiting for some sort of help to be able to leave. One article described how in 1931, over sixty migrants remained in the city weeks after being deported. They had received donations and assistance when they arrived in Chihuahua, and from there had headed south. Despite repeated requests to the head of the local Office of Migration in Torreón, though, they had yet to receive any sort of help to return to their homes in southern and central Mexico. As the appointed head of the group explained, every day the head of the office reported to them that he was still waiting to hear from the Secretaría de Gobernación to be able to provide them with passages south. Consequently, he stated, the group found itself in a situation of “complete helplessness,” desperately in need of food and a place to spend the night. He suspected that the fault lay in the hands of the local Office of Migration, but such incidents repeated themselves across the region.¹⁹¹ When local cities did not organize donation drives to provide for returning migrants, a lack of response by Secretaría de Gobernación meant that repatriates and deportees had few options other than to beg and sleep in the streets. In nearby Saltillo, it was reported that repatriates gathered every day at the local jail, where they shared meals with the inmates, while locals organized a charity to help.¹⁹²

Hundreds of letters addressed to Mexican presidents describing the difficulties of this migration were written by repatriates and residents of the northern states (many of them writing once already in Mexico). While returnees had reached Mexico, they remained far from their hometowns. As the numbers of repatriates thronged border cities, few employment opportunities existed for them, especially since these regions also faced

¹⁹¹ “Deportados en crítica condición,” *La Prensa*, March 28, 1931, 2.

¹⁹² “Continua el exodo de repatriados,” *La Prensa*, February 27, 1931, 7.

an influx of people who hoped to head north to the U.S. Consequently, residents of these cities grew resentful of the presence of returning migrants. One statement by the Cámara Nacional de Comercio de Ciudad Juárez summarized the situation of the city, which it viewed as a serious consequence of the country's migration issues. As the group described, the city's homeless population was composed of the following:

- (a) Returnees and deportees who do not have relatives or are not likely to get work elsewhere in the Republic, or with the hope or intention of returning legally or illegally to the United States and have not done so, remain at the border.
- (b) People from the interior and the south of the country who have been misinformed and have come to the border believing they can find work or enter the United States
- (c) A varying number of repatriates and deportees who have to remain in Ciudad Juarez for some days while they wait for their passages to be issued.
- (d) Families who have been abandoned by the father or the husband, or those who are homeless due to the death or illness of [the father or husband], or those who could not continue their trip south as planned due to a grave illness of one of the family members, or those who wait for other members of their family from the United States who are in jail or for other reasons could not come with them.
- (e) Local and resident indigents.¹⁹³

In this summary of the city's problems, the group alleges that numerous repatriates were to blame. Although a number of reasons articulated why they remained in the city, not enough resources were available to address the influx of so many returning migrants. The city had grown rapidly in the twentieth century, much of this growth a result of northbound migration and the proximity of El Paso, but by the 1930s, the population still

¹⁹³ Letter July 10, 1933, ALR 244.1/58, Box 25, AGN

hovered around 40,000.¹⁹⁴ Reports of hundreds or thousands of migrants passing through presented an enormous challenge to the city.

Letters from repatriates corroborate this letter and the descriptions of the dire circumstances for migrants. A man named Brigido S. Gaspar wrote to President Rodríguez asking to be repatriated in 1933. Six months later, he wrote again from the city of Delicias, Chihuahua, stating that he “formed part of a group of repatriates who find themselves without work in spite of the efforts by the Comité Pro-Repatriación.” As he writes, they remained unemployed, “finding themselves in very bad financial conditions.”¹⁹⁵ A representative from the Southern Pacific Company also wrote on behalf of repatriates, describing their difficult situation upon returning which was only compounded by the fact that Mexican agents in the border region treated them poorly.¹⁹⁶

Many of those who returned had spent so long in the United States that they had few ties back in Mexico. Repatriation meant leaving home, not returning home. In such cases, some strategized to find new opportunities in Mexico, as in the case of one group of eighty-five men who asked to be sent to northern Mexico from Texas to work in agriculture. Raymundo Chavarría wrote on behalf of the group and also served as the president of the Comité de Reconstrucción in San Antonio, TX.¹⁹⁷ Chavarría’s letter and his leadership role in the organization illustrates how migrants had developed ties in the U.S., joined civic groups, and become part of the community. When faced with the

¹⁹⁴ Edward Sadella, *The U.S.-Mexican Border Environment: Dynamics of Human-Environment Interactions* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 2005), 328.

¹⁹⁵ Correspondence February 5, 1934, ALR 244.1/58, Box 25, AGN

¹⁹⁶ Letter from Hector Varela, ALR 2441.33, Box 24, AGN

¹⁹⁷ Correspondence February 12, 1934, ALR 2441.33, Box 25, AGN

possibility of forced removal, they sought to make the best of the situation and attempt to resettle to areas of Mexico with plenty of land available.

As the above examples illustrate, migrants could not count available or affordable transportation from the border region. Consequently, some reportedly headed north back to the U.S. as soon as they could, leading to frustrations in Mexico that the country would have to pay for their repatriation a second time should they be detained again.¹⁹⁸ For many migrants, Mexico no longer represented home, so they risked re-crossing the border. As a result of this pattern of return to the U.S. once in Mexico, however, Eduardo Vasconcelos of the Secretaría de Gobernación sent a circular to municipal presidents which explained that, given the financial burden placed upon the government, return passage would only be provided for those who could prove that they had resided in the United States for more than a year. Those who had been in the U.S. for less than a year could no longer receive funding, and neither could those who had spent years there but lacked the needed proof of residency. In this way, attempts to prevent the re-crossing of returning migrants restricted the options for Mexicans in the U.S. Vasconcelos also suggested using intensive propaganda to discourage repatriates from attempting to leave the country again – a suggestion that Mexico had previously employed in the 1920s under Calles and one that proved useful again.¹⁹⁹

Mexican officials also began to devise other methods of return for those deported. In 1932, as repatriation campaigns continued in full swing, Mexican Consul Lauro

¹⁹⁸ Eduardo Vasconcelos, Circular No. 112, *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Colima* April 18, 1932, 1-2. HNMD

¹⁹⁹ Eduardo Vasconcelos, Circular No. 112, *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Colima* April 18, 1932, 1-2. HNMD

Izaguirre in McAllen, Texas wrote to the Consul General in San Antonio to state that Mexican migrants caught crossing the border again would be subjected to deportation by sea. He explained that this form of return “has the objective of removing as far as possible the offenders from the border and in this way avoids that they constantly are clandestinely entering by the ford, which results in difficulties and even the committing of crimes in the places that are feasible for their entry to this country.”²⁰⁰ His description of the plan’s objectives reveals already existing tensions resulting from leaving deportees at the border and their association with increased crime rates. Thus, he concluded, he requested permission to issue of certificates of nationality to expedite the deportation of these migrants, who generally lacked any documents to prove nationality.

At a time when airplane travel remained exclusive, planes also helped to transport deportees back to the interior of Mexico. One article critiqued the usage of planes for such individuals, writing that “without paying a cent, and in luxurious and powerful airplanes, many Mexicans who have recently deported or repatriated from the United States have been transported to the south of the Republic.” The Corporación Aeronáutica de Transportes, a jointly owned U.S. and Mexico company, made unused seats on planes available for the purpose. Such flights were short-lived (CAT ceased operations in 1932), but the coverage of such flights reflects both efforts to prevent migrants from re-crossing the border as well as resentment against returning migrants who received free plane trips.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Correspondence from Lauro Izaguirre to the Consul General of Mexico in San Antonio, TX, June 29, 1932, File IV-348-3A, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City, Mexico

²⁰¹ Anne Millbrooke, *Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Alphabets of Aviation: A Guide to Contemporary and Historical Terms Found in Aviation Literature* (Xlibris Corporation, 2008), 129.

Examining the transportation challenges experienced by migrants after returning in Mexico reveals the complexities of the process of return migration. Rather than arriving directly in their hometowns, migrants often struggled to leave the border region, while others settled in the area, and others attempted to head north to Mexico. The presence of so many migrants in difficult circumstances created challenges for northern cities which the federal government repeatedly failed to address and which led to discrimination against this group. In a way, migrants' status as deportees or repatriates did not have much consequence in Mexico. After arriving in Mexico, both groups often remained stranded and had to rely the generosity of others. As the following section illustrates, however, public health concerns and the deportation of sick migrants only led to further stigmatization of returning migrants.

Tuberculosis Repatriates, Lepers, and *Mexicanos Dementes*

As explained in Chapter 1, even before the Great Depression, U.S. employers regarded Mexican migrants as physically and mentally inferior individuals. In 1930, the category of "Mexican" appeared on the U.S. Census for the first time, rendering Mexican Americans and Mexican migrants officially non-white.²⁰² The racialization of Mexicans contributed to anti-Mexican sentiment, and economic strain during the Depression led to even more tension. During this period, public health concerns become another reason to justify the forced removal of ethnic Mexicans from the United States as tuberculosis emerged as a threat across the country. Soon after the beginning of the Depression, the

²⁰² Alexandra Minna Stern, "Eugenics and Racial Classification in Modern Mexican America," in *Race and Classification: the Case of Mexican America*, Ed. Iona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 149.

mayor of Los Angeles described how the disease made Mexicans “a menace to the community at large.”²⁰³ Throughout the decade, concerns regarding Mexicans’ hygiene and biological fitness contributed to negative stereotypes and ultimately, made the group more deportable. In Mexico, however, the arrival of sick repatriates and deportees on the border led to panic and resentment.

Even after the early years of the economic crisis, tuberculosis continued to plague cities in the United States as leaders looked for methods to address this and sending sick Mexican migrants back to Mexico proved to be one solution. In the midst of economic and social pressures, opinions of Mexicans’ health and fitness had changed, particularly in the face of such a contagious illness with no easy cure. Natalia Molina explains how, consequently, “Los Angeles public health officials reversed their assimilation policies during the Depression and argued that Mexicans’ biological inferiority precluded any possibility of rehabilitation.” By this time, she writes, they had become “genetically flawed.”²⁰⁴ However, this removal of migrants suffering from this disease known as the White Plague did not end in the early 1930s as the worst of the Depression years ended – the association of Mexican migrants with disease had made them easily removable subjects. In 1938, half of the repatriates sent to Mexico on official trips had been diagnosed with tuberculosis.²⁰⁵ After the sustained removal of sick migrants, the director of the California Bureau of Tuberculosis described the plight of “tuberculosis repatriates” who were “being left in various Mexican States without provision for care.”²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens*, 116.

²⁰⁴ Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens*, 117.

²⁰⁵ Abel, “From Exclusion to Expulsion”: 847.

²⁰⁶ Emily K. Abel, “From Exclusion to Expulsion: Mexicans and Tuberculosis in Los Angeles, 1910-1940,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 77:4 (Winter 2003): 845-846.

In 1940, an anti-tuberculosis league in Houston requested that the Mexican government help to repatriate all Mexicans in Houston hospitals suffering from the disease. Luis L. Duplan, the Mexican consul of the city, responded to this call by clarifying that not everyone would receive help from Mexico: “I don’t think the Mexican government should support these people, who sacrificed their lives and health for the development and progress of the United States. The Mexican government will repatriate any Mexican who wishes to return to his country, and I think that for these sick Mexican citizens, it would be unpleasant to be deported.”²⁰⁷ Duplan’s statement and his grouping of migrants into those worthy and unworthy of government assistance reflect a frustration with the migration of Mexican migrants who resided in the U.S. for years or decades, only to be regarded as deportable once they became ill. After more than a decade of funding repatriation trips for Mexican migrants in the U.S., officials had become frustrated with the continued emigration from Mexico and the all-too-frequent incidences in which U.S. employers left Mexican migrants unemployed, with few other options than to return to their home country, with transportation and other costs funded by Mexico.

Duplan continued by stating that these migrants had had sufficient time to become U.S. citizens, but had decided not to do so, and thus “They find themselves subject to deportation.” Despite his harsh message for sick migrants in Houston, the representative of the anti-tuberculosis league urged the Mexican government to consider the difficult conditions faced by a repatriate “who lacks resources, friends, and hopes, and who finds himself gravely ill, when he finds himself back in the country to which he has always

²⁰⁷ “Repatriacion de Mexicanos Solicitada,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, Feb 26, 1940: 1-2.

remained faithful.”²⁰⁸ Duplan’s reply and his justification for not extending repatriation benefits to some migrants highlight how Mexican migrants consistently naturalized as U.S. citizens at much lower rates than other immigrant groups, reflecting the ongoing back-and-forth migrations at the time. Mario García writes that “Mexican immigrants and exiles from the Revolution of 1910 saw themselves as only temporary sojourners awaiting return to *la patria*.”²⁰⁹ When economic or political situations changed, however, this lack of U.S. residency placed them in a vulnerable position as part of a group regarded as deportable.

Many migrants at the time viewed a few years in the U.S. as only temporary, until they returned to Mexico. A few years working in the United States would allow them to earn higher wages that they could send back to their families or save for the future. No option existed for dual citizenship at the time, and migrants who valued their Mexican citizenship had to make decisions that had long-term consequences when anti-Mexican sentiment made their presence unwanted. In one letter to President Rodríguez, Ricardo Frias Beltran asked for help to return with his family to Mexico and explained why he had never pursued U.S. citizenship. As he wrote, it would be a serious error to educate his children in the U.S., “because with time, under the pressure and propaganda carried out in the schools here, they would lose their Mexican nationality.”²¹⁰ Unlike other immigrant groups, Mexico remained geographically close, and thus Mexican migrants tended to become U.S. citizens at much lower rates throughout most of the century.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Mario T. García, “Mexican Americans and the Politics of Citizenship: The Case of El Paso, 1936,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 59 (1984): 187.

²¹⁰ Correspondence from Ricardo Frias Beltran, April 12, 1933, File 241/4, ALR, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico.

Diseases and health concerns also proved major problem for repatriates and border cities as U.S. agents took advantage of the mass departure to send sick migrants back to Mexico. In the case of tuberculosis, Mexico had only one sanatorium for patients, located just outside of Mexico City. Designed 1929, a year in which ten thousand Mexicans died of the disease, the Tuberculosis Sanatorium at Huipulco addressed the desperate need for treatment in the country, and in a “state [that] had only three beds reserved for indigent consumptives.” The lofty dreams of the sanatorium’s designer were not quite reached, but it did serve as the country’s first institute for that purpose.²¹¹ As one member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors noted when discussing how to send sick migrants to Mexico, in 1938 the sanatorium only held 180 beds – hardly enough to address the number of people suffering from the disease in the entire country.²¹² By the 1940s, the sanatorium only had 300 beds. In response to the prevalence of tuberculosis, the country opened a number of clinics in the years that followed, but all remained in the Mexico City area.²¹³ Thus, migrants left in border cities had very few options for obtaining medical treatment.

The situation in border cities faced with the return of so many migrants only compounded the situation. Accounts of repatriates arriving in Mexico illustrate how poorly equipped border cities were for such a challenge. In Ciudad Juárez, over two dozen repatriates died, while others “were insufficiently clothed and so crowded that

²¹¹ Kathryn E. O’Rourke, “Guardians of Their Own Health: Tuberculosis, Rationalism, and Reform in Modern Mexico,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71 (March 2012), 61.

²¹² Abel, “Mexicans and Tuberculosis Control in Los Angeles,” 847.

²¹³ Matilde Prida and Mercedes Miranda, “Nursing in Mexico,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 44 (Aug 1944), 760.

2,000 lived in a large open corral.”²¹⁴ State newspapers reported on these health issues and used them as examples of the tragedies that befell repatriates in order to dissuade potential migrants. Months after the stock market crash, a statement in the *Periódico Oficial* in San Luis Potosí described the situation of sick repatriates at the border, warning:

This government is interested that all Mexican migrants know well the above requirements and also hopes that the BRACEROS AVOID MOVING INTO AMERICAN TERRITORY...constantly the American authorities imprison and deport those who by the same lack of work find themselves in difficult financial circumstances; it can be seen in all the borders of our country's constant crush of deportees returning sick, destitute and generally in poor conditions.²¹⁵

Others denounced the activities of *enganchadores* and *coyotes* who contributed to the waves of migrants crossing into the U.S., who, the piece warned, would be “exposed to misery and imprisonment followed by deportation.”²¹⁶

In some cases, repatriates with tuberculosis were escorted by county workers and medical attendants to the border. While the repatriation of migrants suffering from the illness ostensibly needed to be negotiated between both countries, the large numbers of repatriates leaving the U.S. and wide range of repatriation procedures followed meant that this failed to happen.²¹⁷ Moreover, once in Mexico, no U.S. officials accompanied sick repatriates or ensured that they received medical attention and accommodations separate from those of other migrants. As Balderrama and Rodriguez summarize, “Across

²¹⁴ Neil Betten and Raymond A. Mohl, “From Discrimination to Repatriation: Mexican Life in Gary, Indiana During the Great Depression,” *Pacific Historical Review* 42:3 (August 1973): 387.

²¹⁵ *Periódico Oficial del Estado de San Luis Potosí*, June 15, 1930, p. 351. HNDM.

²¹⁶ *Periódico Oficial del Estado de San Luis Potosí*, June 15, 1930, p. 352. HNDM.

²¹⁷ Balderrama and Rodriguez write that “Expelling tuberculosis cases to Mexico required extensive diplomatic negotiations. Special arrangements had to be made to place the patients in Mexico’s only tubercular hospital, Talapam, Huipulco, because it had a limited capacity of only 180 beds.” *Decade of Betrayal*, 132.

the Southwest, the proximity of the border made Mexico a convenient dumping ground for counties anxious to cut their welfare costs.”²¹⁸ Mexico’s border cities, however, were unequipped to deal with the challenge of so many returning migrants in need.

Along Mexico’s northern border, other diseases were also associated with repatriates, including leprosy. In March of 1932, a newspaper headline proclaimed “THERE ARE LEPERS AMONG MANY REPATRIATES,” describing how the 900 repatriates who had passed through Torreón, Coahuila that day included two women were removed from the train for having leprosy. Such sensationalist headlines led to even more fears that the arrival of repatriates, even temporarily, could lead to epidemics and sicken residents. That same day, a woman named Salud Rico de Díaz, who had previously lived in Los Angeles, stopped in Ciudad Juárez en route to Guanajuato. She traveled by car with her family, but her passage through the city sparked interest and interviews by several reporters. A number of reporters approached her vehicle, eager to report on the presence of the disease in the city, but she rebuffed them (and stated that, ironically, despite her name, she enjoyed neither health nor wealth).²¹⁹ The interest in the arrival of a migrant with leprosy sparked considerable interest, even though she only passed through the city.

Other targets for deportation included those deemed insane, many of whom found themselves dumped in Ciudad Juárez and Nuevo Laredo. One article on the arrival of a group of deportees described how the migrants who were “*enfermos del cerebro*” experienced an even more difficult trip:

²¹⁸ Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 133.

²¹⁹ “Hay Leprosos Entre Muchos Repatriados,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, March 12, 1932: 1, 3.

The pains of hell are being suffered in this part of the border for many Mexicans deported from the United States, especially those sick in the head who yesterday were subdued and tied up by soldiers of the escort train on which they are traveling... The official head of the escort said a group of crazy deportees aboard the passenger train, continually were bothering the passage and even tried to throw themselves on the guard, so it was necessary to subdue and tie them tightly.... They did not eat one bite of food the whole way (two days and a one-night stopover in Madera, Chihuahua) and some fell into a dangerous condition of excitement. Indeed, the company's railroad Northwest Mexico provided them with passes but there was none that gave a penny to the insane.”

These migrants had been sent from the U.S. through Ciudad Juárez, with the ultimate destination of the city of Chihuahua. Upon arrival, however, the mayor of Chihuahua denied them admittance to the hospital, claiming that it was full, and instead placed them in the public jail. As the article concluded, he intended to send them back to Ciudad Juárez, as “there is no money in this city to support them.”²²⁰ As this incident conveys, officials viewed deported migrants with mental conditions as nothing but a burden for already strained city economies.

The following year, another article described how the practice continued. In May of 1931, a reported 3,000 migrants returned to Mexico through Ciudad Juárez (2,650 of whom reportedly returned voluntarily). *La Prensa* published an article describing how a high-ranking U.S. official had stated that “lunatics, insane people, and prostitutes” comprised more than five hundred of those deported that month. In response, Mexican Consul Renato Cantú Lara protested and argued that those with such “vices or defects” represented only a minority of those deported.²²¹ Nonetheless, such coverage of the deportation of allegedly insane or otherwise unwanted migrants continued to present

²²⁰ “Mil pases para los mexicanos deportados,” *La Prensa*, May 1, 1950, 1,5.

²²¹ “3,000 mexicanos repatriados por Juarez,” *La Prensa*, May 18, 1931, 6.

another concern for officials and residents in border cities who worried that migrants deemed undesirable in the U.S. would create problems after returning to Mexico.

In 1932, Mexican officials in the U.S. and at the SRE struggled to address the ongoing issue of deported “*mexicanos dementes*.” The Consul General of San Francisco wrote to the SRE to notify the office that these individuals were being deported through Ciudad Juárez, and Consul Oscar Duplan, stationed just across the border in El Paso, responded to the situation.²²² As he wrote, he had previously issued instructions to the migration offices stating that “when U.S. authorities intended to deport demented Mexicans, they should do so with the knowledge [of Mexican officials] and move them to this capital or other places of the Republic where asylums existed in order to intern them, but with the express condition that the individuals did not have relatives.”²²³ Mexico at the time had few institutions for patients struggling with mental illness, and leaving such deportees in Ciudad Juárez – a city struggling with rapid growth that had no mental institution – presented a number of problems for the city. While leaving migrants in the city presented a convenient solution for the U.S. to dispose of unwanted, insane migrants, such procedures placed migrants at risk and further fanned the flames of resentment against deportees and repatriates.

By the end of the decade, Mexican officials had begun to resist the wholesale deportation of migrants at the border by the U.S. However, agents in the U.S. realized that Mexican officials resisted accepted deportees by relying on the requirement that they

²²² Correspondence from A. Lubbert to SRE, October 28, 1932, File IV-343-9, SRE, Mexico City, Mexico.

²²³ Correspondence from Oscar E. Duplán to Secretaría de Gobernación, November 9, 1932, File IV-343-9, SRE, Mexico City, Mexico.

confirm Mexican nationality and obtain a certificate before the person could be deported. The district director of the INS in El Paso revealed his findings, writing: “Incidentally, I have reviewed a number of the cases in which deportation had been accomplished on previous occasions — after the Mexican Immigration officers had passed upon the question of nationality — and in which the Mexican Consul-General at El Paso has refused a certificate of nationality, and I find that in nearly every instance the alien was in need of hospital or institutional care — generally for syphilis or insanity.” He expressed his suspicion that Mexico’s Consul in El Paso refused these certificates to force the U.S. to pay for the medical treatment of ill Mexicans, which would benefit them. He wrote that in a conversation years before, Consul Esparza (stationed in El Paso) “expressed the view that this country was in a better position than Mexico to take care of such aliens, and I am now convinced that this is his real reason for delaying or refusing the insurance or certificates of nationality in certain instances.”²²⁴ Facing reticence or outright refusal from Mexican officials to confirm the nationality of sick migrants, U.S. representatives schemed other ways to dispose of these now-unwanted individuals.

After the Revolution, leaders in Mexico initiated a number of attempts to address public health concerns in the country, including syphilis, tuberculosis, yellow fever, and a number of other diseases. However, much of these efforts remained regionally constrained, such as anti-syphilis efforts in Mexico City that included clinics run by the Departamento de Salubridad Pública in the 1920s or the influence of eugenics research

²²⁴ Letter from District Director, El Paso District, INS, to Consul Blocker, January 25, 1940, Box 1, Classified General Records, U.S. Consul in Ciudad Juarez, 1923-1952, RG 84, NARA, College Park, MD.

on the passage of a sterilization law in Veracruz.²²⁵ Public health on the border failed to receive much attention from the Mexican government, although the risk of Mexican migrants spreading disease north of the border continued to worry U.S. officials. Despite the high rates of migration and return migration at this time, public health in northern border cities has not received much attention.

Deportation as Punishment

The criminalization of unauthorized entry during the 1920s allowed for deportation to function as a threat in myriad circumstances. Throughout the 1930s, U.S. authorities used deportation to their advantage as Mexicans remained vulnerable to the possibility of forced expulsion. In the early years of the decade, number of agricultural strikes involving Mexican workers, and often the Confederación de Uniones de Obreros Mexicanos, were met by the threat of mass deportations.²²⁶ Indeed, this remained a common tool available for employers who wished to discipline or punish migrants who dared to speak out against their exploitative conditions. Authorities also employed the threat of forced removal outside of the agricultural sector, though, and it had particular ramifications for Mexican women.

Josefina Salgado de Schrater opened a small café on New High Street, in Los Angeles. Scarcely two weeks after she opened the shop (for which she had obtained a

²²⁵ Katherine Bliss, "The Science of Redemption: Syphilis, Sexual Promiscuity, and Reformism in Revolutionary Mexico City," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1999), 1-40. Alexandra Minna Stern, "'The Hour of Eugenics in Veracruz, Mexico': Radical Politics, Public Health, and Latin America's Only Sterilization Law," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 91 (2011), 431-443.

²²⁶ Mark Reisler, "Mexican Unionization in California Agriculture, 1927-1936," *Labor History* 14 (1973), 562-579.

license from the city the year before), local police arrived to interview her. However, they also requested a monthly payment to ensure they would protect the business. Salgado de Schrater refused, so they returned a second time to demand this fee, and she refused again. Days after this second refusal, a 17-year-old boy accused her of prostitution and she was arrested and ordered deported. An investigation into the case revealed that the young man had been instructed by the police to make such an accusation, and had in fact only entered the store to buy a soda.²²⁷

Salgado de Schrater had the advantage of having the means to hire an attorney on her behalf who contacted the Embassy, but even three years later, she still faced deportation orders that would have torn her away from her family. Even after the original accuser recanted his statement, and revealed that police had coerced him into making the accusation, authorities did not drop the case against her. In her case, failing to pay a bribe to police resulted in accusations of prostitution and subsequent deportation. Police strategically exploited her status as a non-citizen to accuse her of a deportable crime. As Eithne Luibheid argues in *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border*, immigration control and policing of sexuality frequently overlapped to restrict entrance to undesirable migrants.²²⁸ In the case of Salgado de Schrater, however, authorities employed the accusation of prostitution to make her a deportable migrant well beyond the geographic boundaries of the border and even after living for years in the U.S. In his analysis of post September 11th policing and enforcement practices, Mathew Coleman

²²⁷ Correspondence from Paul Shapiro to the Mexican Embassy, November 8, 1938, Box 1210, File 311.1221, RG 59, NARA, College Park, MD.

²²⁸ Eithne Luibheid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2002).

argues that these “interior spaces of immigration geopolitics” serve as yet another method of controlling labor migration.²²⁹ However this case and the use of such practices in the early 20th century illustrate how U.S. authorities (not only border agents) relied on such procedures to control and discipline Mexican migrants and communities.

American officials had long used anti-prostitution legislation to regulate morality and migration. The Page Act of 1875 excluded the entrance of “undesirable” migrants into the country, targeting in particular Chinese women suspected of prostitution, and the 1907 Immigration Act further expanded anti-prostitution legislation. By the early 20th century, officials also targeted Mexican women who could be easily deported. As Grace Peña Delgado writes, “A variety of practices to govern immigrant women’s bodies, including deporting immigrant women convicted of practicing prostitution in the United States from its northern and southern borders, formed a regime of immigration control that gave wide force to the meaning of whiteness, middle-class respectability, and citizenship in North America.”²³⁰ Although she writes about the turn of the century, this legacy continued into the 1930s. Even after entering the country legally, Mexican women could still be deported for allegedly engaging in prostitution, and little was required to prove that they had done so. Consequently, deportation became the preferred method for addressing prostitution in border states such as Arizona and Texas.²³¹ Unmarried Mexican women who resided with men and engaged in sexual relations with them could

²²⁹ Mathew Coleman, “Immigration Geopolitics Beyond the Mexico-US Border,” *Antipode* 39 (2007), 54-76.

²³⁰ Grace Peña Delgado, “Sexual Self: Morals Policing and the Expansion of the U.S. Immigration Bureau at America’s Early Twentieth Century Borders,” in *Entangling Migration History: Borderlands and Transnationalism in the United States and Canada*, Ed. Benjamin Bryce and Alexander Freund (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 102-103.

²³¹ Peña Delgado, “Sexual Self,” 109-110.

also be accused of prostitution and were viewed as concubines, and therefore, deportable.²³² The threat of deportation forced women to conform to certain ideas of morality, or in Salgado de Schrater's case, functioned as means for authorities to extort migrants.

The process followed to deport migrants also compounded the problem of forced removal. Authorities could detain migrants for an indefinite period of time while waiting for paperwork or to punish them for entering the country without authorization.²³³

Throughout the 1930s, conflicting stories emerged as authorities abused, and some cases killed Mexican migrants, while in Mexico, the press and officials defended their compatriots. A small newspaper in Cananea, Sonora, reported on a "blood crusade" undertaken against Mexicans in the U.S., citing recent examples in which authorities in Oklahoma, Texas, and California had shot and killed a number of Mexicans. Reflecting on the situation, the article ends by asking, "Why has the hate against our people in the United States been so recrudescant in the last few days?" As repatriation campaigns continued to round up migrants while others, fearing deportation, fled the country, this anti-Mexican sentiment also manifested itself in violence.²³⁴

²³² As Peña Delgado writes, "Women from Mexico faced considerable vulnerability. Their noncitizen status and their possible employ as prostitutes, taken together, made them deportable subjects." "Sexual Self," 114.

²³³ Kelly Lytle-Hernandez argues that this further complicated the process of return migration after the 1929 Immigration Act made unauthorized entry a crime punishable by jail time or fines, which "further diminished the basic pecuniary function of labor emigration, while time in jail placed Mexico's emigrants next to American criminals rather than model American citizens." "Persecuted Like Criminals," 230-231. She concludes: "The 1929 criminalization of unsanctioned migration therefore deepened the social, cultural, and economic threats first created by the 1924 transformation of Mexico's labor emigrants into America's illegal immigrants."

²³⁴ Letter from Hartley F. Yost, Consul in Nogales, to Son., to U.S. Secretary of State, July 14, 1931, Box 1210, File 311.1223, RG 59, NARA, College Park, MD.

Relationships often soured between officials on opposite sides of the border as Mexican officials reported abuses of migrants, while U.S. officials responded by denying any violence and framing the migrants as criminals. Near the end of the decade, El Paso authorities had grown frustrated with the actions of the Mexican Consul General in the city, Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Esparza. The sheriff of El Paso County wrote a letter to the U.S. State Department to complain of this situation, writing:

“We do have what I think sometimes is a most intolerable situation here, but I guess we can live through it and will perhaps be better men for having done so. It does “rankle in my craw” to think that we live on the Border and have to be subjected to so many unnecessary difficulties that are the out-growth of a stupid attitude on the part of our Mexican Consul General....Please do not get the impression that I am sour on them as a nation, because I am not, and I have many good friends among them; But I just can’t stand to have a man in an official capacity who deliberately [sic] connives with and abets the actions of hoodlums.”²³⁵

In an earlier letter to a different official in the State Department, he summarized the situation more bluntly: “As far as I am concerned I wish he was in China and everyone in El Paso in an official position is of the same wish.”²³⁶ The tense situation along the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border reflected the complicated processes that the region had undergone. As the border became an increasingly difficult boundary to cross, tensions arose.

In 1938, officials sought to hold a binational conference on recent “border difficulties,” notably, the manner in which Mexico processed deportees. Officials in El Paso resented how Esparza handled the process. In particular, they criticized how he

²³⁵ Letter from Chris P. Fox to Herbert S. Bursley, May 9, 1939, Box 1210, File 311.1223, RG 59 NARA, College Park, MD.

²³⁶ Letter from Chris P. Fox to Cordell Hull, April 22, 1939, Box 1210, File 311.1223, RG 59, NARA, College Park, MD.

delayed issuing certificates proving Mexican nationality to deportees, prolonging the time they were held in the U.S. The American Consul General, William P. Blocker wrote to Josephus Daniels, the U.S. ambassador in Mexico about the situation with Esparza, claiming: “For some time the Mexican Government has refused to accept deportees at the international boundary line unless they are in possession of a certificate from the Mexican Consuls to the effect that the individual being deported is a Mexican citizen. Consul General Esparza has been reluctant in issuing these certificates and invariably is included to place obstacles in the deportation of Mexicans regardless of the clearness of the case.” Among his purported crimes: demanding birth certificates to prove the nationality of deportees, making immigration agents “cool their heels” and wait in his office for several hours, and waiting days or weeks before interviewing deportees to determine their nationality.

As a result, Blocker complained, this had led to “considerable cost in money in maintaining groups of deportees in the county jail at El Paso.” Beyond this, he was also accused of being a disreputable figure and of having a veritable harem in El Paso.²³⁷ These accusations led to frustrations and anger for American authorities who wanted to deport Mexicans as soon as possible, but the list of complaints actually reflect how they wanted to streamline the process and relied on deporting migrants without investigating each case. This is hardly surprising, given the tense climate on the border, but these negotiations and resentments are important to consider when examining return migration during this period. Beyond repatriation, deportation procedures and politics proved

²³⁷ Letter from William P. Blocker to Josephus Daniels, September 12, 1938, File 855, Box 1, Classified General Records, U.S. Consul in Ciudad Juarez, 1923-1952, RG 84, NARA, College Park, MD.

volatile matters on the border and proved influential as the countries negotiated how the processes would be handled. This case highlights how Mexican officials actively resisted the ongoing deportation of migrants by delaying the process when possible.

Deportability, Border Enforcement and Corruption in “Ambos Nogales”

As a consequence of intensified border surveillance, the smuggling of migrants also increased during this period. This was nothing new, as coyotes began to transport migrants across the border after the passage of Chinese exclusion laws in the late 1800s. After this, migrants would arrive in Mexico’s port cities and while many stayed in northern Mexico, others headed north to cross what Grace Peña Delgado refers to as “one of the last frontiers of the United States.”²³⁸ Indeed, the Sonora/Arizona border became a popular crossing area, with *ambos Nogales* providing an especially convenient and well-traversed point. By the early twentieth century, an “underground railroad” had emerged to take Chinese migrants across the border into Arizona.²³⁹ The trafficking of so many migrants often relied on the bribery and participation of border officials, and when the border began to tighten for Mexican migrants, a similar pattern followed as officials and smugglers worked on both sides of the border to transport migrants.

Ramon Preciado emerged in the late 1930s as a powerful coyote based in Nogales, Sonora, years after the well-publicized, Depression-era repatriation campaigns. Throughout the decade, the city remained a relatively small town with a population that barely exceeded 14,000 residents. On the other side, Nogales in Arizona had slightly less

²³⁸ Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 75.

²³⁹ Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 89, 94-96.

than half the population.²⁴⁰ In these twin cities, the opportunities for cross-border schemes flourished. The Mexican government struggled with how to stop Preciado's economic and social dominance in the region, but his connections with Border Patrol agents made him a wealthy man. Migrants paid Preciado, and then he helped them obtain employment in the U.S. If they failed to pay him a portion of their wages every payday, he turned them over to U.S. authorities to help them raise their numbers of deported migrants. The deportees then ended up back in Sonora, often penniless and desperate to cross again or return to their homes in other areas of Mexico. These intertwined processes of deportation, exploitation and corruption ultimately only further destabilized small border towns and led to physical and sexual violence against migrants. His control over migration and deportation in the area profited him and the Arizona Border Patrol authorities he worked with, but also led to crime, disorder, and even sexual assault for the few women who attempted to cross. Grounding the case of Preciado against the larger background of border enforcement and northern Mexico illustrates how deportation shaped local economies and cities in Mexico. Moreover, it illustrates how contrary to what migration historians have argued, the Great Depression did not end unsanctioned border crossings.²⁴¹

The porous nature of the border in the 20th century and the low numbers of authorities actually tasked with guarding it meant that unauthorized border crossings happened frequently. Indeed, historians such as Josiah Heyman have shown how families

²⁴⁰ Lorey, *United States-Mexico Border Statistics since 1900*, tables 110 and 104.

²⁴¹ Kelly Lytle-Hernández cites Alanis Enciso and writes that, "It was only the United States' deep economic decline of the 1930s that effectively stemmed unsanctioned Mexican immigration." In "Persecuted Like Criminals," 235.

led transnational lives, often having relatives on both sides of the border while also working in one country or another depending on the season and the industry. After the 1924 Immigration Act and the creation of the Border Patrol, however, migration patterns shifted.²⁴² Mexican officials now required more from migrants who wished to leave the country, including a passport and a tax, and the fares offered by coyotes seemed affordable in comparison.²⁴³ Thus, border enforcement policies prompted a shift in who was being smuggled across. Instead of Chinese migrants, Mexican migrants became clients for coyotes, and their precarious status north of the border meant that they could easily be expelled to Mexico. By the early 1930s, “smuggling had emerged as a core enterprise in the small pueblos of Mexico’s northern borderlands.”²⁴⁴ Coyotes continued to flourish along the border, but focusing on one case illustrates the long-reaching consequences of *coyotaje* in one city.

Sonora during this time was undergoing tremendous change as the government invested funds in developing towns on the border and agricultural infrastructure. President Lázaro Cárdenas’ land reforms in the second half of the 1930s altered power dynamics in the state, and some argue that this period also marks a shift as Sonora’s identity as an independent frontier state slowly gave way and the state incorporated itself more into the nation.²⁴⁵ However the state also struggled throughout the 1930s in the aftermath of the arrival of tens of thousands of repatriates. While many repatriates stayed

²⁴² For more on the 1924 Act, see Mae M. Ngai, “The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien: Immigrant Restriction and Deportation Policy in the United States, 1921-1965,” *Law and History Review* 21 (2003), 69-108.

²⁴³ Lytle-Hernandez, “Persecuted Like Criminals,” 228.

²⁴⁴ Lytle-Hernandez, “Persecuted Like Criminals,” 229.

²⁴⁵ Adrian A. Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution*, xvi.

in the border region after leaving the U.S., Nogales actually witnessed population loss during this period after changes in the mining industry.²⁴⁶ Copper mines had closed in the previous years and an influx of return migrants also financially struggling did not help local dynamics.²⁴⁷ In border towns, a lack of oversight and general prevalence of corruption allowed enterprising criminals to benefit from changes in U.S. border enforcement policies that made it increasingly risky to cross without official papers. Migrants who hoped to work in the U.S. relied on coyotes to help them cross the border, while coyotes in turn often worked with border authorities to avoid capture. These interactions and negotiations led to local economies based on corruption and the exploitation of these migrants. Deportation became more than a mechanism of post-entry border enforcement – it also functioned as a source of profit for smugglers and authorities alike.

Historian Rachel Ida Buff argues that deportation is a “crucial technology of the state” that “render[s] workers more vulnerable to exploitative work conditions and unconstitutional practices.” The threat of forced removal and the punitive measures that accompany it leave migrant communities in a precarious position, constantly aware of what she terms the “deportation terror.”²⁴⁸ However, this terror also affected border communities when deportees were effectively dumped on the other side of the border, often robbed of their possessions and savings. Nogales provided a convenient crossing point, as the Southern Pacific operated a railroad line that ran along the coast of Mexico

²⁴⁶ Daniel D. Arreola and James R. Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993).

²⁴⁷ Josiah McC. Heyman. *Life and Labor on the Border: Working People of Northeastern Sonora, Mexico, 1886-1996* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991), 111.

²⁴⁸ Rachel Ida Buff, “The Deportation Terror,” *American Quarterly* 60 (Summer 2008): 524. (2008)

to end in the city. Once completed in 1927, the Ferrocarril Sud-Pacífico de México line connected Mexico City to the border, passing through Guadalajara, and running along the country's western coast to stop in port cities such as Mazatlán, Sinaloa and Guaymas, Sonora before ending in Nogales.²⁴⁹ Migrants without documents could travel north and then from Nogales, cross into Arizona or head to California or Texas.

Beginning in the 1920s, the Mexican government established a secret police agency that sent inspectors across the country to report on various issues such as the general political and economic climate, as well as reports of organized crime and corruption. In 1937, inspectors from this office, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS), arrived in Nogales and began to investigate rumors regarding illegal border crossings and exploitation of migrants. Their mission took them from Nogales, Sonora, to other surrounding cities and to various locales in southern Arizona. Late that year, they began to send a series of reports to Mexico City detailing their findings on Ramón Preciado and his crime ring. The first report detailed how this operation worked. When hopeful migrants arrived in Nogales and could not legally cross the border to work, Preciado used his connections with Mexican border agents to help them illegally cross. He often charged migrants a fee, depending on their financial circumstances, before they even crossed, but his exploitation extended beyond the initial border crossing. Preying on migrants from other states in central Mexico who arrived in Nogales, Sonora, he promised them employment just across the border in Nogales, Arizona. Once they began to work, they would have to pay a daily "contribution" to him from their wages, for as

²⁴⁹ Daniel Lewis, *Iron Horse Imperialism: The Southern Pacific of Mexico, 1880-1951* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 3.

long as they stayed in the U.S. and wherever they went. As the investigators explained: “When someone for any reason could not pay this obligatory contribution, then he would denounce them to the American migration authorities to have them jailed and deported.” The deportation of unauthorized migrants benefited both Preciado and American officials, according to the reports which stated: “This action by the American authorities is an agreement between them and the aforementioned Preciado, since it has come to be known that these authorities have a stake in the business interests of Preciado.”²⁵⁰

While the involvement of Mexican authorities perhaps seems unsurprising given Mexico’s reputation of rampant political corruption, the cross-border nature of this operation extended beyond individual U.S. Border Patrol officers. Preciado also reached out to and maintained close relationships with U.S. migration officials, “some of whom were his *compadres* and frequently he would hold splendid parties for them in his private house.”²⁵¹ In particular, the U.S. Vice-Consul stationed in Nogales, Sonora and the head of the Border Patrol in Nogales, Arizona were noted to have attended multiple parties of his, as well as a number of other INS representatives. In Sonora, the general consensus painted him as a “servant of American authorities.” Beyond the financial benefits of participating in this scheme, U.S. authorities also benefited professionally in their careers as Preciado’s tactic of reporting non-paying migrants in the U.S. without papers helped them raise the numbers they could report of detained and deported migrants. However, his crimes extended beyond the financial demands he placed on male migrants. Female

²⁵⁰ Correspondence from Pedro Molina Espinosa to IPS, August 11, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

²⁵¹ Report from Inspector V-52, September 8, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

migrants who ended up in precarious situations due to not being in the U.S. legally often ended up homeless after being deported to Mexico. Preciado took advantage of their vulnerable situations to take them on as his own sexual partners, as well as “trafficking them in diverse ways.”²⁵² In other cases when the women were still in the U.S., he turned them over to U.S. authorities and then they remained detained in jails across Southern Arizona.²⁵³

During this period, cities just south of the provided a wealth of opportunities for vice. Every year, Tijuana welcomed large numbers of U.S. tourists interested in the city’s casinos and the availability of alcohol until Prohibition ended in 1933. (Lázaro Cárdenas dealt the industry a blow shortly thereafter when he shut down casinos.)²⁵⁴ Prostitution along the border also flourished during the early twentieth century, and for decades U.S. immigration officials turned a blind eye to prostitution on the border. As Deirdre Moloney argues, “the presence of prostitutes "serving" predominantly male, migrant mining camps” was less worrisome than the prospect of Mexican families settling in the area.²⁵⁵ During this period, women who crossed the border could find themselves forced into prostitution. Ann Gabbert writes, “"Coachers" would bring Mexican girls across the river and rape them at a "house of assignation." Upon their return to Mexico, the women were often deserted by their families and forced into prostitution to support

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Report from Inspector V-22, September 30, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

²⁵⁴ Kirk S. Bowman, “The U.S.-Mexican Border as Locator of Innovation and Vice,” in *Borders and Border Politics in a Globalizing World*, Ed. Paul Ganster and David E. Lorey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 274-275.

²⁵⁵ Deirdre M. Moloney, “Women, Sexual Morality and Economic Dependency in Early U.S. Deportation Policy,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18 (2006), 104-105.

themselves.”²⁵⁶ Thus, Preciado’s actions fit into a larger narrative of exploitation and violence against women at border-crossing points.

Thousands of miles away in Mexico City, officials struggled with how to address the issue. Preciado had reportedly assassinated the son of a Nogales judge only a year or two earlier, but never faced repercussions for this action. The wealth and influence he had gained as a coyote profiting from U.S. border enforcement laws had made him an untouchable man. Despite his unsavory reputation, he maintained a publicly respectable persona. He had served in the municipal police for six years and even won an award for good service, and was reported to live relatively modestly while attentively taking care of his widowed mother and generally being a “good family man.”²⁵⁷ The public impunity that Preciado enjoyed also influenced attitudes in Nogales as others sought to begin similar schemes. In reports detailing his activities, an IPS agent identified only as Inspector V-52 said that city residents had noted that “nothing happens to those who dedicate themselves to informing U.S. authorities and turning in their own compatriots as a way of life.” Indeed, even the previous chief-of-police in the city had allegedly participated in his own ring of migrant exploitation before transferring to another northern border town.²⁵⁸ After months of investigation, the government could do little to address this issue despite gathering testimonies from officials on both sides of the border. U.S. authorities denied ever maintaining friendly relations with such a known criminal, while Mexican officials described how his sphere of influence limited their options.

²⁵⁶ Ann Gabbert, “Prostitution and Moral Reforms in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890-1920,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12 (2003): 592-593.

²⁵⁷ Report from Inspector V-22, September 30, 1937, Caja 313, Expediente 47, DGIPS, AGN, Mexico City.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

While many city officials did not support him and feared his influence, local criminals and American authorities formed part of his transnational mafia. If he were to be officially charged, one inspector presumed, he would certainly flee to the U.S. and be welcomed by his gang of cronies.

Years later, in 1940, IPS launched another investigation into his activities and business ventures based on defrauding migrants. In this scheme, he told migrants looking for passports and official documentation that he could arrange this for them. He provided them with fraudulent documents which they attempted to use, but U.S. officials could easily pick out the fraudulent documents, and migrants were then detained, imprisoned and deported.²⁵⁹ Again, Preciado faced no charges or punishment for his role in falsifying documents and defrauding migrants.

Despite denials from United States officials, declassified documents from the U.S. Department of State reveal an investigation into his activities, in collusion with Thomas Powell, the American vice-consul in Nogales, Sonora. Letters of complaint accused Preciado and Powell of demanding payment from migrants, or that they engage in sexual activity with them. A resident of Nogales, Sonora wrote a letter to the U.S. Labor Department to complain of these activities, echoing complaints found in Mexican archives:

I respectfully inform you, at the request of various persons on the frontier, of the abuses committed by C. Thomas Powell, American vice-consul in Nogales, Sonora, and that he with a certain Ramon Preciado is deceiving and robbing the public, those persons who go to the Consulate to secure their local passports to cross the border, all persons being refused except those Mr. Preciado wishes, he and Powell collecting hundreds of pesos. Preciado fools the people for some days, telling them that he is arranging

²⁵⁹ File 15, Box 126, DGIPS, AGN.

things, and that he is going to speak with Mr. Powell, and as Mr. Powell is already in agreement that they collect a certain amount of money they pay it and then all is arranged.²⁶⁰

Lawrence S. Armstrong, the U.S. Consul in Nogales, Sonora, replied to the charges and cleared them of any suspicion or wrong doing. As Consul Armstrong said, Powell enjoyed a “very good reputation” among both Mexicans and Americans, and Preciado acted as “an immigrant advisor.” In his opinion, Preciado had likely incited some anger and frustration from Mexicans “owing to his activities as an informant and due to the fact that he is friendly to Americans.”²⁶¹ After explaining this, the Consul then requested that the Labor Department provide him with the complainant’s address so that he could be called in for an interview. Given Powell and Preciado’s wide-reaching influence and apparent impunity, Martinez likely purposely omitted his contact information to avoid such an encounter, and instead mentioned that he was writing on behalf of a number of other individuals who had experienced similar situations.

The following year, another complaint against Powell and Preciado was sent to government officials, this time reaching the American Consul in Mexico City, who then forwarded it to Lawrence Armstrong. In the letter, a man named Raymundo Gómez recounted the experience of his sister-in-law, Isabel Macías de Gómez. Her husband (Gómez’s brother) had lived in Los Angeles for years, and after they were married in Aguascalientes, she traveled through Nogales on her way to the U.S., where she would live with him. When she attempted to cross the border at Nogales, however, all required

²⁶⁰ Letter from Luis Martinez to Chief of Labor Department, July 24, 1940, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936-1949, NARA, College Park, MD.

²⁶¹ Statement L.S. Armstrong, September 4, 1940, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936-1949, NARA, College Park, MD.

documents in hand, Powell and Preciado “imposed as a condition to facilitate passage to the border that she agree have carnal intercourse with them, imposing shameful requirements and making her the victim a thousand immoral attacks.” Gómez writes that she did not agree to these terms. As a result of her refusal, however, she was forced to wait more than a month at the border before allowed to enter the U.S., even though she possessed all the paperwork needed.

Raymundo Gómez requested an investigation into Powell and Preciado, as well as punishments for the two. In April, the Consul General conducted an investigation into the matter, and the Secretary of State cleared Powell of any charges of wrong-doing in the matter of Macías de Gómez.²⁶² The following year, amid concerns of discrimination against Mexicans on the border, Armstrong stated that he was had “never heard of any cases of racial discrimination” against Mexican migrants or persons of Mexican descent in the region.²⁶³ Despite a record of complaints against Preciado and Powell, however, the U.S. Consul in Mexico City waited four months after receiving the letter to take action – two months after the Consul General had already determined that Powell had done no wrong.²⁶⁴ He wrote to Armstrong (still the Consul in Nogales, Sonora), and this response illustrates why many complaints about border agents received little response or attention from the government. Instead of investigating the complaints, he writes “I had thought to ignore this communication but having run across it again I thought it would be well to give Mr. Powell an opportunity to answer it. Unless you yourself think there is

²⁶² Letter to Lawrence S. Armstrong, April 29, 1941, Box 23, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936-1949, NARA, College Park, MD.

²⁶³ Letter from Armstrong to Mayor of Tucson, April 10, 1942, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936-1949, NARA, College Park, MD.

²⁶⁴ Letter from Raymundo Gómez to U.S. Consul, Mexico City, February 22, 1941, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936-1949, NARA, College Park, MD.

something to it before calling it to his attention, I would suggest that you do not even mention it in his efficiency report and I shall not bring it up again unless you write me further on the subject.” Powell at this point had a record of complaints made against him, and the omission of this accusation represents yet one more instance of U.S. officials refusing to investigate complaints by Mexican residents against U.S. government employees. Interestingly, no records indicate that U.S. officials ever contacted Gómez, his brother, or Isabel Macías de Gómez. Instead, they collaborated to ensure that no mention of the accusations would affect Powell’s career.²⁶⁵

While Preciado’s lengthy career as a coyote remained limited to the Sonora/Arizona borderlands, this case illustrates the complex history of deportation and corruption in border cities. The proximity of both cities of Nogales facilitated his business, as he could easily network with U.S. authorities while also keeping tabs on the migrants for whom he had arranged passage across the border. Throughout this era, however, reports in border cities increasingly focused on the numbers of deportees that arrived in desperate conditions, sick, starving, and destitute. For those who had paid coyotes the little money they had available after traveling from other states, they were left without many resources or funds after then being detained and deported. However, the multiple accusations of sexual assault or of sexual harassment form part of a larger narrative of sexual violence at border entry points. While some women complained of these abuses, many others likely remained quiet, worried about the potential repercussions. This silence reflects purposeful attempts by American authorities to

²⁶⁵ Letter from Geo. P. Shaw to L.S. Armstrong, June 17, 1941, Box 2, RG 84, Nogales Classified General Records, 1936-1949, NARA, College Park, MD.

overlook alleged transgressions by their own. Perhaps this was due to the deliberate concealment of such actions, disbelief in accounts by Mexican women and men, or a combination of both. In any case, the prolonged careers of Preciado and Powell reflect a system in which migrants continued to be exploited while authorities looked away and tacitly allowed such behavior to continue unchecked.

Conclusion

While the Great Depression resulted in unprecedented rates of return migration, mass repatriation and deportation had not ended by the end of the decade. Reports continued to describe how thousands of deportees languished at the border, perhaps waiting to obtain more work north of the border or perhaps unable to pay for passage elsewhere in Mexico. In 1939, one telegram mentioned that three thousand repatriates had arrived at the border in a week.²⁶⁶ The ongoing waves of return migration to Mexico underline how commonplace the expulsion of Mexicans from the U.S. had become. Rather than an exceptional response to the economic crisis of the Great Depression, the coerced return of Mexican migrants formed an essential part of the labor migration pattern between the two countries. U.S. employers sought Mexican workers not only because they could pay them less and treat them poorly, but also because they could essentially dispose of them once no longer needed. Focusing exclusively on repatriation campaigns erases this part of the labor migration cycle while also overlooking how the

²⁶⁶ Acta de la Sesión Pública Ordinaria celebrada por la H. XXXI Legislatura Constitucional del Estado, *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Colima*, March 18, 1939, 76-77. HDNM.

continuous arrival of returning migrants destabilized border cities and created myriad economic and social problems for Mexico.

In looking at the body of scholarly literature on Mexican migration during the first half of the twentieth century, it seems that emigration from Mexico virtually halted after the Depression and only resumed again with the introduction of the Bracero Program. This chapter examines this gap in the timeline and argues that migration patterns remained much more fluid than previously thought, with ongoing undocumented migration, illicit border crossings, and deportations. Examining Mexican migration in the 1930s as part of a larger tapestry of complex U.S.-Mexico relations, immigration restriction, and border tensions reveals how the repatriation campaigns in many ways represent only a continuation of U.S. policies. Moreover, looking at the effects of immigration law on the border during this period highlights the violence that these regions faced as the line increasingly became a militarized boundary. This decade had serious consequences for Mexico as it continued to destabilize the border region. While unprecedented in size, the repatriation campaigns should be considered as part of a larger pattern of U.S. border control efforts and as an essential factor in the development of northern Mexico.

During this period, deportation also emerged as a profitable business for those on both sides of the border. Today, a number of industries prey on deportees in Mexico as well as undocumented people in the U.S. The business of border enforcement today has contributed to the rise of privately-owned detention centers in which migrants languish for months, the militarization of the border, and targeting of deportees by drug cartels upon their return to Mexico. Tracing the early history of formal deportations and coyotes

reveals how early on, business interests linked officials from both sides of the border as they exploited migrants for profit.

Chapter 3: The Wetback Problem:

Deportation During the Bracero Program, 1942-1954

Introduction

In the early 1940s, Presidents Manuel Ávila Camacho and Franklin Delano Roosevelt agreed to a guest worker program that would bring Mexican men to work in the U.S. for short periods of time. This would ostensibly help ease the employment crisis in the US provoked by the departure of an estimated sixteen million American soldiers who fought in World War II. Inexpensive and deportable migrant labor proved to be irresistible for U.S. employers, however, and the agreement continued to be renewed well beyond the end of the war. During the twenty-two years of the program, waves of Mexican men migrated to the U.S. on 4.5 million temporary work contracts. Many more migrants took advantage of the demand for cheap labor and U.S. employers' willingness to hire "wetbacks," and traveled north without documentation. While some Mexican families did migrate to the U.S. during this period, most migrants were unaccompanied men who intended to spend a short time abroad. This gendered, selective labor migration had specific consequences in terms of return migration. Instead of settling in a new country, the majority of workers regularly returned to Mexico as they cycled back and forth across the border according to the growing seasons and availability of work. Some "skipped" their contracts and stayed in the U.S. Others never made it back home to their hometowns.

This chapter covers the beginning of the Bracero Program until Operation Wetback, covering the years between 1942 until the mid-1950s. In this period, the program evolved from being an emergency wartime labor program to forming an

important provider of contracted and non-contracted employees for agribusiness. In 1954, the program gained far more attention as INS and the Border Patrol claimed to deport a million Mexican migrants from the U.S., thereby framing undocumented Mexican immigration as a serious risk to the nation. The program also geographically expanded during this period, with braceros being sent to Texas (which had originally been excluded due to the history of discrimination against Mexicans in that state) in 1947.²⁶⁷

This chapter specifically focuses on the experiences of male migrants who traveled to the U.S. on temporary work contracts or who crossed without papers as “wetbacks,” and the effects of their return to Mexico. The threat of deportation had been used for decades to keep workers vulnerable and controllable, particularly in cases of strikes. The years of the Bracero Program continued to rely on this strategy, and also introduced the scheduled repatriations of guest workers as well as the period of mass deportation under Operation Wetback. Migration during these decades represents a period in which Mexican migrants became even more temporary and disposable. Deportation (and removal in general) during this period did not only have symbolic importance as a mechanism of control and discipline – it had tremendous, long-lasting consequences for migrants and for Mexico.

²⁶⁷ In addition to *de facto* discrimination, in 1936 El Paso officials declared that Mexicans would now be registered as “colored” in birth and death records, not white as they previously had been. While short-lived, this change in classification prompted regional and international debates as officials wrestled with reactions. After years of debate, advocacy from the Mexican government and Mexican American groups as LULAC, and the initiation of the Good Neighbor Policy, Mexicans were once again categorized as white except in cases where they were “definitely Indian or of other non-white race.” The rampant segregation in the U.S. South at that point made this debate especially important. For more on this, see Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, “Good Neighbors and White Mexicans: Constructing Race and Nation on the Mexico-U.S. Border,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 33 (2013): 5-34.

The informal processes of removal and return during this period did not leave hundreds of thousands of files that tracked the return of migrants; thus, I take a different approach to examining return migration to Mexico during the duration of the Bracero Program. The documents and oral histories I examine in this chapter illustrate how the overall system of labor migration proved traumatic for migrants and detrimental for Mexico, rather than focusing solely on the actual formal legal process of deportation. While deportation has terrorized communities and families, I argue that the condition of deportability – the temporary status ascribed to Mexicans – wrought havoc for ethnic Mexicans on both sides of the border.²⁶⁸

I focus on three aspects of return migration from the beginning of the Bracero Program until just after the end of Operation Wetback: 1) changing economic and political conditions in Mexico; 2) treatment of braceros in the U.S. that affected them after their return to Mexico; and 3) the actual processes of return for braceros and their reception in their home country. The Bracero Program undeniably altered migration patterns to the U.S., but its effects cannot be separated from the history and trajectory of post-revolutionary Mexico and its citizens. This chapter continues to explore how Mexican labor migration to the United States ultimately had major consequences for Mexico as a sending country. While transnational labor migration destabilizes sending countries in a number of ways, the nature of the Bracero Program, in which workers were contracted for only short periods of time in order to best suit seasonal changes and

²⁶⁸ In her article “The Deportation Terror,” Rachel Ida Buff delves into this aspect of the power of deportation in recent raids by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. As she writes, “I argue that the deportation terror imposed on immigrant communities by these raids is a crucial technology of the state...Deportation, or forcible removal, has long been used to secure and enhance borders, and to extend the gatekeeping work performed at the border deep into the interior.” *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 525.

growers' demands, provides a clear example of how guest worker programs exploit workers and their home countries.

International labor migration can negatively affect sending countries in a number of ways, as seen during this period. Braceros' presence in the U.S. meant an absence in Mexico, and in the first part of the chapter I consider the changes that occurred as a result of these temporary periods abroad. The cyclical departure and then return of hundreds of thousands of Mexican men every year significantly affected their home country as the work they might have done at home went undone. Mexican agribusiness struggled with recruiting enough workers to plant and harvest crops, while unfilled processing jobs in factories meant that the businesses sometimes closed. When braceros returned to Mexico, the employment opportunities they had once had were now gone. The departure of so many men also affected politics in their hometowns as well as in northern cities that faced an influx of returning workers.

In the second section, which focuses on the bracero experience and its consequences, I begin by looking at the living situations for Mexican migrant workers in the U.S. during this period. For many braceros, the short time they spent working in another country (contracts were as short as 45 days, and some were returned even before this time ended) affected the rest of their lives. Unsafe working conditions, experiences of discrimination and exploitation, and inadequate food and medical care permanently changed the lives of migrants who sometimes fell ill or became injured on the job. This subhuman treatment left indelible marks on surviving braceros, and while some ex-braceros describe the financial benefits of the program, the task of examining the mental consequences of long periods of segregation and overwork proves harder to explore.

Thus, I attempt to look at how braceros and their family members share and censor their memories. Their experiences illustrate how guest work proved a painful experience for many and continued to affect migrants even after crossing back into Mexico. In the last section, I look at the repatriation and deportation of these workers (and the experiences surrounding these processes) as part of the entire bracero experience. While the return of these workers was a crucial part of the program the actual details of this process remain an understudied aspect of the program and its effects on Mexico.

Of course, labor emigration to the US was hardly a new phenomenon. The Mexican government and Mexican citizens knew well the risks that awaited migrant workers in the US, and many wary Mexicans recalled the repatriation campaigns of the 1930s in the hopes of urging braceros not to emigrate lest they encounter the same discrimination, exploitation, and eventual forced removal from the country. Despite these qualms, for workers with few options the Bracero Program offered comparatively high wages, particularly in rural areas or regions suffering from climate problems that severely limited agricultural output. From the beginning, demand for contracts overwhelmed officials, outstripped the number of available spots, and sparked rising rates of illegal emigration from Mexico as aspiring braceros flooded contracting centers and cities close to the border. Emigration had similarly proved problematic in the 1920s while the country attempted to stabilize amidst a religious civil war and the wake of nearly a decade of revolutionary violence, and such emigrants were critiqued for abandoning their

country in its time of need.²⁶⁹ Once again, the emigration of so many men and the consequences of their departure sparked intense debate in Mexico.

Procedures used by both the US and Mexico to transport returning migrants held ramifications for not only those officially deported, but also their compatriots and for Mexico itself as the notion of a deportable, temporary workforce affected the sending country in complex ways. Examining the effects of return migration, including both forced and voluntary, on Mexico as the original country-of-origin opens up new lines of inquiry and raises important questions regarding ideas of circular migration and labor importation. This project thus sheds light on the consequences of coerced return migration as the hidden side of an inherently flawed system that exploits laborers at the expense of their well-being and their countries-of-origin.

The Many Uses of Deportation

The chronology of the Bracero Program that focuses exclusively on Operation Wetback as the sole period of mass deportation erases the longer history of border enforcement that had begun years earlier. As historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez describes, “Raids, mass deportations, and an uncompromising focus on undocumented Mexican immigration had increasingly characterized U.S. Border Patrol work since the early 1940s. Year after year, the Border Patrol’s campaign to detect and deport undocumented Mexican nationals developed slowly and unevenly until its well-publicized

²⁶⁹ Kelly Lytle Hernández. “Persecuted Like Criminals: The Politics of Labor Emigration and Mexican Migration Controls in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34:1 (Spring 2009), 219.

announcement in the summer of 1954.”²⁷⁰ This assessment of previous literature accurately points out the over-reliance on looking at the effects within the United States, as well as the focus on a few months in 1954 without examining the longer history and the changing policies that led to the operation. While Mexican workers in the U.S. had long experienced a precarious existence as they faced discrimination and the possibility of forced repatriation, the introduction of guest worker contracts in 1942 ushered in a new era of migration in which laborers became even more temporary. Aspiring braceros often took out loans to pay the hefty bribes some local officials demanded in exchange for contracts, spent weeks waiting to be processed, and in some cases received contracts as short as six weeks, after which they would be re-evaluated to see if they would make useful workers or would be sent back.²⁷¹ “Wetbacks” who crossed without papers found themselves in an even less desirable situation, at risk of exploitation, abuse, and deportation (which would make further crossings into the U.S. even riskier if caught).

These circumstances meant that they arrived in the U.S in a vulnerable state, with the threat of deportation hanging over their heads. Ronald Mize summarizes: “If a worker did not comply – deportation. If they started making demands for better working conditions – deportation. Living with the fear of total control, violence did not have to be inflicted by the grower because workers were made well aware of the history of state agents (local law enforcement) who were recruited to do the dirty work of punishment.”²⁷² Despite the recent increase in scholarship on braceros, the importance of

²⁷⁰ Lytle Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 422.

²⁷¹ Gilbert G. Gonzales, *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 36.

²⁷² Ronald L. Mize, “Power (In)-Action: State and Agribusiness in the Making of the Bracero Total Institution,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 50 (2006): 90.

deportation and repatriation has not drawn much attention. This chapter details how the threat and reality of forced return kept contracted braceros effectively trapped in potentially life-threatening situations. Those working without contracts and who had crossed without authorization could be rounded up and sent back at any time, with little time to collect belongings or advise friends and relatives. Deportation during this period, particularly in cases where workers were not contracted, did not receive the sort of oversight that deportation did for migrants from other countries. The geographic proximity of Mexico and the shared border meant that the official, legal process of deportation often never happened. Instead, migrants could be forcibly returned to Mexico with no chance of receiving legal representation, due process, or respect of their human rights.

Some Chicana/o Studies scholars have interpreted the Bracero Program as yet another example of the U.S.'s unceasing drive to control and maintain a neocolonialist relationship with Mexico. As historian Gilbert G. González describes, the program very much represents yet one more manifestation of the United States' imperialist agenda, and in this case, bracero labor bears a disturbing resemblance to colonial labor exploitation. As he writes, "Braceros were, in legal terms, indentured laborers, recruited and processed by the U.S. government with the assistance of the Mexican government and placed under the control of agricultural corporations for a specified period of time, after which the braceros would be disposed of – that is, repatriated."²⁷³ These workers were replaceable, and thus the U.S. did not have to concern itself with reproducing the labor source. The task of raising, feeding, and educating workers fell on Mexico, as did the responsibility of

²⁷³ González, *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?*, 79.

caring for elderly and injured workers who were no longer “useful.” In a Marxian analysis, the U.S. benefited from a “surplus of labor” while Mexico’s social and economic fabric was disrupted by the temporary absence of these men. Thus, fathers, sons, and brothers all helped the U.S. further along its process of capital accumulation, while Mexico struggled to deal first with their departure, and then with their return. Migrants headed to the U.S. to serve as agricultural stoop labor, while large farm owners in northern Mexico struggled with how to employ workers in the same industries.

Historians such as Ana Elizabeth Rosas and Deborah Cohen have recently explored how the migration of unaccompanied men to the U.S engendered economic, social, and emotional turmoil in the hometowns and families they left behind.²⁷⁴ Additionally, the complicated and constantly changing contracting process meant that workers internally migrated within Mexico, disrupting and straining local economies for months as they waited to hopefully get a contract. Thus, even before workers returned to Mexico, their initial departure from their home communities had already altered everyday life and local economies in Mexico. This large-scale importation of unaccompanied male Mexican workers to the United States marked a departure from previous waves of migrating families, and further entrenched the image of Mexican men as a temporary source of unskilled labor. Beyond the change in perceptions of Mexican migrants, though, the program’s use of Mexicans as a source of temporary labor led to other unfortunate consequences for migrants and their families.

²⁷⁴ Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Sources and Memories

Mexican history has generally overlooked the role of emigration in the development of the country, particularly when considering the political and social landscape of the early 20th century. Interestingly, the years of the Bracero Program overlap with an understudied period in Mexican history, as many historians of 20th century Mexico have focused on the Porfiriato (ending in 1910) and on the “long” history of the Revolution (1910-1940), but not much on what followed.²⁷⁵ Chronologically, this chapter takes place after the era of Cardenismo (1934-1940), when President Lázaro Cárdenas enacted sweeping reforms across the country, and before the watershed year of 1968. That year, the country hosted the Olympics, but also witnessed the horrifying massacre of students that signified the Partido Revolucionario Internacional’s shift to a more dictatorial method of rule.²⁷⁶

For decades, the PRI’s control of government archives limited the ability of historians to “break the 1940 barrier”²⁷⁷ and exerted an even tighter grip over documents from the 1960s-1990s, in which PRIísta corruption flourished. When Vicente Fox, the presidential candidate for the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), won the 2000 elections, the new administration attempted to rule in a more transparent manner. As part of this attempt, the 2002 *Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental* declassified decades’ worth of confidential documents, including those of

²⁷⁵ Alan Knight, “Patterns and Prescriptions in Mexican History,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 25 (2006): 346-347.

²⁷⁶ Pablo Piccato reflects on the meaning of 1968 symbolically and methodologically in a recent article: “1968 meant the beginning of the end of the post-revolutionary regime, the moment when the true authoritarian nature of the presidency and the PRI was unveiled and radicalized.”

“Comments: How to Build a Perspective on the Recent Past,” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19 (2013): 92.

²⁷⁷ Knight, “Patterns and Prescriptions in Mexican History,” 348.

the Oficina de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS) – Mexico’s secret police agency.²⁷⁸ During this period, IPS sent agents all over the country to gather information on local happenings, gossip, and the political climate. The release of these documents has allowed historians to delve into the workings of PRIísta Mexico as well as into the concerns of local community members. Over time, perhaps future presidents will facilitate access to later decades of investigations, but in the meantime, historians can weave details from these documents into their work.

This chapter combines some of these documents with other archival sources (including government correspondence, newspaper accounts, and writings by braceros and migrants) and oral histories. For many years, published work on braceros did not include the voices of the workers themselves and instead relied on government reports and newspaper coverage. More recent scholarly works on the program incorporate interviews with former braceros, but in many cases do not critically examine how memories get altered and filtered over years, or fail to identify what made the bracero experience unique from that of other migrants. This overlooks the particular nature of “guest work” in which migrants were separated from their families and communities, and knew that they would only be abroad for a short period of time. Critically approaching these various sources and memories allows for a more thorough exploration of how the program’s legacy continues to undergo revisions. Combining archival research, contemporary coverage of the program and texts written by migrants allows for more

²⁷⁸ Tanalís Padilla and Louise Walker, “In the Archives: History and Politics,” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 19 (2013): 1-2. Over decades, the name changed to Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, and then Miguel Alemán created a separate agency known as the Dirección Federal de Seguridad.

detailed insight into what Ronald Mize describes as “what Braceros recalled and what they forgot (or chose not to recall).”²⁷⁹

As with many other topics in history, the Bracero Program seems to be undergoing a sort of re-evaluation as scholars present new analyses. Ernesto Galarza’s damning critique of the program in *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (1964) has been tempered in recent work that takes into account oral histories of braceros to present a more positive view of the program and the financial benefits for workers and communities.²⁸⁰ However, relying exclusively on oral histories from surviving braceros reflecting on their experiences half a century later can obscure the darker consequences of sending migrants abroad for a few months at a time. This recent literature tends to offer a much more positive portrait of the program and treatment of workers. To consider what may get omitted from these generally supportive accounts, I also look at older oral histories as well as letters written by migrants during the years of the program. This critical approach to the use of oral histories is influenced by historians such as Alistair Thomson, who writes: “I wonder if the opportunity readily presented by oral history to record the apparently hidden histories of migrants has displaced historians’ efforts to unearth other forms of personal testimony.”²⁸¹ While histories of migration that rely on interviews with migrants are an undoubtedly rich and invaluable source, some do not question how these memories may have evolved over the years to privilege some events

²⁷⁹ Ronald L. Mize, “Mexican Contract Workers and the U.S. Capitalist Agricultural Labor Process: The Formative Era, 1942-1964,” *Rural Sociology* 71 (2006): 88.

²⁸⁰ 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, 1964).

²⁸¹ Alistair Thomson, “Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies,” *Oral History* 27 (1999): 26.

while leaving out other details. Part of the richness that emerges in oral histories comes from the individual voice and experiences of each interviewee. But at the same time, some people may remain more reticent to share and relive painful memories of struggle, trauma and loss.

In Michael Snodgrass' analysis, he overlooks many of the changes in the Bracero Program's implementation and enforcement of bracero protections over the course of its twenty-two years. As such, no mention is made of the material effects of and popular responses to Operation Wetback, or of the surge in deportations before that time and the increase in wetback labor afterward. Additionally, his reliance on interviews with surviving braceros skews the results to privilege the voices of those braceros who remained in Mexico (and not those who chose to return to the US with or without documentation). Lastly, this method limits the narrative to have only those who actually survived the ordeal participate. Thus, the horror stories covered in newspapers and exposed in research such as Henry Pope Anderson's harshly critical study *The Bracero Program in California* remain no more than work by "muckraking journalists" or the stuff of online rumors, as he claims.²⁸² Instead, he emphasizes the ability of braceros to mobilize against oppressive work conditions, writing:

²⁸² Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," in *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: 261. He writes: "Moreover, most braceros returned home with positive recollections that contrast markedly with the Bracero Program's depiction as a form of "legalized slavery," a view as common in the 1960s as on the Internet today. This, of course, reflects a tendency among oral history interviewees to recall the past with a sense of nostalgia. But from their perspective, seasonal labor in the fields of El Norte permitted them to maintain their families, make their lands more productive, and open their eyes to a world beyond their hardscrabble villages and neighborhoods. The benefits they gained from that experience, and the lessons it taught to their children, helped to institutionalize the culture of migration for which western Mexico is so renowned today."

Bracero recruits knew their rights before departing – or learned them up north – and protested their abrogation. Mexico’s Foreign Relations Ministry archives hold hundreds of files documenting bracero protests and successful efforts to redress their grievances. Consular officials recovered lost wages, fined employers, and blacklisted entire counties for violating the accord. Effective enforcement declined as the program’s growth in the 1950s outgrew the consular offices’ reach. But braceros continued to resist what they perceived as contractual violations through formal claims, with wildcat stoppages, or by skipping out to return home or seek better jobs elsewhere.²⁸³

As he concludes, despite all the problems with the program, people still wanted to travel north as braceros – far more than the number of contracts available.

Deborah Cohen’s work on braceros in Durango also presents aspects of the program in a less critical manner, focusing on the positive reflections of former braceros. As she writes, “I expected former migrants’ accounts to be ones of racism and abuse. However, in living rooms, kitchens, barbershops, and on street corners, they talked to me with pride about their experiences in the U.S. In contrast to scholarly portrayals, men refused to see themselves as victims; rather, they were actors in making their own worlds and the resulting social configurations of Mexico and the United States.”²⁸⁴ Cohen’s argument highlights an aspect of the program that often went overlooked – the braceros’ own roles in shaping their surroundings and future networks. However, how does this contrast with what braceros and migrants said *at the time* about their experience? What does the disparity between coverage at the time and memories decades later suggest about the program’s effects on individuals and communities? At the same time, how can

²⁸³ Ibid., 251.

²⁸⁴ Deborah Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006): 81.

we look at the exploitative aspects of labor migration without unilaterally portraying the workers as vulnerable victims?

The Costs and Consequences of Labor Migration for Sending Countries

Despite its flaws, the program did in some ways economically benefit Mexico. Often, economic analyses of international migration place a great deal of value on remittances and wages brought back to a sending country to focus extensively on how these funds help the sending country. While the program was intended as a wartime measure to help the U.S. mitigate the loss of workers during World War II, modernization theory also influenced support of the efforts.²⁸⁵ Leaders hoped that the program would guide Mexico along a path toward becoming a modern, industrialized nation that would be a formidable world power. Under the guidelines of the program, ten percent of wages were to be held from braceros' paychecks until they returned home with the goal of being able to use this money to invest in Mexico by buying land and tools. However, the program only worsened agribusiness in Mexico as growers in northern states could no longer find enough workers to tend to the fields during planting and harvest times. In the end, regulation and oversight of wages became a disaster, with former braceros fighting to receive their withheld pay even to this day.²⁸⁶ Many other factors complicate the project of studying the economics of the Bracero Program, including the theft and corruption that led to exchanges of cash and property that began before the contracting process in Mexico and ended well after workers returned to their

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 82.

²⁸⁶ Adam Goodman and Verónica Zapata Rivera, "Bracero Guestworkers, Unpaid," *Jacobin*, October 16, 2013.

country. Thus, I argue for a more comprehensive analysis of how guest work has much more complex and long-term ramifications beyond remittances.

Throughout the Bracero Program, Mexico experienced sustained economic growth, entering a period often referred to as the “Mexican Miracle.” Although the nationalization of its petroleum industry in 1938 had earned it ire from countries such as the United States and Great Britain, the country’s economy flourished. Irrigation projects in northern Mexico increased opportunities to profit from the land, and subsidies further benefited those in agriculture. However, while large landowners enjoyed the economic boon, the country’s peasant workers who worked the land did not benefit. Michael Foley argues that, “Limited access to land and growing populations prompted *minifundismo* and drove millions of peasants to emigration or agricultural labor on unfavorable terms.”²⁸⁷ From 1939 to 1946, inflation increased prices for basic items by 300 percent, making everyday life much more difficult to afford.²⁸⁸ The opportunities the Bracero Program presented seemed more persuasive given the few options available to peasants in Mexico.

Agricultural regions in northern Mexico swiftly experienced a loss of labor as workers pursued higher wages in the U.S. A report on the Laguna region in 1943 stated that laborers’ desire to head north “became so manifest that the state government authorities were alarmed over the exodus of workmen necessary to the state’s industries,” to the point that they cautioned local leaders not to allow the contracting of men in their regions who already had employment. Unemployment had drastically been reduced, but

²⁸⁷ Michael W. Foley, “Privatizing the Countryside: the Mexican Peasant Movement and Neoliberal Reform, *Latin American Perspectives* 22 (1995), 62.

²⁸⁸ Norman Caulfield, *Mexican Workers and the State: From the Porfiriato to NAFTA* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1998), 77.

at the same time, employers reported that workers were quitting the work they had in the fields.²⁸⁹ The sustained emigration of workers meant that such employment opportunities in Mexico permanently disappeared in some cases.²⁹⁰

In his study of the Altos region of Jalisco, Snodgrass highlights the various ways in which bracero remittances helped to develop the area. Based on his interviews with former braceros in the Los Altos region of Jalisco, he explains:

In their recollections, the hardships confronted and sacrifices made barely tarnish the benefits that seasonal migration offered: good pay, frequently decent treatment, and the opportunity to improve their families' lives upon return. Seen from the perspective of Jalisco, we understand how a guest worker program that undermined conditions for farmworkers in the United States produced beneficial returns for Mexican communities, where the Bracero Program nurtured and sanctioned a culture of migration that persists to this day.²⁹¹

Remittances certainly helped many families and braceros, and some communities even used bracero savings to fund infrastructural developments such as paved roads. In other cases, they saved to buy appliances such as sewing machines to take back to their hometowns.²⁹² These appliances could make everyday life easier for families, and could potentially even serve as a source of extra income.

However, the full extent of the economic contributions by migrants remains difficult to ascertain since transactions were often not tracked and wage theft ran rampant on both sides of the border. Employers would also use deportation to their financial

²⁸⁹ "Political Report for July 1943," August 4, 1943, Torreón: Political Reports, 1939-1943, RG 84, NARA II, College Park, MD.

²⁹⁰ See Chapter 5 for more discussion of this.

²⁹¹ Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress," 247.

²⁹² Interview with Fernando Rodriguez by Fernanda Castillo, 2003, "Interview no. 1138," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

advantage in order to avoid paying workers. One former U.S. Customs investigator described his experience with this tactic:

There were instances where we received information about a bunch of wets here or there in some particular farm and went out and sacked ‘em up, and then in talking to ‘em found out that they had two, three weeks wages coming or something like that, and pretty much knew that we’d been tipped off and that it was just before payday. In most instances we’d take the aliens to the farmers, see if we could get ‘em paid before they left. If the farmer refused to do it the aliens would report it to the consul that they had been cheated out of their wages or hadn’t been paid... I think in some cases [the consul was successful].²⁹³

Unfortunately, when the consul was not successful, the workers would lose their wages while employers brought in other Mexican migrants to take over without paying those sent back to Mexico. More commonly, employers would overcharge braceros for food and other basic supplies to profit even more from the program, forcing the workers to spend their meager earnings on overpriced items. All-too-quickly, the dream of returning to Mexico a wealthy man disintegrated for many exploited braceros.

Other factors made emigration tempting for *aspirantes*. The population was growing rapidly at this time, but land distribution after Cárdenas dwindled. Consequently, more people were working in agriculture, but did not own their own plots. Between 1940 and 1960, the number of Mexicans “working in agricultural pursuits” jumped more than 50%, from approximately 4 million to over 6 million. According to James Wilkie, “The average plot of 12 to 25 hectares given out during the 1930’s was now overcrowded with eligible young laborers.”²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Interview with Arthur Adams by Jim Merchant and Oscar J. Martínez, Interview #646, UT El Paso Oral History Collection.

²⁹⁴ James Wilkie, *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change Since 1910* (University of California Press, 1970), 191-192.

Recent scholarship lists remittances as Mexico's third largest source of funds in the 1950s,²⁹⁵ yet as Richard H. Hancock wrote in his study of the effects of the program at that time on northern Mexico, remittances form "a largely "hidden" capital since no precise statistical measure of it has ever been made."²⁹⁶ In his thesis based on fieldwork in Chihuahua in the 1950s, he described how the wages that some braceros saved and brought back to Mexico affected local economies:

The importance of the bracero's contribution to the economy was attested to by rural storekeepers all over Chihuahua; one of these men said that at his store in Gómez Farías bracero dollars frequently made up more than half of the total daily receipts. A storekeeper in Colonia Dublán in the municipio of Nuevo Casas Grandes estimated that trade with returned braceros had improved his business by 10 to 15 per cent. Through employment in the United States, migrants have raised their level of living and that of their families, particularly in regard to food consumption, clothing, and housing. Some braceros have also used their wages for investment in farm equipment, land, animals, and other factors of production. Seasonal emigration to the United States is, in the great majority of cases, the rural worker's only real opportunity for economic self-improvement."²⁹⁷

Despite the social and economic costs of sending men abroad for short periods of time, the influx of bracero wages into Mexico had a significant influence on the Mexican government's decisions regarding the program.²⁹⁸ In literature on Mexico-U.S. migration, scholars disagree on the involvement and the motivations of the Mexican state.

²⁹⁵ Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker," 82.

²⁹⁶ Richard H. Hancock, "The Role of the Bracero in the Economic and Cultural Dynamics of Mexico," (Ph.D. diss, Stanford, 1959) 2.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 122.

²⁹⁸ Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu*, 68-69. Regarding the hiring of "specials," Rosas writes: "The Mexican government was willing to overlook this racially motivated rationale because it supported the legalization of discretionary contract renewal in the United States rather than at stations along the border. It approved this provision out of a desperate need for Mexican immigrant remittances. In its estimation, this new immigration status meant longer, profitable contracts for Mexican immigrant men who would capably manage and cater to fellow immigrant men. Special immigrants' remittances would bolster local economies nationwide in Mexico."

Proponents of the “safety-valve” thesis opine that emigration provided Mexico with a convenient way to mitigate economic and political tensions. Others argue that various offices and sectors of the Mexican state, including its consuls abroad, deliberately overlooked the sometimes horrifying treatment of migrant workers in the U.S. Former braceros and their families often agree with this statement, reflecting on the failure of the Mexican state to help them when they were struggling abroad.

As Michael Burawoy argues in his seminal article comparing systems of migrant labor, the geography of international labor migration also matters:

...At a more general level the proximity of the United States has been a factor in the persistent underdevelopment of Mexico, making it difficult for that nation to absorb the full potential of its labor force or to compete with wages available in the United States. Furthermore, the very sale of labor power by an underdeveloped country, such as Malawi or Mexico, to an economically advanced nation serves only to reinforce the relations of economic subjugation and domination. This is so despite protestations by the South African and United States governments that in employing nationals of underdeveloped countries that they are doing these countries a service. In a narrow sense, they are doing just that by absorbing surplus labor that could present a political threat to the undeveloped nation and by providing rural workers with “their only real opportunity for economic self development” and the possibility of remitting income home. In a broader context, however, migrant labor exists only because of the uneven development of capitalism and reflects the economic dependence of Mexico on the United States and Malawi on South Africa.²⁹⁹

He directly cites Hancock’s study and focus on remittances, and adamantly refutes the idea that these programs can help the sending country. Mexican braceros and wetbacks earned dollars and sent some home (even if it meant eating dog food to spend less on meals), but did so at the expense of being exploited, overworked, separated from their

²⁹⁹ Michael Burawoy, “The Functions and Reproductions of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 81: 5 (March 1976), 1068.

families, and possibly injured.³⁰⁰ Additionally, after multiple decades of labor importation and repatriation (or expulsion), the U.S. came to view Mexicans even more as controllable, temporary providers of cheap labor. As Burawoy emphasizes, migratory patterns affect much more than just the individual migrants. The material or social benefits experienced by some do not entirely mitigate the overall damage wrought by migratory patterns that rely on the sustained transnational movement of low-skilled laborers.³⁰¹

The exportation of agricultural workers meant that growers in Mexico could expect a critical lack of labor when harvest time came. Hancock stated that in Chihuahua, “The 36,623 braceros contracted in 1957 comprised 11 per cent of the total labor force and 21 per cent of the economically active agricultural population of the state.”³⁰² In other words, one of every five agricultural workers in the state had left at some point to work in the U.S, and likely left during the peak of the planting and harvesting seasons to meet the demands of agricultural needs north of the border. Some *municipios* in the state had nearly half of their agricultural workforce leave for the U.S.³⁰³ At the time, the domestic disruption in Mexico caused by the emigration of workers did not receive much attention from officials in the U.S. However, communities all over northern Mexico asked for a halt to this migration during harvest seasons. One letter published in the national newspaper *Excelsior* described the proposal of some agricultural leaders in the

³⁰⁰ Interview no. 1138 with Fernando Rodriguez, interviewed by Fernanda Carrillo, March 5, 2003, UTEP Oral History Collection

³⁰¹ Burawoy, “The Functions and Reproductions of Migrant Labor,” 1068.

³⁰² Hancock, *Role of the Bracero*, 121. Note: Hancock does not elaborate on this number to explain whether men may have been contracted multiple times in the same year. Nonetheless, the numbers provided would have had a significant impact on agriculture in the region.

³⁰³ Ibid.

northern Laguna region to import workers from other countries such as Italy or Spain to come pick the valuable cotton crop. These migrant workers would take the place of those “Mexican workers who desert the fields to “enroll themselves” as braceros.”³⁰⁴ Such a proposal highlights the unstable nature of guest work. In this case, the emigration of guest workers (even if only temporarily) destabilized the sending economy to the point where growers solicited the importation of agricultural workers from a different continent.

Early Years of the Program

In much of the coverage in Mexican newspapers and documents in Mexican archives, there is no mention of the migrant worker’s legal status in the U.S. The term “bracero” often refers to wetbacks as well as contracted workers, and sometimes newspapers made mention of “braceros ilegales” instead of saying “espaldas mojadas.” This lack of distinction consequently complicates our ability to understand if some workers went to the U.S. with contracts, which thereby entitled them to certain rights by both governments. However, the ease with which citizens and officials switched terms and used “braceros” to refer to all migrant laborers in the U.S. also raises important questions about how people in Mexico understood the program and the contracting process. With local officials demanding exorbitant bribes, the possibility of obtaining a contract remained out of reach for many migrants. Nonetheless, they migrated north, understanding that U.S. employers wanted their labor and would pay them. In turn, their

³⁰⁴ Enrique S. Espinosa, “El problema braceril de Mexico,” Apr 5, 1956, File 546.6/9, Archivo Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, AGN.

families and communities understood this migration as part of the larger Bracero Program.

As 1943 came to a close, the Mexican Consulate in McAllen, Texas, directed the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores to send a statement to state governors across the country that discouraged hopeful emigrants from crossing north without papers. According to the statement published in newspapers across the country a few weeks later, fifteen of these “*aspirantes*” had been detained by INS while crossing the border and were being held in a jail in Edinburg, Texas. Some of the men detained revealed in interviews that they had paid 3.00 USD to a man known as “El Chapo” to cross the border in a small boat. Others detained the same day divulged that they swam across the border in the Reynosa, Tamaulipas region. All, however, mentioned that the severe lack of employment options in their hometowns, as well as reports that Texas growers needed workers and would hire them without papers, drove them to risk the border crossing process. As they said, they had heard that in that state, “nobody is being apprehended, nor deported, what is needed are workers.”³⁰⁵ For these *aspirantes*, the three dollars (approximately \$41 in 2016 currency) demanded by *coyotes* actually proved less expensive than the exorbitant fees requested by the local officials in Mexico who assigned bracero contracts.³⁰⁶ Some demanded fees as high as 500 pesos.

With the onset of the program, Mexico set up established contracting centers in a few select cities in the country. Men traveled long distances by train, and then waited for

³⁰⁵ “Internación ilegal de braceros a Estados Unidos de América, *Periódico Oficial*, Tepic, Nayarit: 1-2. Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.

³⁰⁶ Dollar value taken from the Inflation Calculator provided by the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 2016.

days and weeks in the hopes of getting a contract. Those who did not they could return home, stay in the city until the next round of contracts were issued, or decide to head north without a contract. For those who decided to return home, the government sometimes provided transportation for them at the end of the contracting cycle. For example, in 1944, the government declared that it would no longer contract braceros from other states in its Mexico City center. Until that point, masses of men had convened upon the stadium to wait for a chance to get contracted, but local residents complained about the large numbers of men who camped out for days on end without a place to stay. On March 16, the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social sent out a notice that contracting had ended, and offered trains home for those men still left. Ironically, this notice was received by some officials after the last day that trains were scheduled to leave, and in the case of the *Periódico Oficial de Hidalgo*, published well after the last trains had left.³⁰⁷ The Mexican government's inability to effectively regulate the contracting process continued throughout the years of the program.

The return of braceros also led to complications when they did not return to their original hometowns for whatever reason. This increased substantially during the later years of the program, when U.S. employers could hire Mexicans as day laborers, but it still created problems in northern Mexico soon after the beginning of the program. One letter of complaint sent to President Manuel Ávila Camacho explained that more than five hundred migrants remained unemployed in the city of Torreón. They had returned from the U.S. after working as braceros, but they continued to stay in the city because

³⁰⁷ "Aviso a los braceros," *Periódico Oficial*, Pachuca, Hidalgo, April 1, 1944: 76. Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.

enganchadores would come recruit them to head north again.³⁰⁸ For border cities, the arrival of migrants hoping to head north to the U.S. only complicated the problem of return migration and contributed to chaos and unemployment.³⁰⁹ President Ávila Camacho proposed starting new colonies and building new roads to handle the emigration and return migration, but these plans were never completed.³¹⁰

End of the Wartime Program and Shifting Responsibilities

After World War II ended, the wartime labor program ended, as well. In April, 1947, Public Law 40 changed the terms of guest worker importation and the U.S. government no longer served as what the Department of State termed ““a guardian of the workers” that assumed responsibility for implementing and enforcing the protective safeguards established in the work contracts.” In ending this role, the U.S. government thereby absolved itself of the responsibility to oversee many aspects of the program, including the return of workers. Indeed, the new Public Law specified that

...The United States Government no longer subsidizes any of the transportation, housing, subsistence, health, and other costs. Since existing legislation does not provide for the expenditure of public funds for such purposes, these costs must now be borne in one way or another by the participating public groups.... [In the case of Mexican work contracts], the employers assume the cost of transportation from the contracting centers in Mexico to the place of employment in the United States and return.³¹¹

At the end of that year, discussions between representatives of both governments drafted a new agreement and contract form. In this new agreement, workers would have their

³⁰⁸ Correspondence dated June 25, 1943, File 546.6/120-4, MAC, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico.

³⁰⁹ File 546.6/120-2, MAC, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico.

³¹⁰ File 546.6/120, Folder 4, MAC, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico.

³¹¹ Daniel Goot, “Employment of Foreign Workers in United States Agriculture,” *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, July 18, 1949: 44.

lodging and travel expenses covered. The agreement also provided more detail about the transportation of workers, proposing that Torreón and Saltillo (both cities in the northern state of Coahuila) be the limit after which employers would pay for transportation northward for recruited workers.³¹²

In the years leading up to Operation Wetback, border officials attempted to handle the unceasing waves of migration north. In particular, many migrants without contracts headed to Texas during the 1940s, since the state was prohibited from receiving contracted braceros until the end of the wartime program in 1947.³¹³ Even after the state began to use contracted braceros, undocumented migrants could easily find work (albeit at lower wages) in Texas, and its proximity to the border made it an easy destination. The Acting of the Division of Mexican Affairs in Washington, D.C. critiqued the Mexican government's efforts to control the border as well as the difficulties of controlling undocumented labor in the region: "Our Immigration Service will be faced with threats and perhaps violence on the part of farmers who employ these illegal workers if we remove them from farms, especially in the State of Texas, or more specifically in the El Paso cotton producing area."³¹⁴ Consequently, a stream of undocumented migration was established between Mexico and Texas, and this continued even after Mexico permitted braceros to go to that state. In 1948, the Assistant Commissioner for Alien Control of the

³¹² Correspondence from the Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Mexico, December 16, 1947, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947, Volume VIII*. 810.504/12-1647. "Article 8 of the over-all agreement does not establish Torreón and Saltillo as recruiting centers but establishes a line from coast to coast through Torreón and Saltillo as the limit to which transportation for workers is to be paid by employers."

³¹³ For more on Texas' use of Mexican workers during these years, see: Otey M. Scruggs, "Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947," *Pacific Historical Review* 32 (Aug. 1963), 251-264.

³¹⁴ Letter from Paul J. Reveley, July 7, 1948, U.S. Consulate, Ciudad Juárez, Classified General Records, 1923-1952, Box 2, RG 84, NARA II, College Park, MD.

INS, Willard F. Kelly, described the efforts of the INS on deporting Mexican workers from Texas as “like stirring a lake with spoon.” He laid the blame for this on Mexico, stating that this situation continued in other border states, while Mexico did little to prevent deportees from leaving again.³¹⁵

In mid-1951, Public Law 78 amended the Agricultural Act of 1949 to include agricultural workers and a new guest worker program officially began – one that again shifted the responsibility of repatriating Mexican guest workers after the end of their contracts. As the new law stated, “the Secretary of Labor is authorized...to provide transportation for such workers from recruitment centers outside the continental United States to such reception centers and transportation from such reception centers to such recruitment centers after termination of employment.” Additionally, the Secretary of Labor was also authorized to cover “such subsistence, emergency medical care, and burial expenses” (with a limit of \$150 for the last category) during transportation between recruitment and reception centers, and during their time at the reception centers.³¹⁶ That legislators found it necessary to mention the possibility of a need for emergency medical care and specify the maximum amount that would be spent should a bracero die during transportation or at a reception center indicates that bracero illnesses and even death during the process of travel were not unique, isolated cases. Moreover, the amendment’s transfer of responsibility for repatriations back to the government reflects how many issues arose from the problem of how to transport braceros back home.

³¹⁵ “Mexican Workers Illegally I the United States, June 22, 1948, U.S. Consulate, Ciudad Juarez, Classified General Records, 1923-1952, Box 2, RG 84, NARA II, College Park, MD.

³¹⁶ “Public Law 78: Title V – Agricultural Workers,” July 12, 1951: 119.

This change in transportation resulted in demographic shifts for regions of northern Mexico as braceros moved north to border regions, relying on repeated journeys to work in the U.S. or on work as day laborers.³¹⁷ Employers could re-hire favored workers as part of the “specials” program and receive contracts year after year. Many did not move alone, however, as their families accompanied them to settle in areas along the border from the U.S.³¹⁸

The Bracero Experience

“The vast majority of our compatriot workers, who work on the other side of the border, will return to the country victims of dysentery, tuberculosis, dermatitis, venereal diseases, and partial or full handicaps due to work accidents and non-existent healthcare and terrible foods...” – Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos, October, 1944.³¹⁹

This statement by the CTM, the largest confederation of unions in Mexico, was made only two years after the program began, but accurately summarizes the many health-related risks that braceros faced in the United States. As Natalia Molina argues: “...although the Bracero Program ostensibly upheld strict health standards, in practice it stigmatized Mexicans as bearers of disease while ignoring the systemic conditions that gave rise to disease.”³²⁰ The poor, and often cruel, treatment of braceros had long-lasting consequences beyond temporary discomfort. Mexicans became even more stigmatized as

³¹⁷ Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 108.

³¹⁸ For more on this subject, see the forthcoming dissertation by Alina Méndez, “Cheap for Whom? The High Cost of Labor for Mexican Immigrant Workers and Their Families in the Imperial-Mexicali Borderlands, 1942-1964.”

³¹⁹ Report by the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos, October, 1944, File 546.6/120, Archivo MAC, AGN.

³²⁰ Natalia Molina, “Borders, Laborers, and Racialization: Mexican Immigration and US Public Health Practices in the 20th Century,” *American Journal of Public Health* 101:6 (June 2011), 1029.

dirty carriers of infectious diseases, while workers lived in filthy conditions that facilitated the spread of illnesses. The dehumanizing aspects of the bracero experience began before workers even reached the border, where they found themselves sprayed with poisonous substances and subjected to humiliating medical exams in which they stripped in front of large groups of other men.³²¹ The topic of health and medical care for migrant workers during this period has received some attention, but significant variations in treatment, oversight, and record-keeping complicate the subject. Living conditions did nothing to improve workers' health, and employers invested as little as possible in the well-being of their workers. This began even before they arrived in the United States. An exploration of the entire process, beginning with the contracting process and ending with how migrants fared after returning to Mexico, clearly illustrates the destructive reality of guest worker programs.

Those with contracts in hand traveled north from contracting centers, but traveled more like livestock than passengers, and then were subjected to medical exams that put them further at risk. One resident of Mexicali witnessed train after train of braceros arriving in the border city, waiting to cross. He wrote to President Ruiz Cortines, stating that it was his duty as a Mexican to inform him of the situation and the ways in which both Mexican American "*pochos*" and U.S. citizens were "denigrating our people." He wrote, "Mr. President, related to the same subject of the braceros, I want to notify you that these poor people are delayed up to eight days in transit to arrive to this town, thus

³²¹ In letters requesting bracero contracts, men often asked to be exempt from this requirement. For photographs of the process, see the extensive collection of photographs by Leonard Nadel currently held by the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian.

arriving in unbearable shape.”³²² Without access to showers, and traveling in cars that were often standing room only, migrants already suffered while still in their own country. They did not fare much better in the U.S.

When the first braceros returned to Mexico and complained of the poor living conditions they had endured north of the border, Mexico responded by temporarily stopping the recruitment and contracting process in February of 1943. The Farm Security Administration had been involved in establishing policies to protect agricultural workers when talks began, but after this stoppage, growers critiqued the agency’s role. Under pressure, the War Food Administration, “less concerned with humanity than with food production,” ended up assuming control in March of 1943. The following month, Public Law 45 renewed the program and did away with some of the policies that protected braceros.³²³ No longer did employers have to concern themselves with well-constructed quarters for their workers and their families, nor did they worry too much about sanitation and hygiene. Braceros were temporary, and those found unfit for labor or noncompliant could be sent back.

The issue of bracero living conditions also raises interesting questions as to how the workers remember and recount their experiences. Ronald Mize interviewed many former braceros and explains that when first asked how they viewed their lodging, they initially replied that it was fine or favorable. When pushed further about the living situation after their first replies, however, then they began to describe the severely inadequate quarters. He quotes a former bracero, Don Emilio, who at first said that the

³²² Letter from Gumaro Moscoso Valdes to President Ruiz Cortines, August 31, 1956, File 548.1/124, Archivo Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, AGN.

³²³ Driscoll, *The Tracks North*, 56-58.

conditions were “fine,” but then began to share the details: “Well, they had no beds for us. We slept on the concrete floor. We were given one meal a day. There were no bathrooms.”³²⁴ This example illustrates one difficulty with memory, interviews and oral histories. For myriad reasons, those being interviewed decades later may be hesitant to share all of their experiences in full detail, and thus may unconsciously omit the more unpleasant aspects of their experiences. As Mize argues, “it’s also important to interpret the Braceros’ silences.”³²⁵ Using a variety of texts and resources to reconstruct various aspects of the bracero experience can help us to more thoroughly understand the program and how it affected migrant workers long after they returned to Mexico.

At this time the use of pesticides in the fields sharply increased without considering how the use of such chemicals could affect workers. Historian Linda Nash reviewed reports by the California Department of Agriculture from this time which described how the land was “awash in chemicals.”³²⁶ Now much maligned for its poisonous properties, DDT was used as a powerful insecticide. Within years, insects developed a resistance to the chemical and farmers began to use even more toxic pesticides on their crops, thereby exposing Mexican laborers to these harmful substances.³²⁷ Braceros reported the negative effects of these pesticides on their own health, describing how the sprays irritated their eyes, mouths, and skin. One bracero interviewed by Henry Anderson at the time said, “Many [braceros] are in worse health when they return to Chorinzio [Michoacán] than they were when they left. The reason for

³²⁴ Ronald L. Mize, “Power (In)-Action: State and Agribusiness in the Making of the Bracero Total Institution,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 50 (2006): 107.

³²⁵ Mize, “Power (In)-Action,” 111.

³²⁶ Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 132.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

this, I believe, is that they have to breathe in too many chemicals that have been sprayed on the plants where they work.”³²⁸ Scientists still had not made conclusive studies as to the effects of these chemicals on field workers, and thus it is doubtful that these migrants received adequate and informed medical care once they returned to Mexico still suffering from the side-effects of pesticide exposure. Nonetheless, the effects of chemicals had been immediately and acutely felt by workers in the fields.

The 1948 plane crash in which twenty-eight returning braceros died later became famous when Woody Guthrie composed a song about the nameless braceros, but ground transportation accidents resulted in far more deaths that received little attention.³²⁹ Labor contractors moved braceros from camp to camp, and these contractors tended to spend as little as possible in transporting braceros and migrant workers within the U.S. This meant that overcrowding on unsafe vehicles could result in accidents that left braceros injured or dead.³³⁰ As Ernesto Galarza wrote in reference to the deadly bus accident in which thirty-two braceros were killed in Chualar, California, “Bracero transportation was accident prone, because it was an extension or manifestation of a loose regard for law and

³²⁸ Henry P. Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California, with Particular Reference to Health Status, Attitudes, and Practices* (Berkeley: University of California, 1961), 286-288. Also cited in Linda Nash, “The Fruits of Ill-Health: Pesticides and Workers’ Bodies in Post-World War II California,” *Osiris* 2 (2004): 212-213.

³²⁹ “Deportee, (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos).” Interestingly, the archives of President Miguel Alemán Valdés reveal little concern with the issue. Indeed, a letter from the mother of one of the deceased braceros urges the president to do something to rectify this issue, noting that the Ministry of Foreign Relations had yet to even respond to her regarding her son. However, the Mexican government did request over 2 million dollars in damages from the airline.

“Reclamación por la Muerte de [28] Braceros,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio TX, January 28, 1949, 1.

³³⁰ Lori A. Flores’ recent article touches on the consequences of a deadly accident that occurred as braceros were being transported from their work in Chualar to their lodging in Salinas, CA. Twenty three of the fifty-six braceros immediately died, with many others seriously injured. “A Town Full of Dead Mexicans: The Salinas Valley Bracero Tragedy of 1963, the End of the Bracero Program, and the Evolution of California’s Chicano Movement,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (Summer 2013): 124-143.

a feeble sense of compliance.”³³¹ Just as with lodging, food, and workplace conditions, the transportation of braceros was largely overlooked by all parties involved. Moreover, according to the California Public Utilities Code at the time, farmworkers were not actually considered people – they fell into the category of “types of loads” and thus many safety regulations including seatbelts could be overlooked.³³² As a result of these regulations and the poor oversight of the program, family members of braceros who had lost their lives and who had pooled money together to pay bribes upwards of five hundred pesos could find themselves mired in debt for years to come, especially those who had risked their property to pay the fees.

Despite these conditions, some braceros did write to the Mexican government asking for extensions of their contract, hoping to earn more money and perhaps pay off the loans they had taken out. Others “skipped” their contracts to stay without authorization, some of whom never returned to Mexico which had major ramifications for the families they left behind in Mexico.³³³ Tanya Basok posits that the ease with which braceros could skip their contracts was facilitated by the fact that many had contracts in the U.S. Southwest, and thus could easily blend into local cities that already had significant Latino populations.³³⁴ However, others had no desire to remain in the US any longer. For those accustomed to living in warmer regions, six months in the Midwest or Northeast of the United States proved difficult to endure. One former bracero named

³³¹ Ernesto Galarza, *Tragedy at Chualar: El Crucero de las treinta y dos Cruces* (Santa Barbara: McNally and Loftin, West, 1977): 86.

³³² Galarza, *Tragedy at Chualar*, 92.

³³³ For more on the effects of the program on families in Mexico, see: Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

³³⁴ Tanya Basok, “He Came, He Saw, He Stayed: Guest Worker Programmes and the Issue of Non-Return,” *International Migration* (38 (2000), 228.

Lucas Edmundo Benítez Cárdenas described his bracero experience in St. Louis, Missouri: “From there, immigration didn’t get me. It’s that it was so cold where I worked that I couldn’t stand it. So, a few of us asked them to take us to Mexico.” He reflected on his experiences fifty years later, stating, “I learned that the government of Mexico was never interested in any bracero, if he lived or died, that wasn’t important, either.”³³⁵ Stranded in another country, exposed to terrible conditions, and often unable to speak English, many braceros (both with contracts and without) returned to Mexico deeply suspicious of the government that sent them away.

In other cases, unbearable living conditions pushed some braceros to ask for an early termination of their contracts. Historian Erasmo Gamboa detailed in his study of braceros in the Pacific Northwest how some requested to be repatriated and reported being sick in the face of terrible working conditions and abuse.³³⁶ In one notorious case, these working conditions devastated the workforce on one farm as an outbreak of food poisoning in which “500 of 511 braceros fell sick and 300 required hospitalization.”³³⁷ Such health problems cropped up frequently for workers who lived in unacceptable, unhygienic housing. Workers had few options, since the threat of deportation kept many from making official complaints or asking for medical care.³³⁸

³³⁵ Interview with Lucas Edmundo Benítez Cárdenas, interviewed by Alejandra Valles, January 5, 2008, Interview no. 1336, UTEP Oral History Collection.

³³⁶ “Not surprisingly, many men became distraught and feigned illness or wrote to their families asking to be recalled for reasons of supposed sickness or death before the end of their seasonal contracts.” Erasmo Gamboa, “Braceros in the Pacific Northwest: Laborers on the Domestic Front, 1942-1947,” *Pacific Historical Review* 56: 3 (August 1987), 380.

³³⁷ Gamboa, “Braceros in the Pacific Northwest,” 380-381

³³⁸ As Daniel Martinez quoted in a thesis published in the 1950s, “Dr. Wood stated that there was no question in his mind that the Braceros were in many cases responsible for spreading communicable disease to the residents of Northtown, as well as to the residents of other surrounding communities, but not in as many cases as the wetbacks who swarmed into the area

On some occasions, representatives of the Mexican government attempted to intervene on behalf of braceros. In 1953, Mexican Consul General Eugenio V. Pesquiera wrote to a U.S. Employment Service compliance representative in Fresno, addressing the complaints of braceros working near Ventura, CA. He summarized the conditions at Somis Labor Camp, focusing on the food, living conditions, and transportation safety, in addition to the verbal abuse doled out regularly by camp staff:

On the matter of food the general complaint is that the meats used are spoiled or, at best, do not smell good. It is very seldom that they are given any solid meat, so to speak, the rule being such meats as tripe, tongue, liver and pork feet. The powdered milk has a salty taste... Most of the time, especially when the earnings are good, the men throw their lunches away... It is stated that mattresses are dirty, being so since their arrival. In spite of the cold and damp weather, the men have been issued only one blanket... Most of the crews of workers are transported from the camp to the groves in old trucks, boarded on the sides and covered by a piece of canvas. There are no benches where the men may sit, the side boards have holes and are not closed, permitting the cold air and the rain to go in.³³⁹

With poor nutrition and not much to protect them from the rain or cold, many braceros fell ill. Oral histories with ex-braceros reveal similar experiences of terrible living conditions across the country. One interviewee reported that some braceros even turned to eating canned dog food, which was apparently deemed more appetizing than the food provided at camps.³⁴⁰ Inadequate access to bathrooms and abuse by employers only added to health and hygiene problems. A former bracero recalled a particularly vindictive boss who when he arrived every morning said, “All of them [braceros], I want them

from 1945 to 1955. There are few statistics on this matter because these men would not dare go to a doctor for fear that they would be reported to the immigration officials and would be sent back to Mexico.” “The Impact of the Bracero Programs on a Southern California Mexican-American Community: A Field Study of Cucamonga, California” (MA Thesis: Claremont Graduate School, 1958): 69.

³³⁹ File 546.6/48, Archivo Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, AGN.

³⁴⁰ Interview no. 1138 with Fernando Rodriguez, interviewed by Fernanda Carrillo, March 5, 2003, UTEP Oral History Collection.

covered in piss and shit.” The dehumanizing treatment of Mexican workers meant that the two to three minutes needed for a bathroom break would be too much of a loss of labor, and thus he provided no nearby bathroom facilities for them.³⁴¹ Another former bracero recounted that over five hundred braceros had to share one bathroom and one kitchen, forcing them to wake up as early as 2:30 or 3 in the morning to get ready for work.³⁴² Growers, overseers, and labor contractors could treat braceros almost like livestock and faced few repercussions for this.

Reception in Mexico and the Journey “Home”

Unfortunately, the difficult experiences that many braceros and wetback workers endured in the U.S. did not end when they left the country. Upon arriving in their home country, political leaders in northern Mexico often attempted to expedite the departure of returning migrant workers from the region as soon as possible. However, the focus seemed to be on removing them, rather than ensuring their well-being of the workers, effectively resulting in a second round of expulsion. Border cities experienced tremendous population growth during this period in large part due to migration patterns. Ciudad Juárez had a population of approximately fifty thousand people at the beginning of the Bracero Program, but by the end of the program, the city had multiplied fivefold in size – a pace that dwarfed that of its neighboring city, El Paso.³⁴³ Prolonged labor migration and a long history of deporting workers from the U.S. to northern Mexico had

³⁴¹ Interview with Antonio Nuño, interviewed by Annette Shreibati, May 19, 2009, Interview # 1233, UTEP Oral History Collection.

³⁴² Interview with Jesús Rivera L. by Perla Guerrero, 2006, "Interview no. 1178," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

³⁴³ Secretaría de Industria y Comercio, *Estudio del Desarrollo Comercial de la Frontera Norte* (Mexico, D.F., 1972), 1.

resulted in significant challenges for the region, as well as simmering resentment and suspicion directed at those who returned.

These actions did were not limited to 1954, when Operation Wetback ostensibly increased the numbers of returning migrants. In the spring of 1953, thousands of returning braceros arrived at a time in Nuevo Laredo. *Excélsior* reported on their plight in an article entitled “Abandonan a su Suerte a los Pobres Braceros” which detailed the actions of Nuevo Laredo’s municipal president:

The problem of the return home of thousands of braceros who came through this port and who come hungry and without any more support than the government’s protection to return to their homes is very serious. The municipal president has taken on the task of routing them south, directing them in special trucks that take them farther past kilometer 26, and from there it is not known what direction they can take nor what will be their fate, since there are no nearby villages, there are no farms or farmland....³⁴⁴

Other municipal leaders in northern Mexico took similar actions in response to the waves of arriving braceros, many of whom came hungry and without any resources. This process of removing braceros from the border region illustrates the problems the Bracero Program posed for the Mexican state that largely failed to ensure that that appropriate resources were made available for repatriating braceros. This led to the accumulation of many returning migrants in border regions, from where political leaders sought to expel them as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the sparse development in some regions of northern Mexico meant that not much other than deserts existed beyond the edges of border cities.

³⁴⁴ “Abandonan a su Suerte a los Pobres Braceros,” *Excélsior*, Mexico, D.F., May 31, 1953: 9B.

Even decades before the Bracero Program began, Mexican citizens regarded return migrants warily, fearful of the disease and social disruption they could bring with them. One article re-printed in 1924 in San Antonio's newspaper *La Prensa* described how U.S. authorities hastily deported workers back to Mexico, where officials "instead of sending them to an asylum or hospital to be cured, leave them free in this city, presenting a constant threat to inhabitants."³⁴⁵ Decades later, this perception of returning migrants as a physical and social threat continued, and the state in which workers returned did little to soothe worried residents that deported wetbacks and repatriated braceros would seamlessly reintegrate into society. The failure of the U.S. to follow deportation procedures complicated the problem further. However, little work has been done to explore what the various processes of return entailed for Mexico and its people as they, too, were affected by changes in U.S. labor, immigration laws and enforcement.

As some have argued, the Bracero Program ultimately damaged Mexico's relationship with its own people. Consistently high rates of undocumented border-crossings by hopeful braceros limited Mexico's ability to advocate on behalf of its migrants and consequently affected diplomatic relations between the US and Mexico.³⁴⁶ In turn, citizens questioned Mexico's structural issues that led to the mass waves of emigration, as well as its inability to regulate the border to prevent such crossings. Upon return, the death and injury of migrants merited even more concern as Mexican authorities meted out some of the abuse against returnees. The bodies of deported and

³⁴⁵ "Enfermos y en doliente caravana regresan centenares de braceros," *La Prensa*, San Antonio, Oct 9, 1924, 5."

³⁴⁶ Deborah Cohen. "Caught in the Middle: The Mexican State's Relationship with the United States and Its Own Citizen-Workers, 1942-1954," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20:3 (Spring 2001), 116.

wetback braceros became visible symbols of Mexico's structural problems, and the abuses endured by these workers allowed for Mexicans to express their frustrations with the post-revolutionary Mexican state that had failed to deliver the progress it had promised. Newspaper editorials pointed to the continued exodus of "braceros ilegales" as a direct result of exploitation, corruption, land reforms and other major issues that continued to frustrate a nation. As Deborah Cohen argues, "Symbolically and strategically, migrant laborers had provided a sign of [the Mexican government's] failure."³⁴⁷

Before Operation Wetback and the increase in publicized apprehensions and deportations, returning braceros still came back struggling with financial, emotional and physical problems. In contrast to the image of braceros returning flush with money, new possessions, and skills to help them back home, the complex migration process and the exploitation of these workers meant that they many returned in worse conditions than when they had left. When braceros were sent back before the end of their contracts, they did not have much time to arrange their affairs in the U.S. or notify family in Mexico of their impending arrival. "“When you are sent back, you are sent back in a hurry,” recalled one former bracero. “They give you the notice in the morning, or maybe at noon, or when you get back from work. You tie up your bundle and [you’re gone].””³⁴⁸ Even when braceros were not officially deported due to alleged insubordination, both early repatriations and scheduled return upon the end of their contracts prompted a number of problems for the Mexican government and the border region as the available methods of

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 114.

³⁴⁸ Deborah Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006): 97.

transportation could not handle the vast number of returning workers. In the early 1940s braceros were contracted to work on railroads, but when the separate contract for railroad workers ended in 1945, “the railroad companies complained that their need for workers had not expired, and they refused to repatriate their workers as the agreement demanded.” The American Federation of Labor, the Mexican government and other groups protested, but the workers stayed in the U.S. against their will until April 1946.³⁴⁹ Despite this early attempt by the AFL and Mexico to prevent the exploitation of braceros, employers often continued to hold their workers beyond the end of their contracts in blatant violation of international agreements if crops remained in the field ready to be harvested. Braceros and consulates often sent repeated telegrams to Mexico City, asking for passage to be arranged home.³⁵⁰ Instead, they had to stay beyond their contracts, forced to work, until transportation could be secured.

As World War II came to an end, transportation became especially troublesome as American troops came back home. In one case, over one thousand braceros found themselves trapped nearly two thousand kilometers away from the border, in Yakima, Washington, as the available trains were being dedicated to the task of transporting returning soldiers across the country.³⁵¹ Once braceros made it south of the border, the Mexican government and rail companies continued to have issues with arranging the movement of so many workers. In 1943, three hundred braceros who had completed their time in the U.S. and came back to Mexico purchased train tickets to return to their

³⁴⁹ Timothy J. Henderson, *Beyond Borders: A History of Mexican Migration to the United States*, (Oxford: Wiley, 2011), 70.

³⁵⁰ File 546.6/839, Archivo Adolfo López Mateos, AGN.

³⁵¹ David Richard Lessard, “Agrarianism and Nationalism: Mexico and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947” (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1984), 170.

hometowns. The Southern Pacific Railroad (Ferrocarril Sud-Pacífico) then informed them that it would be unable to take them home for another twenty days, and left them stranded in the small town of San Blas, Sinaloa that had little to offer other than a railroad station.³⁵² Years later, amid calls to expropriate the railroad company from its American owners and after inflation raised the cost of living in Mexico in 1946-1947, complaints by the railroad worker union in Mexico showed that little had changed.³⁵³ In a statement, the union detailed terrible conditions for passengers who “regularly are exposed to the weather, sometimes for days... (there are no waiting rooms at most stations)” and travel “in badly conditioned cars, with unhealthful water and nasty sanitation service.”³⁵⁴ Due to the long history of American investment in Mexican railroads, business interests continued to prove detrimental to Mexican migrants even after they had returned to their country.

As the Bracero Program was repeatedly renewed to meet the demand for labor, migrants returned to Mexico in a variety of ways, particularly workers who had crossed into the US without a contract. Depending on the year, “wetback” workers without papers faced the possibility of being deported or even imprisoned in the US. Under INS Commissioner Joseph Swing, wetback workers could also be returned just across the border to Mexico in order to process them as contracted braceros in a process known as

³⁵² File 546.6/120-1, Archivo MAC, AGN.

³⁵³ Robert A. Trennert, Jr. “The Southern Pacific Railroad of Mexico,” *Pacific Historical Review* 35 (1966): 265-284. After 6,000 employees began a strike, the Mexican government assumed control of the railroad for a year and a half, and then eventually the Southern Pacific Company sold the railroad to the Mexican government in 1951. Thereafter, the railroad operated under the name of Ferrocarril del Pacífico.

³⁵⁴ Osgood Hardy, “El Ferrocarril Sud-Pacífico,” *Pacific Historical Review* 20 (1951), 264. The document quoted by Hardy was written by members of the Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros and published on May 28, 1947.

“drying out.” Unfortunately, variations in enforcing the border when it suited agribusiness interests meant that U.S. authorities often failed to observe procedures or record the return of Mexican workers. Thus, obtaining the exact number of deportees and repatriates is difficult. Sometimes, officials in Mexico would write to Mexico City to inform the government that a contingent of deported workers had arrived after being caught in the U.S. without papers. In some cases, they reported that the deportees arrived in horrible conditions, perhaps due to the journey or perhaps due to general mistreatment in the U.S. as well.³⁵⁵

Many returned by train, and for a brief period, “planelifts” were also used to return migrants to the interior of Mexico.³⁵⁶ In many cases, braceros left voluntarily or were effectively dumped by Border Patrol agents at the border, and these returns are difficult to track. However, the consistent return of *deportados* became a serious problem for cities in northern Mexico as returnees arrived in rough shape after “hot-footing” it (a term used when U.S. authorities would leave deportees in the desert) or attempting to swim back across the border. In 1953, just before Operation Wetback, *The Laredo Times*

³⁵⁵ Correspondence from José L. Bugarini, March 26, 1945, File 546.6/120-1, Archivo Manuel Avila Camacho, AGN. Text “...trenes de braceros que regresan vacíos al sur manejen a Irapuato a 75 braceros deportados de Estados Unidos por haber cruzado frontera ilegalmente. Se encuentran en pésimas condiciones y desean ir a citado lugar para enganarse legalmente y regresar a Estados Unidos.”

³⁵⁶ Kelly Lytle Hernández describes this shift in policy to transport migrants from central and southern Mexico farther past the border: “The preferred method of transporting deportees to the interior of Mexico was by train. According to funding throughout the 1940s and 1950s, train-lifts removed between six hundred and one thousand migrants weekly to Monterrey in the state of Nuevo Leon, Torreón in the state of Coahuila, and/or Jiménez in the state of Chihuahua. In addition to the more cost-effective train-lifts, in 1951 U.S. and Mexican officials introduced daily plane flights, or airlifts, from Holtville, California, and Brownsville, Texas, to central Mexican states, such as San Luis Potosí, Guadalajara, Guanajuato. That year, 34,057 migrants were airlifted to central Mexico, but Congress made no appropriations for airlifts in 1953, and the practice was stalled again until funded in 1954.” In “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 37: 4 (Winter 2006), 430.

published an article entitled “Wetback Trek May Become a Death March.” As the paper described, “Young wetbacks – farmers from the Matamoros area – cross the bridge into Mexico from Zapata, Texas after being deported. Ahead of them are 45 miles of waterless desert, blasted by a pitiless sun, before they can find water, food and shelter from sympathetic compatriots.”³⁵⁷ While workers could cross into the US with the aid of coyotes or *pateros* (smugglers who helped aspiring migrants cross the Río Grande river), they could also return and be returned to Mexico without official record. Deportation procedures could take days, and in the early years of the program, the INS had very limited housing for detained migrants waiting to be processed.³⁵⁸ Thus, agents often pursued different tactics of removal.

In early 1944, Inspector Nutiquio Caracas Cruz reported to the head of the government’s secret intelligence agency, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, on the problem of illegal emigration and deportation between Texas and Tamaulipas. As he detailed, every day at least 40 or 50 deportees arrived in Matamoros, with a significant number of workers without contracts detained in prison in Texas. At this point, Mexico had deliberately excluded Texas from being able to contract braceros due to the history of abuse against Mexicans in that state, yet employers there continued to hire many of those who crossed while concurrently deporting undesirable workers. Employers could pay unauthorized migrants even less than official braceros while evading any contract that would obligate them to provide healthcare, suitable housing, or provisions for return to Mexico. After providing more details, Caracas Cruz stated that the purpose of the

³⁵⁷ File 546.6/55, Archivo de Manuel Ávila Camacho, AGN.

³⁵⁸ Otey Scruggs, “The United States, Mexico, and the Wetbacks, 1942-1947,” *Pacific Historical Review* 30 (2): 154

detailed report was so his supervisor could “realize that this problem in question deserves more serious attention than what had been granted, that is to say that if this problem is not halted it’ll be a big mess for national production.”³⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the Mexican government paid scant attention to this and deportation rates continued to rise while crafty criminals realized they could benefit from exploiting returning migrants.

For those who completed their contracts and had some money left over, even the trek back could deplete their meager funds as thieves and border agents targeted returning braceros for money. Robberies and assaults happened frequently in isolated border regions, while migration agents often demanded high duties on items that migrants wished to bring back.³⁶⁰ One former U.S. Border Patrol officer described how migrants being deported preferred to entrust their money to him, rather than risk taking it back into Mexico. He recalled: “I’ve had them want to give me their money to send to them in Mexico. They were afraid that they’d take it away from them in their own country... but I never did accept any of their money. I’d tell them I couldn’t do that. But if they had a check, I would try to [help them] cash it because they had trouble cashing it in Mexico. They had to pay too much to get it cashed.”³⁶¹ As this statement reveals, even the process of cashing checks would present problems in Mexico, further complicating the process of returning home with their wages.

In another case that garnered little public attention, but resulted in an investigation by Mexico’s IPS, the bodies of dozens of dead migrants were dredged out of the Rio

³⁵⁹ Report from Nutiquio Caracas Cruz to Lic. Eduardo Ampudia, March 24, 1944, Box 97, IPS, AGN.

³⁶⁰ ALM 546.6/625, AGN.

³⁶¹ Interview with Ben A. Parker by Douglas V. Meed, 1984, "Interview no. 661," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso

Bravo in 1945.³⁶² Reports concluded that these braceros had been attempting to return to Mexico when they were robbed of their earnings, killed, and then drowned in the river. Once again, the government's lack of action to address the situation prompted concern and outrage as the case remained unresolved. However, these deaths offer yet another example of how return migration and deportation led to crime and violence even within Mexico, echoing Lytle-Hernández's argument that cooperation between authorities on both sides of the divide "transformed the border into an opportunity for imagining policing and coordinating state violence beyond the limits of the nation-state."³⁶³ Sources from cities in Mexico's border region illustrate how this violence against deportees extended beyond the arms of the state, however, and was also enacted by local residents and criminals.

One of the major causes of concern in letters written by migrants and citizens of Mexico was ever-present corruption, which became increasingly obvious as complaints of contract fraud and bribery arrived in the capital from all over the nation. In northern Mexico, however, the impact of corruption and fraud had even more significant effects as cities experienced an influx of braceros deported due to a lack of papers who swelled cities and towns as they waited for the chance to re-cross the border with or without contracts. Even in the 1940s, urgent telegrams from northern Mexican cities regularly arrived in Mexico City detailing the problems created by this issue. Historian Otey Scruggs described the panic that ensued in border cities as "The city fathers of Ciudad Juárez and Mexicali were at a loss how to meet the health and welfare problems caused

³⁶² File 43, Box 114, IPS, AGN.

³⁶³ Lytle-Hernández, "Crimes and Consequences," 438.

by the inpouring of tired and hungry workers.”³⁶⁴ Repatriated and deported migrants swarmed border cities once harvests ended, but farther inland, cities in the interior also struggled – a topic explored in further detail in the following chapters.

Mental Health and “Repatriate Psychosis”

In addition to physical injuries, the mental trauma of enduring exploitation and dehumanizing work conditions also deeply affected migrants. Mize argues that the Bracero Program acted as a “total institution” in which workers were separated from the rest of society and lived in inferior conditions while their employers sought “total domination” over them.³⁶⁵ The quarters in which braceros lived effectively served as labor camps where workers had few options other than to obey their supervisors. Skipping their contracts or returning to Mexico would result in financial punishment as they would never receive their withheld wages and might end up detained and deported.

Mize writes,

The total institution represents a system of domination and coercion that relies on its subjects being physically and symbolically segregated from the rest of society. The managed character of the institution is designed to control the actions of those subjects twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In a potentially much more harmful way, the total institution is designed to impose its definition of the self-identities of inmates/workers. This has far-reaching consequences for how participants view themselves, and assess their prior experiences and future possibilities. The managed self is one of the most potentially destructive products of the total institution.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Scruggs, “The United States, Mexico, and the Wetbacks,” 154.

³⁶⁵ Mize, “Power (In)-Action,” 80.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

Given that many doctors and employers found it easier to return employees to Mexico rather than treat them, few U.S. sources on bracero mental health exist. However, oral histories with former braceros detail their experiences with exploitation and discrimination, while archival sources reveal some cases in which psychological struggles resulted in medical treatment and even institutionalization.

In fact, some returning braceros were sent to Mexico City and committed for reported insanity at La Castañeda, Mexico's largest asylum.³⁶⁷ Also known as the Manicomio General, (the General Asylum), it had opened its doors in 1910 as Díaz's regime entered its last months. The institution was founded as a modernizing project with a focus on social control. During its early years, the chaos of the Revolution exacerbated by staffing and financial problems, and the institution acquired a "black legend" further intensified by the number of prisoners sent there and its high mortality rates. In its early years, estimates claim that close to 90 percent of its patients died after arriving. A focus on institutionalizing beggars and undesirable elements of society, not only individuals with mental conditions, had resulted in the population of patients being triple that of the ideal capacity by 1942. Thus, as the Bracero Program began, some of the asylum's problems had abated but the stigma persisted amid a serious overpopulation situation. The arrival of returning braceros thus piqued the interest of both the general public and the government.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ "Lastimosa caravana de mexicanos llegó a la capital de nuestro país, son braceros que vivían en los Estados Unidos," *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX: Feb 13, 1940 (1).

³⁶⁸ Eric Van Young, "Acenso y caída de una loca utopía: el Manicomio General en la Ciudad de México a comienzos del siglo XX," in *Avatares de la medicalización en América latina 1870-1970*, Ed. Diego Armus (Buenos Aires: Lugar Editorial, 2005), 255-257. For more on the Manicomio General, also see essays by Cristina Rivera-Garza, Alberto Carvajal, Andrés Ríos Molina, and María Cristina Sacristán.

IPS (the government's intelligence agency) began a special investigation in 1943, only one year after the program began, to track returning braceros who were committed to mental institutions upon return for such things as "delirious ideas of persecution." Such was the case for bracero Ramiro Cortes Cabrera, who officials moved to a Mexico City asylum due to his hallucinations of being constantly ordered around and tormented by voices who ridiculed him.³⁶⁹ As many letters of complaint from braceros in the US indicate, such "delirious" ideas were a harsh and constant reality for many Mexican migrant workers toiling in fields or on railroad tracks during this period. Dr. Edmundo Buentello, who worked in La Castañeda, wrote an article in which he examined 204 patients who were diagnosed with "repatriate psychosis" between 1930 and 1951. In this piece, he reported that some cases were "patients who presented periods of psychosis generated by traumatic experiences, but after a good diet and rest, the symptoms disappeared since the syndrome was not due to biochemical factors but social causes."³⁷⁰ Although the diagnosis for the majority of these patients was initially schizophrenia, interviews by doctors once the migrants had been returned to Mexico reveal that the deportees shared many common experiences that related to poor working conditions in the US. This falls in line with research that indicates that although genetics play an important role in the onset of schizophrenia, substance abuse (including of alcohol, which many braceros reported turning to in the U.S.) and difficult experiences related to

³⁶⁹ File by Gregorio Pastor de la Piza, File 32, Box 756, Secretaría de Gobernación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, AGN.

³⁷⁰ Andrés Ríos Molina, "La psicosis del repatriado. De los campos agrícolas en Estados Unidos al Manicomio La Castañeda en la ciudad de México, 1920-1944," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 27: 2 (Summer 2011), 369-370. "Algunos casos atendidos por el doctor Buentello en La Castañeda, eran pacientes que presentaban periodos de psicosis generados por experiencias traumáticas, pero después de una buena dieta y descanso, los síntomas desaparecían ya que el síndrome no obedecía a factores bioquímicos sino a causas sociales."

migration, including being separated from one's families and experiencing feelings of isolation, can contribute to the manifestation of symptoms. Indeed, rates of schizophrenia are significantly higher among first- and second-generation migrants.³⁷¹ While traumatic accidents in the workplace provoked the onset of mental health problems in some migrants, in other cases workers explained that horrible working conditions, such as extreme heat, were to blame.³⁷² These examples support the idea that the bracero experience proved not only physically taxing, but also mentally and emotionally damaging.

Operation Wetback

The waves of mass return migration sparked by Operation Wetback drew considerable attention in the 1950s as well as in historical work. A number of historians have written extensively about the politics of the program and its place in narratives of Mexican migration and U.S. immigration policies. Juan Ramón García's *Operation Wetback: the Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* provided the first full monograph on the subject.³⁷³ Later, Kitty Calavita's *Inside the State: the Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* used previously unavailable documents

³⁷¹ Elizabeth Cantor-Graae and Jean-Paul Selten, "Schizophrenia and Migration: A Meta-Analysis and Review," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 162:1 (Jan 2005), 12-24. As the study notes, risk increased when migrants were from less developed countries. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly given the symptoms reported by patients, "These findings suggest that despite heterogeneity in birthplace, migrants whose skin color is considerably darker than the background population may share a common risk exposure. Individuals with darker skin are more often discriminated against in Western societies. Experiences of discrimination may foster a paranoid attributional style that facilitates the development of psychotic symptoms." 20.

³⁷² Ríos Molina, "La psicosis del repatriado," 375.

³⁷³ Juan Ramón García's *Operation Wetback: the Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

obtained through the Freedom of Information Act to explore how the operation formed part of the larger enforcement efforts by the I.N.S. meant to benefit growers. Ultimately, she argues, Joseph Swing understood the benefits of temporary labor, and thus the operation benefited employers who could then re-hire their deported workers as contracted braceros.³⁷⁴ Recent work on the Bracero Program drawing on Mexican sources has challenged the idea that deportation was limited to the few months claimed by the Border Patrol. In particular, Kelly Lytle Hernández argues that it was a binational effort that extended before and after 1954, and one that involved efforts from Mexico's version of the Border Patrol.³⁷⁵

The vast majority of literature cites that one million or 1.3 million Mexican migrants left the United States at this time. Even Border Patrol agents claim that the operation achieved overwhelming success, stating “We wound up apprehending over a million aliens. That was in 1954. I’ll tell you how effective it was. Up in the 1960s, now, you couldn’t hardly catch a “wet” over here [in] in El Paso.”³⁷⁶ However, the statistics most used and cited come directly from the INS, which had a vested concern in manipulating numbers, first to show that illegal immigration to the U.S. presented a pressing problem, and second, to show that the Border Patrol adeptly handled this issue.

As INS Commissioner Joseph M. Swing reported in the organization’s 1954 report,

These aliens who entered the United States illegally are responsible for 75 percent of all crimes committed in some Southern California and Texas counties. Jails are frequently filled to capacity by illegal entrants committed for crimes ranging from theft and vagrancy to murder. Even

³⁷⁴ Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: the Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York, Routledge, 1992).

³⁷⁵ Lytle Hernández, “Crimes and Consequences,” 421-444.

³⁷⁶ Interview with Ben A. Parker by Douglas V. Meed, 1984, “Interview no. 661,” Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso

more serious is the possibility that among the “wetbacks” who seek employment there may be those whose entry would be detrimental to our national security.³⁷⁷

The INS trumpeted its own success in this fight against Mexican immigrants and criminals and shortly after the operation began, requested Congressional supplemental appropriation totaling three million dollars “for personnel, aircraft, vehicles, and other facilities for this purpose.” Thus, Operation Wetback, which conveniently recorded its highest numbers in the last weeks of the fiscal year, served as a way to solidify the need for more funds and more manpower dedicated to border enforcement.³⁷⁸

Despite the claims of the INS that it apprehended over one million Mexican migrants in a matter of months, only 22,628 of these apprehensions actually resulted in a formal deportation case – slightly over 2%.³⁷⁹ A close look at the statistics provided by the INS at the end of the report reveals that over a million aliens allegedly *voluntarily departed*, and were not deported.³⁸⁰ The lack of this data regarding actual deportation cases presents a methodological issue as the distinctions between formal deportation, repatriation in reaction to widely publicized deportation raids, and seasonal migration become blurred. Even statements by U.S. government representatives contradict the idea that Operation Wetback sent unauthorized migrants back to their hometowns. In fact, less

³⁷⁷ J.M. Swing, *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1954*, 1955: 31.

³⁷⁸ J.M. Swing, *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1954*, 1955: 33.

³⁷⁹ J.M. Swing, “Table 25: Aliens Deported, by Country to Which Deported and Deportation Expense: Year Ended June 30, 1954,” *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1954*, 1955. In fact, the INS reports only 26,951 deportations total for the 1954 fiscal year, which includes all ethnicities.

³⁸⁰ Specifically, the report for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1954 stated that “Voluntary departures totaled 1,074,277 for the year just ended, of which 1,058,326 took place on the Mexican Border.... *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1954*: 41. Also refer to Table 24A.

than ten years later, Albert J. Mislner, a deputy associate solicitor in the Department of Labor, refuted the INS's claims in a presentation before the House of Representatives on the operation. As he stated, "There were a number of Mexicans who had entered the United States illegally. Instead of sending them all the way back to where they came from and bringing others in, an arrangement was made to have them go back across the border and return as though they had been initially contracted under the Mexican labor program."³⁸¹ Indeed, while publicity of the operation continued to fixate on the mass numbers of migrants ostensibly sent back to Mexico, employers did not report a concomitant crisis or any efforts to recruit laborers to replace those deported. Instead, the operation continued to reify the image of Mexican migrants as disposable, with the Border Patrol amply prepared for the task of securing the border.

Interestingly, the operation also provided a source of profit for the Border Patrol, who apparently forced migrants to pay for their own transportation to the border. Numerous newspapers in South Texas reported to the United Press that "they had received "literally dozens" of telephone calls from farmers who claimed to have seen the patrol taking money from wetbacks." Instead of transporting them to the nearest border crossing point, some were transported hundreds of miles away, which left them even farther away from their homes in Mexico and presumably even poorer after paying for the lengthy trip. According to Border Patrol Chief Harlon Carter, the agency deducted the

³⁸¹ "Study of population and immigration problems. Administrative presentations (III): Admission of aliens into the United States for temporary employment and "Commuter Workers"; presentations by the Dept. of Labor and the Dept. of Justice (Immigration and Naturalization Service) to Subcommittee No. 1.," Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1963: 8.

money from the wages that migrants had earned.³⁸² The agency had previously used such methods to financially benefit from deportation drives, and even years earlier, it had been reported that, “the bus used to deport aliens had paid for itself in 18 months and earned enough for a new one.”³⁸³ Migrant workers facing deportation often had little time to gather their belongings, and even if they received their last wages from their employers, they had to effectively pay for their own removal from the country. Such a procedure only left them in even more dire straits upon returning to Mexico.

Border officials frequently followed lax procedures for many migrants, as one agent described: “Women and children, old people and first-timers, they voluntarily return to Mexico. We’d just list ‘em, fingerprint ‘em, fill out the proper forms and take them down to the bridge and watch ‘em walk across.”³⁸⁴ This process did not result in a formal deportation, yet these groups represented a significant portion of undocumented border crossers. After walking across the bridge back into Mexico, they could wait in border cities and attempt to cross the border again, or attempt to find work in already overcrowded cities. Meanwhile, officials in Mexico struggled with how to handle the ever-changing floating population and the constant coming and going of migrants - a problem that was only exacerbated during the years of the Bracero Program.

In the summer of 1954, during the reported height of removals, one article in *La Prensa* stated that at least five thousand women had also been deported as *espaldas mojudas*, an issue which newspapers in Mexico had addressed, “asking the government to

³⁸² “Wetbacks Must Pay Fare to Process Point,” *Schenectady Gazette*, Schenectady, NY, July 19, 1954: 12.

³⁸³ “Mexican “Wetbacks” Play Hide and Seek Along the Rio Grande River”, *The Palm Beach Post-Times*, Palm Beach, FL, Mar 28, 1948: 36.

³⁸⁴ Interview with Arthur Adams (investigator and part of US Customs) by Jim Merchant and Oscar J. Martínez, Interview #646, 8-10-1977.

look for ways to impede that human overflow in the areas bordering the United States.”³⁸⁵ Two weeks later, the paper published another piece describing the struggles of deported families who had arrived in Monterrey. Five hundred braceros and their families had come from Reynosa, where they had entered after being deported from the U.S., and had arrived in such a terrible state as to cause “a painful impression on the city’s society”: “morally defeated sick, and with pain painted on their faces” with some children sick from dysentery. The Red Cross and the Green Cross (an aid organization funded by the government) helped to feed and care for them. Meanwhile, Mexican soldiers guarded the train on which they traveled to prevent them from escaping and heading north again.³⁸⁶ Although not every arrival attracted such attention, the article illustrates the effects of this operation on border cities.

Following Operation Wetback, residents and officials in border cities asked President Ruiz Cortines to address the ongoing issues these regions faced, especially since not all deportees were single men who could return to work in the U.S. The San Luis Tenants Union in Mexicali asked the president to address the issue of women and children struggling in the city. As they reported, Mexicali was facing a situation in which “thousands of women the majority of whom have children and are for that reason pushed into prostitution.” They requested that he grant the women local passports to “work honestly, even as domestic workers in the United States and thus solve their economic problems and rebuild their lives.”³⁸⁷ This correspondence reveals how although male workers could easily re-cross the border with or without documents and likely find work,

³⁸⁵ Carlos García L. “Aquí su atención por favor,” *La Prensa*, August 8, 1954, 9.

³⁸⁶ “México Ante un Problema Más,” *La Prensa*, August 18, 1954, 3.

³⁸⁷ File 548.1/124, November 6, 1956, ARC, AGN, Mexico City, Mexico.

women and children who ended up in border cities had far fewer opportunities available to them. Thus, the voluntary repatriations proudly claimed by the INS had serious consequences for many migrants who left, particularly those viewed as undesirable for hard labor.³⁸⁸

North of the border, support for the operation was buoyed by a blitz of publicity in newspapers across the country that celebrated the Border Patrol's efficacy in ridding the country of wetbacks. In Mexico, however, reception was mixed. Although the government still discouraged unauthorized emigration and deportees still faced a stigma when they returned, others turned a sympathetic eye to the struggles of their countrymen. In 1955, Alejandro Galindo produced the film *Espaldas Mojadas*, which followed the life of a man named Rafael. He seeks the help of a *patero* to cross the Río Grande into the U.S., and once there, finds himself working a number of jobs and experiencing the loneliness of life abroad, until he falls in love with a Mexican American woman, María, in Texas and the pair eventually return to Mexico. Galindo intended for the movie to serve as a deterrent to other Mexicans, to "convince Mexicans to not go to the United States."³⁸⁹ As sources from the time show, the operation did little to staunch the tide of illegal border-crossings, and large groups of deportees continued to arrive in Mexico year after year. The Mexican state pursued other efforts to discourage the emigration of those without contracts, but waves of emigration continued as those in the countryside

³⁸⁸ Relatedly, Ana Elizabeth Rosas explores how when braceros left families behind, some women also moved north to the border and found prostitution one of the few employment options available to them. "Breaking the Silence: Mexican Women and Children's Confrontation of *Bracero* Family Separation, 1942-1964," *Gender & History* 23 (2011): 382-400.

³⁸⁹ Claire Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 107.

struggled economically. Meanwhile, the unprecedented economic boom of the Mexican Miracle continued to benefit landowners and investors.

Conclusion

Today, former braceros organize around efforts to reclaim the wages withheld from their paychecks. Associations of ex-braceros across the country continue to ask the government to return the money that conveniently “disappeared,” yet the government has only attempted to address this in a limited way by paying some of the workers who had contracts in certain years and still had their paystubs. Thus for many, memories of the program now focus on the betrayal of the Mexican government and on the continued attempts to get their wages. Lost in this dialogue is a conversation of what the other costs the program had on migrants and on the country. How can we estimate the cost of sending men to another country to work in exploitative conditions? How can we evaluate the long-term consequences of family and community disruption?

This chapter’s focus on the effects of the bracero experience on workers reveals how short periods of contract workers or as undocumented workers affected braceros and their communities. Extending our analysis south of the border reveals a number of damaging ramifications for Mexico as a migrant-sending country. While the absence of so many male workers had profound social and economic consequences, their return also proved challenging for the country’s border regions. The U.S.’s increasing reliance on migrant work and its efforts to patrol the border contributed to further problems for northern cities that witnessed the ongoing expulsion and arrival of migrants. A study of

return migration in northern Mexico shows how damaging ongoing processes of forced removal were on the region.

Unfortunately, reports indicate that the exploitation and discrimination experienced by bracero workers during this period parallel the experiences of today's labor migrants. U.S. industries continue to import Mexican guest workers under the H-2A and H-2B programs which remain rife with reports of abuse, wage theft and exploitation. In recent years, growers in northern Mexico have begun to transport workers from the southern part of the country (also home to some of the poorest states in the nation) to meet labor needs.³⁹⁰ Indigenous people from Chiapas report torture at the hands of Mexico's immigration agents driven to prevent the immigration of Guatemalan workers into Mexico. Their experiences illustrate the far-reaching influence of U.S. border enforcement efforts, which have recently extended into Mexico to stop the immigration of Guatemalan workers. In turn, the southern states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Tabasco import workers from Guatemala and Belize as "visitor border workers" in the industries of agriculture, service and construction, disturbingly paralleling the Bracero Program.³⁹¹ These linked processes reflect the sweeping consequences of labor migration and the ever-present demand to source inexpensive workers.

³⁹⁰ Nina Lakhani, "Mexico tortures migrants – and citizens – in effort to slow Central American surge," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2016.

³⁹¹ Gustavo Guerra, "Mexico," in *Guest Worker Programs* (The Law Library of Congress, 2013), 54-55.

Chapter 4: The “Bracero Plague”:

Deportation and Public Health Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

Introduction

In a 1948 article in *La Prensa* entitled “Por que los mexicanos se van?” [Why do the Mexicans leave?], the author stated, “And the hardest part is the break that the Mexican suffers in his spirit – the bracero also has a soul – cut off from family, friendships, and customs, religion, social and cultural environment, his forces are depleted until until homesickness and fatigue convert him into chaff consumed by tuberculosis.”³⁹² This statement encompasses many of the concerns held by Mexicans at the time regarding the Bracero Program. Migrants who left to work in the U.S. would be cut off from their families, connections, and culture, until homesickness and fatigue would leave them nothing but disease-filled refuse. Upon their return, they were viewed as an unwelcome, threatening presence and as possible criminals or even disease carriers. The arrival of a large group of deported or returning workers became a “plague” to the cities in which they arrived, while arriving braceros often faced permanent complications and health problems as a consequence of their work abroad.

Borrowing from Paul Farmer, Don Mitchell argues that the treatment of braceros is intertwined with the system of farm labor. He states that during the program’s initial negotiations in the early 1940s, growers ultimately envisioned:

“a structurally violent oversupply of labor, one that meant workers could be replaced as rapidly as they were worn out. In such a system the costs of

³⁹² Manuel Pacheco Moreno, “Por que los Mexicanos se van?,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, December 14, 1948: 3. “*Y la parte más dura está en la quiebra que el mexicano sufre en su espíritu - también el bracero tiene alma - cortado de familia, amistades, costumbres, religión, ambiente social y cultural, sus fuerzas se van agotando hasta que la nostalgia y la fatiga lo convierten en un bagazo que consume la tuberculosis.*”

reproducing labor – the value of labor – could be pushed down and down, with knowledge that any person no longer able to work – because of starvation, debilitating injury, diseases like tuberculosis or pneumonia – could just be replaced by another willing, another hungry, worker.”³⁹³

The program involved bilateral negotiations and regulations for braceros’ benefit, but the system remained easy to exploit at braceros’ expense. In this chapter, I examine the effects of this “structurally violent oversupply of labor” on Mexico as a sending country and its communities. A bracero’s temporary work contract could have long-lasting, devastating consequences for families, and this structural violence thus extended beyond the border into Mexico.

This chapter focuses on public health issues during the Bracero Program during the 1940s and 1950s. The first section looks at the health concerns facing border cities in Mexico, and how deportations and removals of Mexican migrants from the U.S. affected these regions. Despite the regulations in the bilateral treaties that extended the wartime labor program, the return of so many workers caused problems almost from the start. No governing body regularly investigated the transportation provided for returning workers, creating opportunities for employers to send workers back to Mexico without officially processing their return. The increase in employers’ use of non-contracted migrants (officially referred to as “wetbacks” in U.S. government documents) especially after Operation Wetback, made it even easier to send workers back to Mexico for any reason. While the U.S. and Mexico experimented with repatriations to the interior to deter

³⁹³ Don Mitchell, “Battle/fields: braceros, agribusiness, and the violent reproduction of the agricultural landscape during World War II, *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010): 150-151.

undocumented migrants from re-entering the U.S., those removed to border cities in many cases were sick or injured.

The second part of the chapter examines the forced expulsion of migrant workers, especially after the passage of Public Law 78 and the implementation of health insurance for braceros. Particularly in areas close to the border, employers found it easy to dispose of unproductive workers and sometimes recruited Border Patrol agents to participate in this process. For employers looking to maximize profits in any way possible, dumping migrants in Mexican border towns provided an easy way to cut costs instead of sending them to their hometowns or providing extended medical care. Lastly, I examine the experiences of workers sent to Mexico by looking at cases of individual migrants and one incident in which the arrival of deportees in the city of Torreón led to panic as residents worried that these returning migrants could spark a polio outbreak.

This analysis of public health through a study of epidemics and bracero illnesses and injuries can also be interpreted as part of a larger analysis of how deportation affects environmental health in the border region. During the Bracero Program, cities in northern Mexico rapidly grew as migrants headed to the U.S. and as many returned, voluntarily or involuntarily. Those who returned often had limited options to move elsewhere, leading to even more population growth. However, the Mexican state provided scant funding to ensure that cities were adequately equipped to handle booming population growth. Lack of clean water or effective sewage disposal led to frequent problems in border towns such as rabies, typhoid, malnutrition and diarrhea.³⁹⁴ For much of the 1950s, northern Mexican

³⁹⁴ “United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association: Conference Report,” *Public Health Reports* 78 (1) (January 1963): 36. This article, written in the last years of the Bracero Program,

states consistently had the highest rates of tuberculosis in the entire country. During this period, these states also received a disproportionate number of deported migrant workers who were dumped there by U.S. authorities with no regard to the migrant's actual hometown.

Despite major changes caused by tremendous growth and passage of migrants in and out, scholars have largely overlooked how the return of braceros affected border regions. In Linda Nash's monograph, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge*, she argues for a more thorough and inclusive history of environmental change, one that incorporates the actions and experiences of individuals. She writes "...placing the stories of colonization and capitalist development alongside stories of health and disease creates a more complicated environmental history, one in which we can perhaps begin to see ourselves."³⁹⁵ This approach lends itself to studying the dynamics of the forced return of Mexican migrant workers to the Mexican borderlands. Considering the development of the border region and its environmental problems without an analysis of how the U.S. sent migrants there (often without authorization) erases a major portion of border history and contributes to the deliberate omission of deportation's significance in Mexican history.

Studies on environmental and public health in the border region tend to focus on the years after 1965 and the beginning of the Border Industrialization Program, overlooking the issues that migration presented to environmental health in the decades

also describes other efforts to make Mexico's border "a showcase of national development," including the emergent Programa Nacional Fronterizo.

³⁹⁵ Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies*, 2.

before that.³⁹⁶ However, the passage of migrants in and out of the borderlands had created myriad public and environmental health programs before the BIP brought large numbers of *maquiladoras* to the border region. The Bracero Program only further intertwined the health issues of both sides of the border. During this time, public health officials regarded the U.S.-Mexico border as a “frontier,” reflecting the rapid change that the zone was experiencing and the notion of border towns as out-of-control. Organizations such as the United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association formed during this period to address environmental and public health concern, and their projects in many cases addressed the major issues ignored by the Mexican state. Despite the organization’s proclamation that “disease recognizes no political boundary” and that the border was a “two-way street,” both countries overwhelmingly neglected issues relating to return migration.³⁹⁷ Mexican newspapers began to report on the public health problems that returning braceros presented, calling for quarantines for deportees and describing the resulting outbreaks of illnesses as a “Biblical curse.”³⁹⁸ However, the Mexican and U.S. governments as well as their transnational organizations ignored how deportation and return migration could affect lead to the importation of disease into Mexico.

Examining which diseases merited attention from public health officials and at what time offers us an insight into perceptions of braceros as disposable workers. The medical exam required of braceros tested them for tuberculosis and sexually transmitted infections, among other conditions, but the return migration process had no such

³⁹⁶ Darryl M. Williams and Nuria Homedes, “The Impact of the Maquiladoras on Health and Health Policy along the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Journal of Public Health Policy* 22:3 (2001): 320-337.

³⁹⁷ United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association, “Conference Report,” *Public Health Reports* 75 (2) (1960): 171-172.

³⁹⁸ J. Montiel Oliva, “Una Maldición Bíblica,” *La Prensa*, June 30, 1953, 3,

requirement. The focus on excluding workers before U.S. entry and the pattern of sending sick or injured migrant workers to Mexico reveals how bracero bodies became increasingly dehumanized. I consider how this program harmed migrant workers as well as communities in Mexico as workers in the US endured unhealthy working and living conditions and then were sent back home when no longer productive. Upon arrival in their home country, many deportees faced discrimination and suspicion from their fellow citizens who worried that they might spread diseases. In response, local public officials launched public hygiene programs that isolated and stigmatized these migrants.

This chapter also historicizes medical repatriation, a process that continues to be referred to as an “emergent practice” despite its earlier uses.³⁹⁹ More recently Natalia Molina has explored how companies such as MexCare transport patients from U.S. hospitals to their country-of-origin (what she argues is “a feature of the era of globalization,”) but medical repatriation during this period proved much less regulated.⁴⁰⁰ Today the term specifically refers to the removal of undocumented migrants from hospitals, but it can be connected to the longer history of deportation as a way to dispose of ill and injured workers. Undocumented migrants who head north to the U.S. to find work and happen to experience illness or injuries are now legally allowed to receive medical treatment in certain states, but some hospitals try to forcibly repatriate patients to

³⁹⁹ Investigations into the matter of medical repatriation increased after the removal of Luis Alberto Jimenez from the U.S. to Guatemala in 2003. Emily R. Zoellner, “Medical Repatriation: Examining the Legal and Ethical Implications of this Practice,” *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 32 (January 2010): 515-538.

⁴⁰⁰ Molina, “Regulating Bodies and Borders,” 184-185. “Although transnational patient dumping is a recent phenomenon, it nonetheless follows patterns established throughout the twentieth century, in which medical discourse is used to distinguish desirable from undesirable members of society.”

their home countries to avoid paying for years of expensive care.⁴⁰¹ Similarly, during the years of the Bracero Program, employers often preferred to employ Mexican migrant workers could be informally deported by leaving them across the border if they became ill or were injured in an accident.

Much has been written of the difficult conditions that workers experienced and their health problems in the U.S. However, the then-frequent practice of “dumping” sick braceros in Mexico has gone largely unexplored, and even less has been written on the experiences of how the return of so many migrants presented a public health crisis for northern Mexico. Drawing on medical reports, newspaper coverage, oral histories, and archival documents, I examine how this process of deporting migrants when they were no longer useful, productive employees demonstrates one of the many problems with international labor recruitment and global labor migration.

Removal effectively functioned as a means of disposing of workers, much as growers would dispose of spoiled or flawed crops. However, the scheduled return and deportation of braceros both contributed to health issues. Don Mitchell argues that braceros were perceived as less likely to cause “the “consequent problems of health, welfare, and education” that the Governor’s Committee on Agricultural Resources worried were an inevitable part of the temporary farm labor market.”⁴⁰² In this system, the “consequent problems” mentioned by the committee stayed in Mexico. Moreover, the expulsion of disposable bodies from the United States only created further problems for its neighboring country.

⁴⁰¹ For more on the subject, see: Vishal Agraharkar, “Deporting the Sick: Regulating International Patient Dumping by U.S. Hospitals,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 41: 569-600.

⁴⁰² Don Mitchell, “Labor’s Geography,” 570-571.

An analysis of the coerced return of Mexican migrants from the U.S. and its effects in Mexico contributes to literature on public health in Mexico, border and migration studies, disability studies, and U.S.-Mexico relations. Scholars have examined how the U.S. has regulated entrance to the country and rendered other groups in the country undesirable through ideas of health and hygiene.⁴⁰³ How do ideas of desirability and deportability intersect with notions of disability and productivity in a transnational context? While numerous studies detail the health projects that American organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation launched in Mexico, the expulsion of ill and injured migrants from the U.S. offers another lens through which to study how the U.S.'s actions affected health in Mexico.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰³ A few examples include: Michael C. Lemay, *Doctors at the Borders: Immigration and the Rise of Public Health* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015); Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern, “Which Face? Whose Nation?: Immigration, Public Health, and the Construction of Disease at America's Ports and Borders, 1891–1928,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 42 (1999): 1314–31; John McKiernan-González, *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas -Mexico Border, 1848-1942* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, August 2012); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Amy L. Fairchild, *Science at the Borders: Immigrant Medical Inspection and the Shaping of the Modern Industrial Labor Force* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003); Alison Bashford, Ed, *Medicine at the Border: Disease, Globalization and Security, 1850 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and Alan M. Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes and the Immigrant Menace* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995).

⁴⁰⁴ Mariola Espinosa, “Globalizing the History of Disease, Medicine, and Public Health in Latin America,” *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society* 104 (December 2013), 798-806; DH Stapleton, “The Dawn of DDT and its Experimental Use by the Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico, 1943-1952,” *Parassitologia* 40 (June 1998), 149-158; Raymond Blaine Fosdick, *The Story of the Rockefeller Foundation* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989); Anne-Emmanuelle Birn, “Public Health Paradoxes: Science and Politics in the Rockefeller Foundation’s Hookworm Campaign in Mexico in the 1920s,” *Social Science Medicine* 49 (1999), 1197-1213; John Farley, *To Cast Out Disease: A History of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation (1913-1951)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003).

Early Efforts to Address Health on the Border

In describing the development of the border quarantine that only intensified during the years of the Bracero Program, Alexandra Minna Stern writes

“The border quarantine helped to solidify a boundary line that had previously been much more nebulous and, in doing so, helped to racialize Mexicans as outsiders and demarcate Mexico as a distant geographical entity despite topographic and climatic similarity....To a great extent, the pathologization of Mexicans represented an extension of the association of immigrants with disease into new racial and metaphorical terrain.”⁴⁰⁵

From the very beginning of the program, braceros had to undergo a health exam to ensure that they were healthy, had no diseases, and would be productive workers.⁴⁰⁶ This examination in many ways only built upon various programs and processes that the U.S. had used to regulate the entrance of disease into the country, which over time proved to be increasingly one-sided.

Indeed, for much of the period, the U.S. and Mexico seemed much more concerned with the possible transmission of disease between cattle than with migrant health. While great care was taken to avoid the exposure of cows in the U.S. to contagious diseases, Mexican cows were destroyed by the thousand. As Linda Nash argues regarding early sanitary engineering projects in the U.S: “Inspections are exercises of power....”⁴⁰⁷ The introduction of the Bracero Program projected and magnified this power differential at the border. Mexico shouldered the costs of many of the medical examination costs, including providing smallpox vaccines for only the aspiring braceros

⁴⁰⁵ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*.

⁴⁰⁶ Norma J. Robinson, “The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers,” *Public Health Reports* 73 (9) (September 1958): 851-860.

⁴⁰⁷ Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies*, 103.,

who passed the medical exams.⁴⁰⁸ The contracting process for braceros excluded those deemed unfit for labor which led to complications for border cities that will be explored later in this chapter, but the process of return to Mexico (whether voluntary or involuntary) also led to major issues for these regions that were initially neglected during the early years of the program.

In the early 1940s, the cross-border transmission of sexually transmitted infections began to worry U.S. officials. At the time, this had very little to do with the introduction of the Bracero Program and more to do with the U.S. government's concern that military men stationed along the border were contracting such diseases when they visited Mexico.⁴⁰⁹ This led to the creation of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau Field Office in El Paso in 1942.⁴¹⁰ Soon after, the United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association was created.⁴¹¹ The Association began to hold annual meetings, during which representatives from both sides of the border would present findings on various subjects of concern to border health, broadly conceived. The shifting focus of these reports reflects both changes in prevalence of diseases and traces efforts to modernize border cities, but also reflects political issues at the time. Despite the millions of workers (both

⁴⁰⁸ Robinson, "The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers," 855.

⁴⁰⁹ Years later, an official of the Venereal Disease Branch of the U.S. Communicable Diseases Center normalized this occurrence, writing "This, of course, is something which logic would certainly anticipate; we all recognize that, when the active, adventurous, youthful, masculine element of a people sallies forth to conquest, colonization, or livelihood, their energies will not be exclusively directed towards war, territory, or money, and that some of the surplus energy may be devoted to occasional amorous adventures." William J. Brown, "Migration as a Factor in Venereal Disease Programmes in the United States," *British Journal of Venereal Diseases* 36 (1960), 49.

⁴¹⁰ C. Richard Bath, "Health and Environmental Problems: The Role of the Border in El Paso-Ciudad Juarez Coordination," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 24 (3) (August 1982): 379.

⁴¹¹ Bath, "Health and Environmental Problems," 380.

contracted and unauthorized) physically crossing the border, the Association rarely mentioned the importance of migration until the last decade of the Bracero Program, and only after 1954's Operation Wetback well-publicized deportation campaigns. The increase in coverage of braceros and migrant workers as possible disease bearers only after the publicity surrounding deportation campaigns illustrates how the deportation of "unwanted" laborers stigmatized their presence on both sides of the border. Although residents of Mexico and local officials attempted to draw attention to the public health risks presented by return migration (and the types of removal employed by U.S. authorities), both governments continued to ignore the program.

With the United States however, fears of migrant workers spreading diseases among Americans prompted testing of braceros from Mexico and other countries. In 1951, over one thousand braceros working in Arkansas underwent testing for malaria, despite the fact that no case had ever been reported among the bracero population. Nonetheless, reports of the disease among Mexican nationals in Texas had led to fears that braceros would bring it from Mexico.⁴¹² Beginning in the mid-1950s, doctors began to publish more on the risks presented by so many migrants crossing the border. By the 1959 annual meeting, two out of the six resolutions mentioned in the annual report centered on syphilis and other venereal diseases. More specifically, the Association recommended "serologic testing of migrant labor" and that "infectious syphilis cases be considered medical emergencies, calling for exhaustive epidemiological study and rapid control." This hints at the gendered risks that temporary male migrants symbolized for

⁴¹² L. Kartman and Bettye Mays, "Malaria Blood Survey Of Mexican Laborers In an Arkansas County," *Public Health Reports* 67 (June 1952), 561-562.

Americans, but also reflects growing attention to the need for more testing at the border. For most Mexicans, however, other diseases posed a much more immediate and dangerous threat.

The Bracero Threat in Mexico

In 1952 in Monterrey, one newspaper reported on the “plague of braceros” swarming the city. As the article detailed, these hundreds of men posed a risk to the general public as well as to the tourist industry as they begged in the streets and stopped cars with U.S. license plates to ask for spare change.⁴¹³ The migration of so many unaccompanied men worried the residents in the communities they entered as they swelled the ranks of the unemployed. However, fears of an epidemic breaking out made the arrival of returning braceros even more worrisome. To complete the contracting process, braceros had to undergo humiliating medical exams and be sprayed by DDT to ostensibly prevent the transmission of typhus fever.⁴¹⁴ Those who returned underwent no such process. In fact, some employers who sent back their sick workers before their contracts ended packed them onto trains with other, healthy returning workers. This process helped to spread infectious diseases beyond Mexico’s border regions and deep into its interior. In particular, polio became linked to the return of braceros in some regions of Mexico. One article stated: “It is still warned that the regions of the country where there has not been a movement of braceros are free of this bloody scourge. There

⁴¹³ “Plaga de Braceros Invaden las Calles de Monterrey,” *La Prensa*, August 2, 1952: 6.

⁴¹⁴ Norma J. Robinson, “The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers,” *Public Health Reports* 73 (9) (September 1958): 858. Ralph Gregg, “Medical Examination and Vaccination of Farm Laborers Recruited from Mexico,” *Public Health Reports* (65) (June 1950), 809.

is Chiapas Yucatán, Campeche and Tabasco. Not one Lacandón, Tzeltal, Maya, Zapotec or white person that populates these territories knows that terrible disease, nor do they have martyred paralytics; they may be hungry, but hunger only kills the lazy.”⁴¹⁵ The author made his point clear: although people might suffer from hunger or lack of opportunities in Mexico, such troubles were better than contracting polio from returning braceros or from traveling to work in the U.S. This attempt to discourage emigration from Mexico also illustrates growing resentment of those who left the country. As the author argued, if individuals struggled in Mexico, this was due to their own laziness; there was no need to leave the country.

Although now virtually eradicated in the Americas, poliomyelitis terrorized generations as it left many of its victims struggling with some form of paralysis or respiratory problems, or dead. The mass migration of so many workers and the unsanitary conditions that many migrant workers experienced during the Bracero Program facilitated the spread of many infectious diseases. In the case of polio, however, incubation periods range from four to thirty-five days, increasing the possibility that individuals may have returned to Mexico with no idea that they were carrying the virus. During this period, carriers remain highly contagious, particularly since 90% never exhibit symptoms of the disease. The virus can linger in bodies of water such as swimming pools or in clothing and other fabrics for two months, and improper sanitary conditions only increase the possibility of an outbreak as the virus is frequently spread through fecal matter.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ J. Montiel Oliva, “Una Maldición Bíblica,” *La Prensa*, June 30, 1953, 3,

⁴¹⁶ Molly Kindler, “Eliminating Polio in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Center for Global Development: 2.

Polio epidemics increased in the early twentieth century in the U.S., with a particularly large epidemic that started in New York in 1916. When several cases popped up in El Paso, Texas in the early twentieth century, Mexican officials imposed new measures to prevent the epidemic from heading south of the border, declaring that “no child under sixteen years of age was allowed to cross the international bridge into Mexico, regardless of “polio free” status.”⁴¹⁷ In the late 1930s, however, polio began to spread in Mexico and gain attention, almost certainly helped along by increased migration within the country and to the U.S. Less than a decade later and only a few short years after the beginning of the Bracero Program, rates significantly increased. While infections were lower in some years, the rates overall continued to rise until the introduction of the oral vaccine in Mexico in 1959 and its widespread usage after that.⁴¹⁸

One paper published in the journal *Salud Pública de México* reported the incidence of the disease per 100,000 residents in the country: “From 1937-45 the disease was seemingly stable, with an average of 24 cases per year; 1946 showed a sharp rise to 247 and from then on still higher levels occurred, with peaks of over 1500 cases per year in 1951, 1953, 1955, 1957 and 1959; in 1960 there were still 1126 cases and another peak of 1024 cases occurred in 1966.”⁴¹⁹ As large numbers of migrants continued to head north during the 1950s, many without contracts, rates surged accordingly. Recent work has suggested that although these numbers rose dramatically after the 1930s, such

⁴¹⁷ Heather Green Wooten, *The Polio Years in Texas: Battling a Terrifying Unknown*, Texas A&M Press, 2009: 15.

⁴¹⁸ Jorge Fernández de Castro, “Mass Vaccination Against Poliomyelitis in Mexico,” *Reviews of Infectious Diseases* 6:2 (May-June 1984): S397.

⁴¹⁹ J.V. Villaseñor and O.A. Rodríguez, “Los programas de lucha contra el poliomiélitis en México,” *Salud Pública de México* 12 (1970), 15.

statistics represent perhaps only one fourth of the actual cases, presenting a skewed view of the disease's spread and prevalence.⁴²⁰

Soon after the end of the Bracero Program, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an article exploring an outbreak of the virus in South Texas and in northern Mexico in 1966-1967 and detailing how the virus particularly predominated in border regions. In fact, as corroborated in the above-cited journal), the year after the program ended, rates skyrocketed in border states, with the six border states recording over one-third of the country's cases. Three in particular, Tamaulipas, Sonora and Coahuila, were particularly affected, with rates between 7.2 to 8.5 per 100,000.⁴²¹ The nature of international labor migration and the lower rates of vaccination in Mexico only facilitated the spread of the virus across borders. Urban areas in Mexico were particularly affected, and the vast majority of those who fell ill were children under 3 years old, almost certainly related to uneven vaccination patterns as only 3% of these individuals had been fully vaccinated.⁴²²

In 1948, Dr. José Angulo Araico, the head of the Health Department in Mexicali, Baja California, confirmed that sixteen migrants, mostly braceros, had been placed into a segregated area of the Civil Hospital after they returned from the U.S. suffering from polio. To address the fears of Mexicali residents, the Department was reportedly distributing thousands of tablets to the public to prevent an epidemic, even though no known medicine could fight the disease. As Dr. Angulo stated, the migrants most likely

⁴²⁰ Fernández de Castro, "Mass Vaccination Against Poliomyelitis in Mexico," S397.

⁴²¹ Cyrus C. Hopkins, et al. "Surveillance of Paralytic Poliomyelitis in the United States," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 210:4 (October 1969): 696.

⁴²² Ibid.

contracted this disease in California's Imperial Valley since they arrived in Mexicali already ill.⁴²³ Since no polio vaccine existed at the time, a polio outbreak was a nightmarish possibility in a quickly growing city. It is difficult to ascertain whether anyone actually fell ill other than the returning braceros, but their quarantine from the rest of society and the anxious reports on how could infect the city stigmatized their presence.

The following year, after another polio epidemic in Texas, Mexico brought back the same approach used in 1916 and decreed that Texans could not enter the country without showing proof that they had not had polio within the last three years.⁴²⁴ However, braceros and other Mexican migrants did not face this ban. In fact, Dr. Gustavo Argil, Mexico's Under-Secretary of Health stated: "Never has it been considered to prohibit the contracting of braceros to Texas."⁴²⁵ A seeming lack of regard for the health of braceros unfortunately extended to larger communities when migrant workers returned to Mexico. The fears that returning workers would contract this disease and bring it back to Mexico only increased as years passed. In a feature on the new children's hospital in Mexico City, the reporter mentioned that many of the young patients "dragged one foot, or both, victims of the terrible poliomyelitis, an illness that, largely, our braceros have imported from the neighboring northern country."⁴²⁶ Incidents such as these only further stigmatized migrant workers in their home country. After weeks or months of substandard treatment and being effectively segregated from the rest of U.S. society,

⁴²³ "16 braceros son víctimas de la parálisis infantil," *La Prensa*, December 11, 1947: 1.

⁴²⁴ Green Wooten, *The Polio Years in Texas*, 75.

⁴²⁵ "Los Braceros Vendrán a Texas, a Despecho de la Poliomieltis," *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, September 1, 1949: 2.

⁴²⁶ "El Hospital Infantil," *La Prensa*, August 7, 1949: 23.

returning workers sometimes faced more of the same in Mexico as a result of fears that they could be carriers of disease.

Outbreaks extended well beyond the border zones as braceros arrived in Mexico. In 1952, the small state of Colima on Mexico's central west coast tried to use immunoglobulin, which had been used as a treatment for measles, for a dozen patients that had been struck with polio. According to investigations, returning braceros and wetbacks had brought the disease back with them. In addition to treatment and isolation for those with the illness, the Secretary of Health and Welfare ordered the implementation of quarantines and sanitization of houses and other areas.⁴²⁷ In all of these regional outbreaks, no mention is made of any effort by the federal government to address these issues or for any sort of procedure to ensure that those returning did not have any illnesses. In the 1950s, Mexico began to increase its cooperation with the U.S. to fight the spread of the disease. Dr. Albert B. Sabin, creator of the oral vaccine, began to visit Mexico in 1954 and served a consultant on polio for the Mexican Ministry of Health and Welfare (a position he retained until 1976).⁴²⁸ He also carried out a study in Mexico City's Hospital Infantil.⁴²⁹ However, the disease continued to spread in Mexico for decades after the introduction of an oral vaccine due to inconsistent vaccination practices.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ "En Colima Combaten la Poliomiélitis," *La Prensa*, August 11, 1952: 4.

⁴²⁸ Correspondence from Dr. Albert B. Sabin to Dr. Navarro Díaz de Leon, Secretario de Salubridad, October 12, 1976. Albert B. Sabin Archives, University of Cincinnati. In his letter of resignation from this post, Dr. Sabin mentioned his frustrations with Mexico's failure to introduce the annual mass vaccination program he had suggested.

⁴²⁹ Letter from Sabin to Zozaya, Jose dated 1954-07-22. Albert B. Sabin Archives, University of Cincinnati.

⁴³⁰ Fernández de Castro, "Mass Vaccination Against Poliomyelitis in Mexico," S397.

Rejected: Medical Examinations and Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis, another serious and contagious illness, proved a concern for border health long before the establishment of the Bracero Program, leading to the required fumigation of cars entering El Paso from Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴³¹ By the end of the 1950s, rates of tuberculosis remained high in Mexico and the country attempted several strategies to mitigate the spread of the disease. Mobile units were deployed across the country, with samples of sputum tested there or sent back to Mexico City for further examination. Eighty-one centers providing services for pneumonia were in operation by 1962. Despite these efforts, however, both *campesinos* working in Mexico and braceros returning from the U.S. continued to present problems due to their travels.⁴³²

Tuberculosis also provided another reason for employers to rid themselves of sick, unproductive workers without providing them with treatment. In one case in 1957, a reporter with the Los Angeles Spanish-language daily, *La Opinión*, conducted an interview with Dr. Carlo Gómez who described the cruel approach taken with some braceros who suffered from tuberculosis. As a highly contagious disease, no doubt many men contracted it from their cramped and unsanitary living conditions. The newspaper reported,

Later on they are not able to work with efficiency in the neighboring country; so they abandon their jobs, and find themselves unable to return to Mexico for lack of money. They live in a pitiful state, are victims of all kinds of discrimination and are finally deported to a border town where they beg public charity and become social liabilities away from their

⁴³¹ Bath, "Health and Environmental Problems," 379.

⁴³² Dr. Antonio Izaguirre Mercado, "Control de la tuberculosis por areas, en Mexico, *Boletín de la Oficina Sanitaria Panamericana* (Jan 1962): 11-15.

birthplace and their own people...Dr Gómez told us that of the 300,000 men contracted each year, approximately 30 out of every 1,000 become ill, that is to say, that nine thousand Mexicans are destined to die in a foreign land or at the border, when they could be saved if all the necessary precautions were taken.⁴³³

The process described by Dr. Gómez did not involve the same process of dumping workers in Mexico but still resulted in the same outcome. Braceros did not receive treatment for a serious illness, underwent deportation to Mexico, and then were left in border towns that did not have the resources to help them, or were not willing to extend a hand. Back “home” in Mexico, but suffering far from their communities, these workers had few resources and no funds to help them return to their hometowns.

While tuberculosis posed a problem for those deported from the U.S., it also presented an immediate threat for border cities as potential braceros undergoing medical examinations could be rejected for cloudy lungs on X-rays. The dehumanizing and harmful medical examinations that braceros underwent have been extensively discussed in literature on the program and on the border. However, few records track those who were rejected by the medical examinations. Each binational treaty during these years specified that return migration would be provided either by the employer or the U.S. government, but this only applied to those who received contracts and worked in the U.S. Those who traveled from their homes in Mexico to the border only to be turned away due to an illness, disability, or perceived physical defect had no very few options at this point, as no provisions had been made for this group.

⁴³³ Martinez, “The Impact of the Bracero Programs on a Southern California Mexican-American Community,” 71. Article published in *La Opinión* on December 10, 1957.

Focusing on the experiences of those who were excluded through the medical examination process reveals the priorities of the program and Mexico's oversight of its own citizens. The number of migrants rejected after medical examinations at the border was relatively small, but significant. In the year ending in June of 1949, 1,603 migrants out of the 99,033 examined were rejected. 561 were rejected in Mexico, and 1,042 in the U.S. Those who made it to the border failed the exam mostly due to eye disease or defect (333), urethral discharge (142), or hernias (230).⁴³⁴ After the war, workers began to be examined in Mexico, and in 1949, they were examined in both countries with examination centers in the U.S. located in El Paso, Crystal City, and Harlingen, TX, and in Chihuahua and in Hermosillo in Mexico. Chest x-rays were not used, resulting in zero rejections for tuberculosis. As one report notes, this year also marked another anomaly as "While procedures in Mexico followed the usual pattern, the purpose in the United States was to legalize, temporarily, the status of many workers who had already entered the country illegally."⁴³⁵ In other words, U.S. growers' need for Mexican migrant workers overrode the regulations specified by the treaty, and wetbacks who had entered the country were contracted without a medical exam. Unfortunately, operating x-ray machines in Mexico presented a number of difficulties, and in Guadalajara and Aguascalientes, officials had claimed that the buildings with x-ray machines did not have the electrical power required to operate them.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁴ Ralph Gregg, "Medical Examination and Vaccination of Farm Laborers Recruited from Mexico," *Public Health Reports* 65 (June 1950): 809.

⁴³⁵ Gregg, "Medical Examinations and Vaccination of Farm Laborers," 808-809.

⁴³⁶ Robinson, "The Public Health Program for Mexican Workers," 853.

In 1952, a Guadalajara-based group representing braceros entitled “La Unión de Braceros José María Morelos y Pavón” wrote a statement in which they requested that x-ray machines be installed in the migration center in Tlaquepaque. They claimed that of the last group that had been contracted in the city: “...many braceros were thrown across the border, and returned with a multitude of problems, on top of which are the debts they left here to be able to go, as well as the problem of having sold their most valuable belongings, leaving their families with few options. And worst of all, they returned sick and exhausted, which will lead to more grievous conditions.”⁴³⁷ The process of conducting this test at the border resulted in complications for those whose lungs revealed signs of tuberculosis. For migrants who could not work as braceros due to not passing medical exams upon arrival in the U.S., their financial problems compounded because they had to pay for their own return fare back.⁴³⁸

One former bracero described how after arriving in El Paso and then Río Vista, three other *aspirantes* were deemed unfit due to lung problems. In response, the others pitched with ten or twenty pesos to help them get home. As he explained, “Nobody, nobody paid for their passages. By themselves they had to leave, find a livelihood.”⁴³⁹ Unfortunately, rejections for medical reasons once already in the U.S. did not happen only in a few isolated cases. In 1953, 3,862 men were rejected, with 3,593 more sent back in 1954, after which numbers significantly rose to hover between 5,500-5,800 for several

⁴³⁷ Letter from Unión de Braceros José María Morelos y Pavon, Guadalajara, Dec 18, 1952, ARC 546.6/7, Box 882.

⁴³⁸ Interview with Jesús Rivera L. by Perla Guerrero, 2006, "Interview no. 1178," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

⁴³⁹ Interview with Manuela Márquez Flores by Myrna Parra-Mantilla, 2003, "Interview no. 977," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

years. The 1955 figure of 5,769 meant that 1.7% of all contracted braceros traveled all the way to the U.S. only to face rejection and then have to cover their own fare back.⁴⁴⁰

“Dumped” Migrants and Medical Exploitation in the Imperial Valley

During the early years of the Bracero Program, those workers contracted for work on railroads received more health benefits than most.⁴⁴¹ Those who did not work with U.S. railroad companies generally faced more difficulties, however, and some reported delaying care as long as possible “for fear they would be reported to the immigration officials and would be sent back to Mexico.”⁴⁴² After the end of the wartime program and the subsequent changes in oversight of the program, the practice of “dumping” sick, injured, or otherwise unproductive braceros began to gain more traction. In the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Benjamin Yellen, working in California’s Imperial Valley, and the Mexican American labor leader/scholar Ernesto Galarza emerged as two prominent figures who spoke out on the subject. In one letter from Ernesto Galarza to California State Representative in 1963, he pointed out the contradictions in actions by growers and the unwillingness to publicly expose this practice. As he detailed, “[Region 10] asked employers to stop dumping sick and injured men over the border without proper medical release... With the exception of the Secretary’s drastic action, none of

⁴⁴⁰ Robinson, “The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers,” 856.

⁴⁴¹ Chantel Rodriguez, “Health on the Line,” 14. “On the one hand, a railroad bracero could demand, on the basis of the bracero labor contract, that the U.S. state fulfill its obligation to extend health benefits to those who labor in its service. On the other, a railroad bracero could demand, on the force of their citizenship, that the Mexican state fulfill its obligation to protect the body and health of its citizen-worker laboring abroad.”

⁴⁴² Daniel Martinez, “The Impact of the Bracero Programs on a Southern California Mexican-American Community: A Field Study of Cucamonga, California” (MA Thesis: Claremont Graduate School, 1958): 69.

this highly authoritative evidence was ever published. Even as Region 10 continued to admit my criticisms confidentially, it persisted in denying them to the press.”⁴⁴³ Efforts continued to bring attention to this practice, and Yellen became determined to highlight what he termed the “medical exploitation” of braceros and the widespread medical malpractice that prevailed during this period.⁴⁴⁴

Reliance on bracero labor varied dramatically across the country, and even within the southwest. While braceros worked in over thirty states through the duration of the program, during the period of Public Law 78, they were concentrated in four states on the border: California, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. At certain times of the year, such as the summer and fall harvest, Mexican workers made up 95 percent of the foreign agricultural workforce in the U.S. In particular, Texas and California employed the majority of foreign workers. In 1958, for example, these two states employed three out of every four workers contracted from other countries.⁴⁴⁵ To address some of the problems and concerns relating to the treatment of braceros, Public Law 78 mandated health insurance for these workers.⁴⁴⁶ One article published in Mexico included the following rhyme about the benefits of this insurance for legally contracted braceros: “Ese seguro es

⁴⁴³ Letter from Ernesto Galarza to Rep. Charles S. Gubser, October 24, 1963, Box 16, Folder, Folder 4, Ernesto Galarza Papers, Stanford University.

⁴⁴⁴ For more on Yellen’s career and his efforts regarding the Reclamation Act, see: Matt Garcia, “The Road Not Taken in Farmworker Justice,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 24 (Spring 2014), 48-57; Benny J. Andrés, *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley: Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900-1940* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2014); and Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

⁴⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, *Farm Labor Fact Book* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing office, 1959): 156-158.

⁴⁴⁶ For more information on the details of PL 78, see: Grace Leona Wiest, “Health Insurance for the Bracero: A Study of Its Development and the Implementation Under Public Law 78,” PhD Diss, Claremont Graduate School, 1966.

seguro para el bracero legal, el que viene contratado con muy buena previsión.../ Pero los que son “mojados,” el seguro más seguro sería la deportación!”⁴⁴⁷ As the ditty warned, the only assurance for those who went without contracts was deportation.

However, the implementation of health insurance for braceros often resulted in more problems for workers paying a portion of their wages for this program. The portion they paid entitled them to medical care, without restricting the doctor they could see, but often they never received treatment. In some cases, the person they believed to be a medical professional had no such credentials or training and instead distributed medicine with no idea as to what they contained. The payments intended for braceros and their families in the case of illness, disability, or death proved similarly problematic as many never received these payments. Nonetheless, the dollar amounts assigned as compensation for bracero injuries indicate how little a bracero body was valued. Death, permanent disability, loss of both hands or both feet, or loss of sight all resulted in a payment of less than \$10,000 when converted to 2016 dollars.⁴⁴⁸ One hand or one foot – injuries that would also rule out braceros for future work – would net a worker less than \$5,000. Lifelong disability thus only entitled a Mexican migrant worker to less than a third of the average annual household income in the U.S. at that time.⁴⁴⁹ Wetback workers did not even receive these low amounts.

⁴⁴⁷ Delis Negrón, “Microscopio, *La Prensa*, June 13, 1955, 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Data accessed from U.S. Department of Labor CPI Inflation Calculator, April 2016.

⁴⁴⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, “Family Income: 1952,” *Current Population Reports: Consumer Income*, April 27, 1954.

Death	\$1,000
Permanent and Total Disability	1,000
Loss of Both Hands	1,000
Both feet	1,000
Sight of both eyes	1,000
One hand and sight of one eye	1,000
One foot and sight of one eye	1,000
One hand or one foot	500
Sight of one eye	500
Total loss of a digit	50
Partial loss of a digit	25

Figure 4.1: Compensation for Injuries; Migrant Labor Agreement of 1951⁴⁵⁰

Yellen formed a committee to address the myriad problems he witnessed in the region, including the issue of payments for disabilities. In one letter, he detailed the findings of the Committee for the Protection of Mexican Braceros: “in many instances, that weekly disability payment checks apparently have been signed by forged signatures and the workers have not received them. These workers have been kicked across to Mexico and were ill, so that when the checks arrived, someone else got them. In instances of death, we have also found that the families of these dead workers have not received the death benefit payment.”⁴⁵¹

Employers would also unlawfully deport braceros who were ill, or those who they suspected could become whistleblowers. The case of Ezequiel Arismendi Arismendi, a

⁴⁵⁰ Advance Copy of Work Contract, Migrant Labor Agreement of 1951, Folder 2, Box 200, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress

⁴⁵¹ Letter from Ben Yellen on behalf of the Committee for the Protection of Mexican Workers to the Secretary of Labor, June 5, 1959, Ben Yellen Papers, Mandeville Special Collections, UC San Diego.

Mexican migrant worker contracted to work with Desert Growers, Inc. in Brawley, CA provides an even more glaring example of attempts to deprive workers of medical treatment while charging them for it. According to one signed and notarized recounting of his experiences, Arismendi Arismendi was paying the Continental Casualty Co. thirteen cents a day for medical insurance, which entitled him to choose a medical provider. In March of 1958, he began to experience chest pain and went to the doctor's office in the camp office. A woman named Elvira Ruiz provided him with a bottle of pills and a vial of medicine. He continued work the next day, but still felt ill and went to see Ruiz again, who gave him injection. The next day, a Saturday, he felt pain throughout his body and returned to the camp office, which had nobody to provide medical service. He went to see Dr. Yellen who immediately sent him to the hospital after examining him.

He had to stay hospitalized for six weeks due to the severity of his condition. In addition, he was left suffering from a chronic bladder condition that most likely could have been prevented with proper treatment. In response to Arismendi Arismendi's treatment and other examples of blatant medical malpractice, Yellen encouraged the patient to initiate proceedings against Pan American Underwriters, the firm that managed the insurance plan for Continental Casualty and also employed Elvira Ruiz. It turned out that she was not a doctor or as a nurse and had no idea what the pills, vial, or injection she had given the patient contained or what they should be used for. In the case, he sued for punitive damages in the amount of \$499.00 in the local county court.⁴⁵² In response to this legal action, however, the Border Patrol attempted to deport him and another fellow

⁴⁵² Court documents from Ezequiel Arismendi Arismendi vs. Harold Collins, Box 5, Folder 1, Ben Yellen Papers, Mandeville Special Collections, UC San Diego.

bracero who was willing to testify on his behalf. Arismendi Arismendi tried to go into hiding, but his employers and the insurance company reported his name to the Border Patrol as an illegal migrant. When the Border Patrol captured him, the agents “put him in solitary, gave him bread and water and the “hot box” treatment.”⁴⁵³

Other sick braceros were removed to Mexico when they became too ill to continue working and tried to see a doctor. While Continental Casualty Co. included no clause to exclude treatment for pre-existing conditions in its policies, the insurance company reportedly sent hundreds of braceros to Mexico with the argument that they had preexisting conditions.⁴⁵⁴ Sending sick workers to Mexico provided a way for employers to rid themselves of unproductive workers while also absolving the insurance company of paying for their treatment. In the late 1950s, Yellen began to write prolifically about this exploitation of workers and attempt to publish these in local newspapers. In one piece written in June of 1959 titled “Medical Economics,” he opened with a discussion of this practice:

Continental Casualty Co. of Chicago has found the answer to the big problem of medical expenses. If the Mexican worker gets sick, kick him out to Mexico and in that way there is no medical expense. The worker can not do anything. He is in Mexico, he has no health policy to show anyone and the worker can not get back into the U.S. Even if he did, he could not find a lawyer who could talk Spanish. The only chance for the Mexican is to be found by the organization which I have organized “The Committee for the Protection of the Mexican Braceros.

By this time, hundreds of braceros in the Imperial Valley had reportedly been affected by this policy.

⁴⁵³ Letter from Ben Yellen to the Chief of the El Centro Border Patrol, September 20, 1959, Box 3, Folder 5, Ben Yellen Papers.

⁴⁵⁴ Ben Yellen, “Rural Health?? Industrial Health,” June 20, 1959, Box 3, Folder 4.

For a worker spending all day in the field, in temperatures that sometimes exceeded 100°F, the inability to see doctors working nearby was not only an inconvenience, but also a risk to their health when they had to travel farther to see another doctor (sometimes even returning to Mexico) or go without medical treatment. Language served as another barrier in accessing healthcare. A bracero named Angel Estrada Toscano expressed that “I am therefore appealing to you to protect us workers who dont know how to speak English and earning a small sum of money per day so that the 13 cents deducted from our pay is very important to us.”⁴⁵⁵

Even in cases where doctors did treat braceros, some viewed the migrants as inferior human beings who were a threat to society, which almost certainly affected the quality of care provided to them. A doctor contracted to work with the bracero camp in Irwindale, CA, shared his opinions of the workers in an interview conducted by a graduate student in the 1950s. As the student explained:

Dr. [Walter Z.] Baro emphatically stated that over 90 per cent of the men that come to him for medical treatment have psycho-somatic illnesses and should return to Mexico. He boasted of having forced the association to return several men to Mexico, thus saving the insurance company that employs him a great deal of money. Dr. Baro made a statement to the effect that all the Braceros have an I.Q. of a one year old.⁴⁵⁶

In this case, the doctor openly admitted to looking out more for those who paid his checks than those he was obligated to serve, and moreover, freely shared his blatantly racist opinion of the workers. Given the quality of medical care provided in this bracero camp, many migrants almost certainly suffered rather than pay a visit to the camp doctor.

⁴⁵⁵ Letter from Angel Estrada Toscano to the State Commissioner of Insurance, July 9, 1957, Ben Yellen Papers, UC San Diego.

⁴⁵⁶ Martinez, “The Impact of the Bracero Programs on a Southern California Mexican-American Community,” 70.

Unfortunately, due to the collusion between the insurance company, employers, and the Border Patrol, braceros were not documented as officially deported.⁴⁵⁷ In fact, in one case investigated by the Department of Justice, one bracero who attempted to receive a settlement after being injured at work was physically assaulted and then “thrown across the border to Mexico.”⁴⁵⁸ Upon arriving in Mexicali after expulsion, the situation did not improve, especially since the city was undergoing major economic and demographic shifts. Yellen writes, “These men are penniless and the only way to live across the border in Mexicali, if you can not work and have no friends, is to scavenge in the garbage cans, and these cans are mighty lean pickings in Mexicali.”⁴⁵⁹

Employers using braceros also resorted to deportation in cases of workplace accidents rather than providing medical care for their migrant employees as required by the medical insurance paid for by contracted braceros. In Imperial Valley, just on the other side of the border from Mexicali, employers could easily rely on the Border Patrol to round up and “dump” braceros in Mexico.⁴⁶⁰ In a letter to Richard P. Gibbons, Secretary Treasurer of the El Centro Teamster Local 898, Yellen described the Border Patrol was involved in “picking up braceros who have started legal action against employers or the insurance company for depriving them of medical care” as well as how “In many Industrial Accident Cases, the the bracero is being kicked across the border by the connivance of the employer and the insurance carrier.” As he summarized, “they are being deprived of millions of dollars of medical services and millions of dollars of

⁴⁵⁷ Ben Yellen, “Medical Economics,” June 22, 1959, Box 3, Folder 4, Ben Yellen Papers.

⁴⁵⁸ Letter from Ben Yellen to H. D. Huxley, Deputy Regional Director of the U.S. Department of Labor, September 30, 1959, Box 3, Folder 5, Ben Yellen Papers.

⁴⁵⁹ Letter from Ben Yellen to Dr. M. Robert Osterman, June 11, 1959, Ben Yellen Papers.

⁴⁶⁰ Correspondence, March 26, 1959, Box 3, Folder 4, Ben Yellen Papers.

disability payments.” For injured or ill braceros who had to stay in Mexicali or other border cities, these millions of dollars never materialized and the costs were shifted to Mexico.⁴⁶¹

Braceros could also have their contract prematurely terminated when they sought medical treatment. In another letter, he described how “If a laborer keeps on coming to the clinic too often, it is cheaper to have his work contract terminated and the laborer sent back to Mexico.”⁴⁶² Thus, a laborer could potentially work in backbreaking conditions for months, still have debt remaining from having to pay for a contract, and then have his contract prematurely terminated should a supervisor deem that he had sought out medical care “too often.” The threat of an early return kept braceros from seeking medical care, sometimes to the point that a simple illness progressed into a serious condition requiring extended hospital care. At the clinic located at the Desert Growers Association in the Imperial Valley, no microscope or x-ray machines were even available to help examine braceros, making the likelihood of complications even more likely.⁴⁶³

During this period, California passed a number of laws to benefit agricultural workers, and on paper, the state emerged as a pioneer in protective legislation. Among these efforts, a federal Migrant Health Act enacted in 1962 began health service clinics and immunization programs in certain counties. Nurses provided services in farm labor camps, while sanitation efforts attempted to improve living conditions while educating

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ben Yellen, “Rural Health?? Industrial Health,” June 20, 1959, Box 3, Folder 4.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

both migrants and growers.⁴⁶⁴ However, a lack of regulation effectively turned PL 78 into yet another method of profiting from braceros and their meager paychecks. The temporary nature of bracero work also made it more difficult for both governments to keep track of workers. In cases where braceros died or were injured due to their work, officials often did not delve much into the cause of death, and merely informed the worker's family in Mexico that their relative had passed away with no explanation of the circumstances or what was to be done with the remains.⁴⁶⁵

For his efforts on behalf of farmworkers in California, Yellen faced a number of disciplinary actions by officials, including the charge of practicing law without a license and unethical behavior. As Don Mitchell writes: "Whatever the evidence, Yellen was duly expelled from the Medical Society and barred from practicing at the Pioneer Medical Hospital in Brawley." While he did gather supporters, his unorthodox methods (such as informing braceros of their rights via a loudspeaker on his car) and his outspoken criticism of those in power in the Imperial Valley ultimately ended his medical career. Nonetheless, he continued his activism and continued to draw attention to violations of the program in the region.⁴⁶⁶

Returning to Mexico

Employers relied on the threat of deportation to keep workers under control and less likely to complain. Despite the bilateral agreements meant to protect workers, guest

⁴⁶⁴ Senator Thomas H. Kuchel, "The Need for Seasonal Farm Labor in California," from the Congressional Record, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., Oct. 2, 1964, in "Importation of Foreign Agricultural Workers: hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry," 16.

⁴⁶⁵ Rosas, *Abrazando el Espiritu*, 92-93.

⁴⁶⁶ Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 327-328.

workers were frequently returned as soon as they stopped being useful or productive for their employers, or when they started to cause too much trouble. One bracero named Macedonio Serna Lozano wrote to President Lopez Mateos from Colonia Guadalupe, in Baja California, to ask for help. He had been working in Salinas, CA as a bracero from May to August until he fell ill. At that point, he stated that his employers took advantage of the Consul's absence and "expelled" him and 40 other workers while they were still incapacitated. In another case where a bracero became ill, he was returned to Mexico and charged with all of his medical costs.⁴⁶⁷ Instead of providing health care or waiting until they had recovered to return them to Mexico, employers often sent workers to Mexico or allowed them to remain unemployed in the U.S. Once braceros had "abandoned their jobs" and had no means of providing for themselves in the U.S., or of paying for passage back to Mexico, they could be easily deported under the category of "likely to be a public charge."⁴⁶⁸

Failing to send braceros back to their homes did not only happen when the migrants skipped their contracts, though. Poor organization and communication meant that sometimes workers were returned to the wrong state, leaving it to the migrant and to the Mexican government to solve the predicament. Such was the case with Juan González, of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, who was sent to the US as a bracero in 1960 but injured his leg on the job. As he stated in a letter to President Adolfo Lopez Mateos, his employers did not wish to spend any money on him, and so they sent him to Piedras Negras, Coahuila – not even to his home state – without treating him. Only upon his

⁴⁶⁷ File 546.6/592, Archivo Adolfo López Mateos, AGN.

⁴⁶⁸ Emily K. Abel, "Only the Best Class of Immigration: Public Health Policy in Los Angeles, 1910-1940," *American Journal of Public Health* 94 (2006): 932-939.

eventual return to Monterrey did he realize that he had a broken leg and would thus be unable to work and support his family.⁴⁶⁹ This approach meant that the employer avoided both providing medical care and paying health insurance premiums for injured braceros.

When labor contractors and employers did not deport non-productive braceros, they often failed to provide adequate medical care. They left migrants suffering in the U.S. unable to work, and thus unable to earn money. María de la Luz Saenz, whose father, brother and husband all worked as braceros, described her father's experience after he fell sick while contracted in the U.S. After her mother became very ill, her father sought a contract to be able to help with medical costs and provide for their family. In 1956, after a few trips to the U.S. as a bracero, he his son had contracts with the same employer and traveled north together. However, soon after arriving in the U.S. to work near Salinas, he became very ill. According to Saenz, "He told us that he began to feel sick, but they didn't look at him to figure out why. The first days he went to work sick like that, and when he could no longer stand, that's when they took him to the doctor, only once or twice they took him." They left him in the barracks with the other braceros, and after the end of their forty-five day contracts, they sent both him and her eighteen-year-old brother back to Mexico since her father was not improving. Unfortunately, he arrived in Mexico still in bad shape: "His whole body was swollen, and very bad... About a month after he arrived, he died."⁴⁷⁰ For employers, this sick worker could be easily disposed of, even though his health problems began while he worked for them. While they did not send him back early, they also failed to provide the medical care that could

⁴⁶⁹ Letter from Juan González to Lopez Mateos, ALM 546.6/925.

⁴⁷⁰ Interview with María de la Luz Saenz by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1376," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

have saved his life, and instead left him in the crowded bracero quarters where he possibly could have infected others, had it been a contagious illness.

As much as employers wished for workers to be a cheap, replaceable workforce able to withstand long hours at low wages, workers still became ill and suffered injuries due to strenuous work and lack of adequate living conditions. For workers injured on the job, though, there was little recourse available and they were often sent home while still in great pain and still in precarious health. In González's case, a lack of medical attention and being forced to travel with a broken limb caused serious problems that likely affected employment options for the rest of his life. For Saenz's father, he suffered until his contract ended, and then was sent home to die in Mexico. Not only did the US take advantage of Mexico's efforts in raising laborers until they reached adulthood, but it also treated their bodies as expendable and deportable once no longer productive. For workers who suffered long-term or permanent injuries, their lives were irrevocably changed by a short work contract that made few provisions for helping them after they could no longer work.

The Deportation Crisis in Torreón

Located where two main railroad lines cross, Torreón, Coahuila served as a stopping point for migrants heading both north and south. Soon after the Bracero Program began, the influx of *aspirantes* prompted widespread panic as the city struggled to handle the masses of unemployed workers. In the 1940s, an organization called the Civil Union of Unemployed Workers formed to address this problem and explained that many of them had arrived in northern Mexico with the hopes of getting a bracero

contract. By September of 1944, they claimed that 30,569 men were waiting there for contracts – a very large number for a city that had only begun to experience significant growth after the Mexican Revolution and thus lacked the ability to provide for so many transient men.⁴⁷¹ Well into the 1950s, the union would write to the government to explain the difficult situation in the region, but other organizations echoed the complaints regarding returning workers. For example, in 1956, Nemecia García, President of the Committee of the Democratic Union of Mexican Women in Torreón, Coahuila, wrote to President Ruiz Cortines to ask that braceros not be concentrated in her city.⁴⁷² When contracts expired and migrants returned, thousands of men swelled the ranks of the unemployed and strained the city's resources. Thus, the destructive cycle of labor migration became apparent quite early for residents in these cities that witnessed the problems of emigration and deportation.⁴⁷³

In July 1952, another crisis engulfed the city as newspapers reported that thousands of braceros and some of their relatives had arrived in Torreón in the span of one week, after being deported from the border crossing point at McAllen, Texas/Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Residents worried about the economic and demographic impact of 5500 deportees swarming the city, “many of whom could be carriers of the polio virus which has had the highest rates of incidence in the state of Texas, from where the majority of these “wetbacks” come from, who stay for days and maybe for months in the concentration camps there.” As the author warned, “it is rightly feared that they will

⁴⁷¹ Telegram from Unión Civil de Obreros sin Trabajo, September 1944, File 546.6/120-1, Archivo MAC, AGN.

⁴⁷² ARC 546.6/31, AGN

⁴⁷³ Extract of letter from Unión Civil de Obreros sin Trabajo of Torreón to the President, Dec. 12, 1944. 546.6/120. Archivo Manuel Ávila Camacho, AGN.

began to spread the microbe in the entire Laguna region.”⁴⁷⁴ The fears that these new arrivals would prompt a devastating polio epidemic echoed the xenophobic claims of anti-immigrant groups and individuals throughout the twentieth century, including anti-Mexican groups in the U.S. North of the border, many Americans characterized ethnic Mexicans in the U.S. as dirty bearers of disease and used the threat of possible infectious outbreaks to argue for more border enforcement. Similarly, many Mexicans throughout this period viewed returning braceros with distrust and concern. While they critiqued U.S. employers and authorities for leaving migrants in such conditions, many Mexicans resented the arrival of deportees and the risks that their presence meant for the region.

The regional Health Unit responded to these concerns and ordered a general vaccination against polio. Additionally, officials fumigated the barracks close to the railroad station where these deportees had temporarily resided while waiting to be sent elsewhere. Despite these health concerns and suspicions, however, officials also mobilized to help those returning. Municipal authorities criticized this mass deportation in Torreón, as well as the situation overall that had “been causing serious evils in this and other towns in the interior where wetbacks arrive daily.” While they attempted to find a way to send deportees elsewhere, city officials placed the migrants in two of the largest structures in the city – the stadium and the bullfighting arena – where local merchants would provide them with food.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ “Miles de Braceros Deportados Crean un Problema en Torreón,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX (July 26, 1952): 1-2.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.* Luckily, Torreón had constructed a new bullfighting arena in the 1930s, and as one of the country’s largest, it had a capacity of 10,000 people.

These incidents, and the reactions they provoked, illustrate how return migration overall, not just deportation, worried Mexican communities. For those who lived along railroad lines and could see the condition in which workers returned, labor migration often only led to suffering. Moreover, it placed even those Mexicans who had never migrated at risk. Many Mexicans continued to view all forms of emigration with disdain as they recognized the problems inherent in an economic and political system that relied on labor emigration. However, the experiences of braceros upon being returned to Mexico depict the deep cracks in government infrastructure that worsened the effects of labor migration for returnees. For a nation struggling to consolidate power, the modernizing rhetoric of the Bracero Program was weakened by the recognition that the government could not control its people or its borders, as well as the conviction that decades of state failures had produced the conditions that forced workers north.

Conclusion

One summer, a teenager named working in Arizona fields as a legal immigrant experienced severe injuries in a car accident. He lacked health insurance, and so the Phoenix hospital where he arrived sent the young man hours away to a hospital in Mexicali. After days of mobilizing, his parents managed to gather funds and the support to have him transferred to a hospital in California for treatment. His father reflected, “In Arizona, apparently, they see us as beasts of burden that can be dumped back over the border when we have outlived our usefulness.” However, the plight of Antonio Torres did not happen during the Bracero Program – it happened much more recently, in June 2007. His father’s comments echo the experiences of migrant workers from half a century

before and illustrate the need to further understand the ease with which the U.S. can dispose of its migrant workers.⁴⁷⁶

The issue of medical repatriation raises major issues as hospital administrators cite the massive bills piled up for the care of severely injured illegal immigrants, while legal professionals and human rights advocates argue that sending a patient in need of serious care to their home country will likely result in pain and suffering for the individual. Recent legal cases based on the medical repatriation of severely injured Latin American migrants highlights the contentious aspects of the process. These workers, often injured while on the job, face life-threatening health problems while hospitals angle to dispose of them as quickly as possible by sending them to their home country, much as injured braceros and migrant workers were dumped in Mexico in the mid-20th century.

Focusing on the return of migrants and health-related problems during a state-sanctioned guest worker program illustrates how the process of international labor migration presents a number of problems for a sending country, as well as for migrants, their families, and their communities. Despite a century of sustained labor migration from Mexico to the US, these consequences continue to be overlooked as such programs as H-2A and H-2B guest worker programs currently import unskilled labor into the U.S. as abuse and exploitation by employers runs rampant. While the US benefits from temporary and deportable laborers, Mexico is then burdened with caring for injured workers and dealing with the health risks of massive internal migration.

⁴⁷⁶ Deborah Sontag covered the experiences of Antonio and the Torres family in a *New York Times* article entitled “Deported in a Coma, Saved Back in U.S.,” November 8, 2008.

An examination of the health-related effects of the Bracero Program reveals the lasting effects of migratory systems far beyond the individual migrant. While the return of injured, sick or dead workers presented problems for Mexico, the *de facto* segregation of bracero and wetback workers from the rest of the community in some regions only compounded problems for ethnic Mexicans living in the US. Although braceros generally entered the US free of disease and in good health, they often left in drastically different conditions. In turn, Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the U.S. continued to face discrimination while being categorized as dirty and liable to spread infectious diseases. Ironically, fears of deportation led to an increased association between undocumented immigrants and disease as migrant fearful of removals were viewed as responsible for the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid, and sexually transmitted infections.⁴⁷⁷

Focusing solely on wages, agricultural harvests, and employment fails to consider the potential damage that the migration process can inflict not only on the body, but on communities. Even today, health risks for migrants and deportees continue. Anthropologist Seth M. Holmes observed migrant workers from Oaxaca in the early 2000s and writes that “my Triqui companions often return to their hometown when they are unable to work due to old age, sickness or injury. Thus that which is necessary for both reproduction and convalescence is provided in Mexico, and the United State

⁴⁷⁷ W. Tim Dagodag, “Source Regions and Composition of Illegal Mexican Immigration to California,” *International Migration Review* 9 (Winter 1975), 500. “Tuberculosis, typhoid, hepatitis, venereal diseases, and dysentery have been linked to this presence of illegal immigrants. Opportunity for detection of such diseases is lessened due to a fear of detection and deportation. A formidable health hazard exists since aliens are frequently hired in food services or processing industries.”

provides only what is necessary while the emigrants are working.”⁴⁷⁸ During the Bracero Program, the U.S. in many cases refused to provide any sort of service, and relied on selective border enforcement and the cooperation of border officials to cruelly dispose of unproductive workers.

The health risks of migrant work remain high as pesticide usage and poor working conditions can result in death or lasting medical issues for workers, while single Mexican men who migrate to the US report feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression. Mental health remains a concern for Mexican migrants today, with many undocumented migrants struggling with the compounded issue of being at risk of anxiety and depression due to feeling isolated, while also having less access to healthcare services and providers.⁴⁷⁹ The process of involuntary “removal,” as some anthropologists term the experiences located outside of the rigid categories of formal deportation procedures,⁴⁸⁰ exposes migrants to even more risks and places them in vulnerable positions where both the Mexican and the U.S. governments overlook their needs. While some of the risks have changed, migrants continue to wrestle with the combination of physical and mental trauma that results from involuntary return.

⁴⁷⁸ Seth M. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 13.

⁴⁷⁹ Some recent studies that address various subgroups of Mexican migrants include: Joseph D. Hovey and Cristina G. Magaña, “Exploring the Mental Health of Mexican Migrant Farm Workers in the Midwest: Psychosocial Predictors of Psychological Distress and Suggestions for Prevention and Treatment,” *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied* 136 (2002): 493-513; Joseph G. Grzywacz, et al., “Leaving Family for Work: Ambivalence and Mental Health among Mexican Migrant Farmworker Men,” *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 8 (2006): 85-97; Margaret M. Sullivan and Roberta Rehm, “Mental Health of Undocumented Mexican Immigrants: A Review of the Literature,” *Advances in Nursing Science* 28 (2005): 240-251.

⁴⁸⁰ Nathalie Peutz, “Embarking on an Anthropology of Removal,” *Current Anthropology* 47 (2006): 217-241.

Chapter 5: “Chastisement for Dreamers”: Deportation Procedures after 1954

Introduction

In August of 1956, a mutiny occurred on an overcrowded ship used to transport deported workers from the U.S. to Mexico. Three dozen men jumped off at the sight of land and five drowned. The mutiny aboard the *S.S. Mercurio* and the deaths that followed sparked international outrage. Migrants suffered for days as they were sent to Veracruz (far from home for many) from Texas, on a commercial vessel that had never been intended to transport people. As newspapers published story after story that described the *Mercurio* as a “slave ship,” the Mexican government struggled to defend itself against allegations that these methods of returning migrants were punitive strategies meant to discipline those who had traveled north without papers. The incident of the *Mercurio* fits into the larger narrative of Mexican border control in the 1950s, in which the the Mexican government began to increase its efforts to discourage emigration by pursuing increasingly punitive methods of deportation. This led to more strategies that involved removal to the interior of Mexico – a costly endeavor for the state.

These attempts led to chaos and suffering as large groups of deportees would arrive in certain transportation hubs. Kelly Lytle-Hernández argues that these methods of repatriation to the interior “map the violence of migration control far south of the U.S.-Mexico border,” yet little work has focused on the experiences of deportees beyond the borderlands.⁴⁸¹ In this chapter, I examine the tragedy of the “boatlift” and frame this case as one example of the need to historicize not only deportation to Mexico, but also the Mexican government’s punitive actions and the emergence of the current strategy of

⁴⁸¹ Lytle-Hernandez, *Migra!*, 144.

“prevention through deterrence” that continues to place migrants’ lives at risk in the quest to prevent unauthorized border crossings.⁴⁸² Methods of prevention through deterrence dissuaded many deportees from attempting to re-cross the border, but they also created a number of problems for migrants and for the regions to which they arrived.

While the Mexican government had at times objected in the past to the treatment of its workers, it did not make major interventions when it came to the rising numbers of migrants being forcibly returned, and largely cooperated with such attempts.⁴⁸³ Beginning in the 1950s, it became an increasingly active participant as the focus shifted to preventing deported migrants from entering again by transporting them further into Mexico’s interior. However, I argue that this shift does not only represent a bowing to the U.S.’s will. The actions of the Mexican government and government agents in this period should be read as part of a longer history of post-revolutionary political violence by the state as the PRI consolidated its power in the country beginning in 1952 under President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. As Alan Knight writes, “Mexican political violence appears less extreme and significant, but that is partly because it is more discreet, anonymous, prolonged, and quotidian. It involves numerous small, often local, acts of violence, rather

⁴⁸²“Under the “prevention through deterrence” doctrine adopted by the U.S. Border Patrol in the early 1990s, illegal entries were to be prevented by a concentrated “show of force” on specific segments of the border, which, it was believed, would also discourage crossing attempts from being made in areas less heavily fortified but more remote and dangerous to migrants.” Wayne A. Cornelius, et al. “Controlling Unauthorized Immigration from Mexico: The Failure of “Prevention through Deterrence” and the Need for Comprehensive Reform,” June 10, 2008. For more on the idea of deterrence in the context of the criminal justice system, see Daniel S. Nagin, “Deterrence and Incapacitation,” in *The Handbook of Crime and Punishment*, Ed. Michael Tonry (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000).

⁴⁸³ Lytle-Hernandez, *Migra!*, 182-183.

than massive, centralized campaigns of repression.”⁴⁸⁴ Rather than perpetrated by soldiers or paramilitary forces as seen in violent regimes happening elsewhere in Latin America during the mid to late twentieth century, this everyday violence against migrants was enacted by Mexican border authorities and local officials.⁴⁸⁵

After Operation Wetback, the Bracero Program had facilitated the undocumented and documented migration of Mexicans for more than a decade. The last ten years of the program reflect a different period where emigration had become an increasingly common occurrence. However, critique of emigrants had not subsided. This chapter explores several aspects of the program’s consequences on Mexico during this last stage: 1) the permanent demographic, economic, and social transformations that migration and border enforcement engendered on Mexico’s northern cities; 2) discrimination against returning braceros; 3) a shift to punitive deportations framed as repatriation to the interior; and; and 4) how deportation procedures focused on preventing re-crossing continue to threaten the lives of migrants.

As Douglas Massey and Zai Liang argue, ultimately, “there is no such thing as a temporary worker program.”⁴⁸⁶ Migrants continued to leave Mexico not only because of

⁴⁸⁴ Although he does not mention deportation, Alan Knight periodizes state violence after the Revolution in “Political Violence in Post-revolutionary Mexico,” in *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 118. He states that the PRI experienced its height of success from 1952-1987, “when the party machine, possessed of enormous powers of patronage, maintained party cohesion, avoided schisms and defeated the genuine opposition powers with relative ease.” 107.

⁴⁸⁵ For a study on the nature and power of the Mexican military during this period, see: Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁴⁸⁶ Douglas S. Massey and Zai Liang, “The long-term consequences of a temporary worker program: The Bracero experience,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 8 (1989), 199, 201. “Migration is inherently dynamic and social, so that guestworkers do not just stop migrating when their visas expire, and immigration does not cease when labor recruitment ends. Rather, the

the networks that they had developed, but also because economic change in their home country limited opportunities. While landowners and investors experienced record profit during the Mexican Miracle, the country's agricultural population found itself struggling to survive. Some moved to urban areas such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, but many left the country. Others resettled in northern Mexico, including many deportees and returning braceros, leading to a population boom in the region.

The frequency of extralegal methods of border-crossing and coerced removal during this period make a quantitative analysis difficult. In this chapter I draw on oral histories with politicians and border agents in the U.S., Mexican newspapers, letters from migrants, and U.S. government documents to analyze this subject. While incomplete, this variety of sources helps to explore the social and material consequences of return migration after Operation Wetback until the end of the Bracero Program. Historians of race and migration have articulated how immigration laws have categorized Mexicans as deportable, but this chapter explores how the implementation of such laws also had ramifications for Mexico as a sending country and how Mexican citizens objected to the treatment of their compatriots at the hand of their own government.

The Effects of Guest Work on Northern Mexico

Ana Elizabeth Rosas argues that while the Bracero Program was formulated as the answer to the wartime need for labor, its repeated extensions “created a permanent state of emergency for families throughout the Mexican countryside,” worsened by the

act of migration itself changes guestworkers' aspirations, desires, and motivations, as well as the perceived costs and returns of movement, and leads to more migration.”

Mexican government's lack of action on behalf of workers and families.⁴⁸⁷ In the mid-1950s, guest workers had been migrating from Mexico for over a decade, and this opportunity also provided Mexico with temporary solutions to labor, land, and political issues. However, this prolonged period of authorized and unauthorized mass migration also influenced opinions of emigrants. Resentment against braceros continued, bolstered by ideas of fears of the threat that returning migrants presented as explored in the previous chapter, but so did reports of exploitation. As peasants continued to be shut out from the economic growth Mexico was experiencing, demographic shifts occurred as many Mexicans moved from the countryside to urban areas, northern Mexico, and the U.S. These changes had significantly altered local economies and communities in Mexico, and the effects magnified as braceros and migrants returned.

According to Richard Hancock, "The 36,623 braceros contracted in 1957 [in Chihuahua] comprised 11 per cent of the total labor force and 21 per cent of the economically active agricultural population of the state."⁴⁸⁸ In other words, one of every five agricultural workers in the state had left at some point to work in the U.S, and likely left during the peak of the planting and harvesting seasons. Some *municipios* in the state had nearly half of their agricultural workforce leave for the U.S.⁴⁸⁹ At the time, this domestic disruption caused by the emigration of workers did not receive much attention from officials in the U.S. However, communities all over northern Mexico asked for a halt to this migration during harvest seasons. One letter published in the national

⁴⁸⁷ Rosas, *Abrazando el Espiritu*, 41.

⁴⁸⁸ Hancock, *Role of the Bracero*, 121. Note: Hancock does not elaborate on this number to explain whether men may have been contracted multiple times in the same year. Nonetheless, the numbers provided would have had a significant impact on agriculture in the region.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

newspaper *Excelsior* described the proposal of some agricultural leaders in the northern Laguna region to import workers from other countries such as Italy or Spain to come pick the valuable cotton crop. These migrant workers would take the place of those “Mexican workers who desert the fields to “enroll themselves” as braceros.”⁴⁹⁰ Similar to the criticism that repatriates faced, braceros also faced accusations of having left the country for higher wages when they were still needed for agricultural work at home.

In August of 1955, just before the cotton-harvesting season began, the Union of Cotton Producers of the Mexican Republic (including representatives from Coahuila, Durango and Chihuahua) sent a telegram to President Ruiz Cortines in response to the labor crisis. They asked him to stop issuing contracts, stating that this labor was needed to export the product to the world market without any problems. The following year, Monterrey suffered from a lack of workers to pick cotton. As the country’s cotton-producing regions were concentrated in northern Mexico, this industry experienced a number of difficulties recruiting labor to replace migrants who had gone abroad, often to also pick cotton.

Workers also had trouble with the planting and harvesting schedule that decided when contracts would be issued. In 1958, the Grupo San Luis of Mexicali wrote a letter to President Ruiz Cortines on behalf of 6,000 workers in the state of Baja California. The group asked that the contracting schedule be reconsidered, as the temporary jobs available in the region followed the same schedule every year. In much of northern Mexico, the cotton industry provided a significant source of seasonal work. The harvest

⁴⁹⁰ Enrique S. Espinosa, “El problema braceril de Mexico,” Apr 5, 1956, File 546.6/9, Archivo Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, AGN.

required pickers in September and October, and then the ginning companies needed employees to oversee the removal of the fibers from the seeds. Around the same time, factories hired workers to process the seeds into cottonseed oil. By the end of the year, the harvest had ended, and so had the need for workers to process cotton and seeds. Thus, as the Grupo San Luis pointed out, unemployment peaked at the beginning of the year and did not let up again until cotton planting began again in the Mexicali valley in the spring. Writing in January, they explained that these 6,000 men were unemployed and asked for the government to consider this schedule, and then issue contracts (lasting no more than six months) that would allow braceros to return in time to work during the harvests. Not doing so would affect the local economy, as well as their families, who would struggle through months of employment.⁴⁹¹

This had long-term consequences beyond the immediate picking season, however. In 1957, the cottonseed oil processing company in Torreón, Coahuila closed and the company's employees spent months without work. The members of the local cotton industry union then wrote to the president asking for bracero contracts to be able to support their families, showing how the local economy had faltered and left temporary bracero contracts as one of the only options.⁴⁹² Sending workers abroad while putting domestic harvests at risk of going unpicked exemplifies how the program paradoxically destabilized local economies, while hoping that remittances and carefully saved wages

⁴⁹¹ Letter from Grupo San Luis to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, January 20, 1958. File 548.1/124, Archivo Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, AGN. For more work on the importance of the cotton industry in northern Mexico, refer to Casey Walsh's monograph, *Building the Borderlands: A Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton along the Mexico-Texas Border* (Texas A&M Press, 2008).

⁴⁹² Letter from representatives of the Sindicato Industrial de Trabajadores de Plantas Despepitadoras y Compañía de Algodón, Elaboración de Aceites, Jabones, Grasas Vegetales e Hidrogenadas y Similares de la República Mexicana, Torreón, to Ruiz Cortines, October 5, 1957, File 546.6/31, Archivo ARC, AGN.

could help improve the country. However, traditional economic analyses of migration often neglect these aspects, particularly those consequences that cannot be quantitatively evaluated.

Meanwhile, U.S. growers and politicians worked to institute a new program that would allow “specials” to return to work in the U.S., a program which was introduced during the summer of 1954 and helped facilitate the return of unauthorized migrants deported during Operation Wetback.⁴⁹³ Specials had previously worked in the U.S., were viewed favorably by their employers, and their experience with certain skills thus made them desirable workers.⁴⁹⁴ Consequently, the same employers would hire them repeatedly, resulting in repeated migration cycles in which they would also often bring along friends or family members to work for the same employer. However, Mexico sought to implement regulations that would limit the time braceros spent abroad. While discussing the Bracero Program during a U.S. government subcommittee, one representative from the Department of Labor admitted that the program could have social costs for workers and their families, but argued that the short contracts mitigated this problem. As Jack Donnachie, assistant director of the Division of Farm Labor, stated: “This is the reason that the Mexican Government has limited the stay of the Mexicans in the country to 6 months. This is a concern of the Mexican Government, the disruption of

⁴⁹³ Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 244.

⁴⁹⁴ Cohen suggests that the specials actually were skilled workers from urban areas who had paid for that designation, writing “A small bribe, it seems, could turn anyone into a campesino, even though many of those the state hoped would learn modern agricultural skills had already left the land.” Cohen, *Braceros*, 96.

families when some of them were permitted to stay as long as 18 months. This probably is the severest criticism of the program in Mexico.”⁴⁹⁵

The specials program and the I-100 program also led to permanent resettlement within Mexico. With an I-100 card, braceros could return to work with their previous employers. Under this program, growers did not have to pay for the transportation of braceros within Mexico, which also contributed to resettlement in northern Mexico as workers with the cards could save on train or bus fare by moving closer to the border. Consequently, some sought to minimize separation from their families during trips to the U.S. and moved their families to the border region or even to the U.S.⁴⁹⁶ This did not always ease the process of migrating, however. In late 1959, a group of hundreds of workers wrote to President Adolfo Lopez Mateos to explain their predicament. They resided in Piedras Negras and relied on annual contracts to earn money working on farms in Texas. Through this, they had accumulated years of experience in handling livestock and driving tractors, among other skills, which allowed them to work for the same employers. However, when they tried to go to the contracting center, they were told that workers who had spent more than a year working in the U.S. needed to stay a year in Mexico to “reintegrate into [their] families.” Such a request caused them severe financial difficulties in providing for their families, and the scarcity of work in the region made it difficult to earn anywhere near what they had in the U.S. Additionally, they added, they were still paying off their homes that were rebuilt after severe flooding in 1954. While

⁴⁹⁵ “Study of population and immigration problems. Administrative presentations (III): Admission of aliens into the United States for temporary employment and “Commuter Workers”; presentations by the Dept. of Labor and the Dept. of Justice (Immigration and Naturalization Service) to Subcommittee No. 1.” Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1963: 16.

⁴⁹⁶ At the end of the decade, this specials program was ended by the U.S. government however the I-100 system had largely replaced the need for specials. Calavita, *Inside the State*, 159.

the spirit of the regulation perhaps intended to mitigate the effects of guest work on families in Mexico, it resulted in more problems for these workers who had based their livelihood on obtaining contracts to work abroad. Ironically, they also pointed out, their families resided just on the other side of the border and thus they already visited them regularly.⁴⁹⁷

On the other side of the border, the end of the specials program in 1960 also worried employers. Ewing Halsell, a rancher and farmer in West Texas, wrote to President Adolfo Lopez Mateos to explain the value of specials to the agricultural industry. As he stated, “We have taught your men to drive tractors and trucks and to irrigate, and the cowboys learn our brush pastures so they make good hands. I believe we have taught your people better methods of farming and I am sure they are putting them to use in your country.”⁴⁹⁸ The end of special contracting programs would, he explained, create a number of difficulties for employers who grew increasingly reliant on Mexican labor. However, his rhetoric of the benefits of such programs for Mexico echoed the points that emigration proponents such as Manuel Gamio touted, hoping that migrants would bring back new skills and technology. For *campesinos* who did not own land in Mexico, much less tractors or other specialized machinery, this knowledge had limited benefits.

⁴⁹⁷ Correspondence, December 9, 1959, ALM 546.6/57, AGN.

⁴⁹⁸ Letter to Lopez Mateos, March 25, 1960, ALM 546.6/432, AGN. In the letter, Halsell also mentions that the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association was considering contracting workers from the British West Indies, who would be even cheaper, illustrating how certain industries depended on inexpensive labor. For more on the Jamaican guest worker program, see Cindy Hamamovitch, *No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

The introduction of the specials category resulted in many ways to an increased reliance on remittances, and for others, long-term or permanent absence from Mexico. As land distribution continued to exclude the majority of peasants, heading north to the U.S. provided an enticing opportunity.⁴⁹⁹ Moreover, as social scientists of migration have proven, repeated trips to the U.S. set into motion a multi-generation migration pattern. Changes by U.S. corporations also contributed to demographic shifts in Mexico. In the 1950s, some U.S. business interests began to move their operations to Sinaloa to export tomatoes to the U.S., which allowed them to pay their workers even less than they paid braceros and wetbacks.⁵⁰⁰ However, less-populated northern states also needed workers, so more migrants traveled north from other regions of Mexico to work in U.S.-owned fields in Mexico.

In response to Mexican growers' demand for labor, an informal "domestic bracero program" also began in which migrants who hoped to leave the U.S. began to work in Sonora, Tamaulipas, Baja California, and Chihuahua, in what Sergio Chávez describes as "step-migration."⁵⁰¹ With so many migrants returning and even more hoping to leave, macabre scenes became part of everyday life in the streets of cities such as Empalme, Sonora (the site of a large bracero contracting center). Drawing on interviews with former braceros, Chávez writes:

Antonio Lemus, 68, remembers that when he migrated to Empalme during the 1950s, hundreds of young displaced men experienced hunger to the

⁴⁹⁹ Massey and Ziang, "The long-term consequences of a temporary worker program," 220. The authors argue that Mexicans who own land have a lower likelihood of migrating to the U.S.

⁵⁰⁰ Carol Zabin, "U.S.-Mexico Economic Integration: Labor Relationships and the Organization of Work in California and Baja California Agriculture," *Economic Geography* 73 (June 1997), 337-338.

⁵⁰¹ Sergio Chávez, "The Sonoran Desert's Domestic Bracero Programme: Institutional Actors and the Creation of Labor Migration Streams," *International Migration* 50 (April 2012), 20-40.

point that they would walk around as if they were “mad,” not having any sense of where they were. Silvestre Garcés recalls walking through the streets of Empalme and seeing a fellow migrant lying on the street. At first, he thought that the young man had passed out from an all-night drinking binge or had perhaps fainted from the Sonoran Desert heat. However, when Silvestre accosted the young man, he became terrified because the young man was stiff and had died of starvation. Some of the men often times spoke about autopsies performed on men who died of starvation where non-edible products such as toilet paper, banana and orange peels, and cigarette butts found in their stomachs.⁵⁰²

Such recollections graphically illustrate the situations that many border cities experienced during these years as the possibility of working in the U.S. drew migrants north. Continuous cycles of migration, deportation, and re-migration resulted in chaos and desperation along the border during the 1950s, with little acknowledgement from the national government.

Violence, Discrimination, and Demographic Change

Many problems that plagued the wartime labor program continued, or intensified, during the last decade of the program. In Mexico, opportunities remained slim for *campesinos* who viewed the Bracero Program as an opportunity to escape generations of low-paid peon labor. However, long waits at contracting centers made the possibility of getting a contract nearly impossible for many without funds or time to outwait the line. Some *aspirantes* reported waits of over four months, while cotton growers in Northern Mexico tried to lure them away to pick for very low wages.⁵⁰³ By the late 1950s and 1960s, the bribes that local officials requested for contracts had increased, prompting even more hopeful migrants to head north without documents. Migrants and other

⁵⁰² Ibid., 29.

⁵⁰³ Correspondence, ALM 546.6/613, ALM 546.6/532, AGN.

concerned citizens often wrote to the president, describing the extortion that frequently occurred as municipal presidents insisted on high payments for the required letters while officials in contracting centers demanded even more. For example, a reported bribe of 1200 pesos in 1960 would mean paying approximately one fourth of the GDP per capita at the time, or 750 USD in 2016 currency.⁵⁰⁴

This system of exploitation became commonplace in areas of Mexico, and as Michael Snodgrass argues, “To the extent that the bracero program served political ends, it did so by offering the prized contracts to friends of the PRI as it extended its nationwide political machine.”⁵⁰⁵ The solidification of the PRI’s power in Mexico consequently meant that political leaders cooperated in this system of extortion. For small farmers and day laborers who often sought contracts in order to assuage crises prompted by economic disasters such as floods or droughts, the additional costs imposed by these *mordidas* made crossing without a contract the only possibility. Political corruption thus contributed to the stream of unsanctioned migration that placed migrants in precarious positions abroad. As some of the residents of Atotonilco El Alto, Jalisco described in a damning complaint sent to President Lopez Mateos that called the officials “traffickers of human misery,” workers pawned anything from land, to livestock, to household objects such as sewing machines.⁵⁰⁶ In such situations, deportation or removal only further worsened the situation for migrants who had risked their belongings and often the

⁵⁰⁴ Conversion and inflation rates obtained from U.S. Department of Labor CPI Inflation Calculator and World Bank records in May 2016, as well as the Banco de Mexico’s “Exchange Rate Regimes in Mexico Since 1954” (September 2009).

⁵⁰⁵ Snodgrass, “The Golden Age of Charrismo,” in *Dictablanda*, 189.

⁵⁰⁶ Letter from residents of Atotonilco El Alto, Jalisco, ALM 546.6/282.. Mar 20, 1960, AGN.

livelihood of their families to work in the United States only to return home earlier than anticipated.

Letters from residents in northern cities recount yet more of the difficulties experienced, and caused, by returning workers. Mentions of abuse at the hands of Mexican border officials describe how agents regularly charged outrageous fees to returnees to take what little money they had left, while other authorities resorted to physical violence. These letters offer insight into how Mexican citizens across the country became invested in the troubles of returning migrants and where they directed their frustrations. Several themes emerge repeatedly, in particular lack of government control, local corruption, abuse by Mexican border authorities, and failed post-revolutionary reforms. One man named José Cano Torres, writing from Tijuana to President Ruiz Cortines in 1955, denounced “the bad treatment given to the agricultural workers who cross illegally into North American territory, as well as the way that they’re treated by Mexican police upon being moved to Mexican territory.”⁵⁰⁷ Among the letters written by migrants to Mexican presidents during the years of the program are many complaints of border agents who asked for bribes or unlawfully confiscated property from returning migrants. Deborah Cohen’s interviews with ex-braceros illustrate the frequency with which this happened and how braceros resented attempted thefts by their own countrymen.⁵⁰⁸

However, the legal status of returning migrants mattered. As José Cano Torres explained based on his observations from living close to the border, Mexican authorities

⁵⁰⁷ Letter from José Cano Torres to President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, March 25, 1955. Archivo Ruiz Cortines, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵⁰⁸ Cohen, *Braceros*, 175-176.

also participated in the abuse of braceros who had been deported for lack of paperwork, illustrating how being categorized as “illegal” continued to mark the bodies of deported braceros even after crossing back into Mexico. Mentions of abuse by Mexican authorities cropped up in newspapers as well. A report in the presidential archives cites the Chihuahuan newspaper *El Heraldito*, which in 1957 recounted how hundreds of those who had crossed illegally were being deported daily through the Ojinaga border crossing point. As the paper describes, the deportees were loaded “like beasts” into railway cars, beaten with iron rods, and would arrive desperately in need of medical care. Such reports explicitly stated that these forms of abuse were directed against migrants deported for not having legally entered the U.S. Depictions of the mutiny aboard the *Mercurio* also reflected how this perceptions of abuse by authorities extended beyond the border. In this case, the Mexican state also became implicated as an instigator of abuse against its deported migrants.⁵⁰⁹

As explored in previous chapters, decades of emigration and return migration had led to negative perceptions of migrants. The increased coverage of Operation Wetback also led to more negative coverage of those who migrated to the U.S. One article described how lowered levels of remittances beginning in the mid-1950s signaled a “good sign,” since it would limit the hundreds of thousands of migrants who migrated to the U.S. for temporary periods of time. According to Jalisco-based newspaper *El Informador*, the Bank of Mexico had stated that remittances in previous years had

⁵⁰⁹ “Que son tratados como bestias los braceros deportados,” *El Heraldito de Chihuahua*, May 7, 1957. File 546.6/55, AGN. Also cited in *Migra!*, by Kelly Lytle-Hernández and Deborah Cohen, *Braceros*.

reached sixty or seventy million dollars, but in 1954 dropped to twenty-eight million.⁵¹⁰ More critically, another piece described how an “invasion” of *aspirantes* troubled Hermosillo, Sonora. Since only three hundred braceros managed to cross the border daily, a reported 18,000 hopeful migrants remained in the city hoping to be contracted. With few options available, the newspaper described the miserable conditions they lived in which led them to commit “shameful criminal acts.” In a matter of days, this included the assault of a driver and a home robbery.⁵¹¹ While such crimes happened frequently in large cities, Hermosillo at the time had an estimated population of 65,000. If the newspaper reported the number of *aspirantes* accurately, around 1 out of every 4 people in the city was a male migrant hoping to head to the U.S. as a bracero.

Such resentment did not immediately end in 1965. One article reflecting on the end of the Bracero Program described the perspective of labor unions such as the CROM toward returning braceros: “...meanwhile migrant workers receive serious prejudice, but if they can accommodate into our agricultural or industrial production, especially with government aid, remarkable progress will be achieved in our development since thousands of braceros who annually leave the country represent a considerable work force.”⁵¹² By the end of the program, millions of contracts had been issued, but millions more had migrated without documents, resulting in an undeniable crisis for the country.

During this period, northern cities in Mexico also experienced tremendous growth. During the 1950s, “growth of the nine major frontier municipalities of Ensenada,

⁵¹⁰ “Ahora Mandan Menos Dólares,” *El Informador*, Guadalajara, Jalisco, April 7, 1955, 1.

⁵¹¹ “Estorban en Hermosillo los Aspirantes a Braceros,” *El Informador*, Guadalajara, Jalisco, May 1, 1955, 1.

⁵¹² “Resultará Mejor que no se Vayan los Braceros,” *El Informador*, Guadalajara, Jalisco, January 5, 1965, 1.

Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros were one and one half times above the average for the republic.” Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana had emerged as the largest cities on the border, and they continued to grow at rates that dwarfed that of Mexico City, in the midst of its own population boom due to increasing urbanization.⁵¹³ Much of this growth owed not only to emigration, but also to return migration. One article written shortly after the end of the program stated: “Many braceros returning from the United States are unwilling to experience the less favorable economic and social milieu of their home districts and have remained in the border communities. Thus, the border cities must contend with serious problems of population growth and unemployment.”⁵¹⁴ Even in cases where braceros willingly returned (or could no longer emigrate due to the end of the program), many stayed in the border region and did not return to their hometowns where opportunities often remained sparse.

Indeed, interviews conducted with returning braceros by a sociologist reveal how migrants and guest workers often returned to Mexico, but not to their hometowns.⁵¹⁵ One

⁵¹³ C. Daniel Dillman, “Urban Growth along Mexico’s Northern Border and the Mexican National Border Program” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 4 (1970), 487. “[During the 1950s] growth of the nine major frontier municipalities of Ensenada, Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros were one and one have times above the average for the republic. Between 1950 and 1960, these centers increased by more than 83 percent from less than 900,000 to over 1,500,000, whereas national total population rose 34 percent. The rates of growth of the three largest border cities, Mexicali (126 percent), Ciudad Juárez (111 percent), and Tijuana (153 percent), far exceeded that of the Federal District (60 percent). Other than Tijuana and nearby San Diego, Mexican cities, located in distinct western, central, and eastern groups, are bigger than their U.S. twins.”

⁵¹⁴ C. Daniel Dillman, “Recent Developments in Mexico’s National Border Program” *The Professional Geographer* 22 (1970), 244.

⁵¹⁵ Sergio Chávez, *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15. Chávez writes that this continues even

former bracero described how after finding work in Tijuana, he “lost the eagerness of going to the other side.” After obtaining steady work in the border city, he no longer felt a need to migrate to the United States. Other employers even paid workers in dollars, further diminishing the need to migrate with or without papers. For migrants who had previously worked in agriculture, occupations in border cities such as driving taxis or working on construction offered a form of “upward mobility.”⁵¹⁶

The Mexican state attempted to address the tremendous growth in the border region beginning in the 1960s. It established programs such as the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (ProNaF), designed to improve cities along the border as well as increase their tourist appeal. In 1965, the Border Industrialization Program brought *maquiladoras* to the border region in an effort to address high unemployment rates due to the return of migrant workers from the U.S. However, instead of hiring former guest workers or migrant workers, employers often preferred to hire young women. While the *maquiladoras* did lead to economic and population growths, they also led to more social, environmental, and economic problems for the region that continue to reverberate today.⁵¹⁷

Repatriation to the Interior

Before Operation Wetback, U.S. Border Patrol agents had experimented with deportation via a number of modes of transportation, including by bus, train, plane, and

today, with Tijuana viewed as a “preferred destination for migrants who opt out of returning to their place of birth.”

⁵¹⁶ Chávez, *Border Lives*, 34-35.

⁵¹⁷ Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 37.

beginning in the 1950s, ship.⁵¹⁸ This resulted in concentrations of deportees in the areas to which they were sent. During the operation in 1954, American officials assumed that their Mexican counterparts would comply in transporting deportees from the border. However, this did not happen as planned, and as mentioned in Chapter 3, many migrants returned to work in the U.S. Other problems plagued attempts to prevent deportees from quickly crossing the border again. Sociologist Julian Samora investigated border enforcement efforts in the 1960s and stated of the “buslifts”: “This procedure raises a legal question in our mind: Once an alien is in his own country, what right does the U.S. have to force him into the Mexican bus for a trip he may not want to take?”⁵¹⁹ This question highlights many of the logistical and theoretical problems that deportation procedures presented for Mexico. Once no longer on American territory, how could deportees be controlled and what was the role of Mexico in participating in such procedures to control its returned migrants?

After the Revolution, the Mexican government had experimented with different methods of preventing unauthorized emigration.⁵²⁰ David Fitzgerald argues that Mexico’s efforts to control emigration were limited by the nation’s “asymmetric interdependence” with the United States, as evidenced by multiple events in which the U.S. lifted

⁵¹⁸ Lytle-Hernández, *Migra!*, 168.

⁵¹⁹ Julian Samora, *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1971), 65. Further complicating the process was the matter of oversight within Mexico. Samora also wrote that “We have heard of incidents whereby an enterprising bus driver, having deposited the aliens in the interior, then offered the same aliens or other Mexicans a ride back to the border for a nominal fee!”

⁵²⁰ Alexandra Delano, *Mexico and Its Diaspora in the United States: Emigration Policies Since 1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2011); Aguila, “Mexican/U.S. Immigration Policy prior to the Great Depression;” Alanis Enciso, “No cuenten conmigo: La política de repatriación del gobierno mexicano y sus nacionales en Estados Unidos, 1910-1928;” Lytle-Hernandez, “Crimes and Consequences of Operation Wetback.”

immigration restrictions or facilitated the entry of migrants.⁵²¹ Even before Operation Wetback, Congress worked to criminalize and punish unauthorized migrants, while still allowing employers to employ them without problems. Passed in 1952, Public Law 283 illustrates the U.S. government's problematic attitude toward Mexican migrants. Any person who willingly brought into the US, transported within the US, concealed, harbored, or encouraged the entry of a migrant could face felony charges resulting fines and/or imprisonment. However, those who employed these migrants faced no punishment.⁵²² In excluding employers, the U.S. government protected growers from facing any charges and arguably protected the stability of the agricultural labor force. As Fitzgerald writes, "Given the asymmetries in their relationship and a proven inability to stop emigrants from leaving, the Mexican government had few means of forcing U.S. concessions."⁵²³ While it could not force the U.S., it could force its own migrants by disciplining those caught in the U.S. without papers.

"Chastisement for Dreamers" – Responses to *S.S. Mercurio* in Mexico

In 1956, the disaster involving the ship *S.S. Mercurio* seized the attention of the nation and illustrated Mexico's participation in punitive deportation tactics. The vessel made weekly trips from Port Isabel (near Brownsville, Texas) to Veracruz, each time carrying a reported 450-500 deported men aboard on a trip that lasted two days. The voyage was not a comfortable one by any means, as the craft had not been intended to be

⁵²¹ David Fitzgerald, "Inside the Sending State: The Politics of Mexican Emigration Control," *International Migration Review* 2 (Summer 2006), 259-293.

⁵²² Public Law 283: "An Act to assist in preventing aliens from entering or remaining in the United States illegally." "Campbell, "Bracero Migration and the Mexican Economy, 68.

⁵²³ Fitzgerald, "Inside the Sending State," 272.

a spacious vessel for passengers. Originally a Canadian warship in World War II, it reportedly only measured 60 meters long.⁵²⁴ After leaving those caught in the U.S. without papers in Veracruz, it transported bananas north to the U.S. On August 23rd of that year, Mexican officials traveled to Texas to inspect the ship amid complaints regarding the treatment of those aboard. Shortly before that, a representative from the U.S. government confirmed in a report sent to numerous agencies including the Coast Guard and INS that the ship had several major issues that called into question its use as a vessel for transporting deportees.

In particular, it lacked sufficient security equipment, sanitary conditions were far from adequate, and it did not provide shelter for all its passengers in the event it encountered inclement weather.⁵²⁵ The route taken through the Gulf of Mexico, however, placed it in risky situations in hurricane season and during Veracruz' frequent "nortes" (windy storms that came from the north). As Robert M. Mollohan, president of a subcommittee on the matter, summarized, "What happens on this ship can only be compared with the galleys of eighteenth century slave ships."⁵²⁶ He described how the deportees were loaded "like cattle" into a cramped space where they could not even sit down and remained covered up without being able to breathe fresh air. While the issue of how to address unauthorized emigration from Mexico divided the country, the poor treatment of deportees raised concerns that the men were purposely being transported so far from their homes as punishment. An article in *Excélsior* critiqued the lack of response

⁵²⁴ "Disminuye el Paso Ilegal de Braceros a EE.UU," *La Prensa*, Mexico City, 2, 54, August 12, 1956, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵²⁵ "Inspección al Barco que Regresará Braceros Ilegales," *Excélsior*, August 23rd, 1956, 25A – 29A, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵²⁶ "Disminuye el Paso Ilegal de Braceros a EE.UU," *La Prensa*, Mexico City, 2, 54, August 12, 1956, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

from Mexico's political leaders, stating that it did not seem to matter to them if deported wetbacks returned in slave conditions. The author concluded that the most hurtful part of this silence lay in the sharp contrast between Mexico's indifference to its migrants' suffering and the U.S.'s investigation into the issue.⁵²⁷

On August 15th (in the middle of hurricane season), an article in *La Prensa* ominously warned that the situation aboard could turn into a tragedy at any point, especially since the life boats on the ship would only fit a few dozen men.⁵²⁸ Days later, on the same front page that announced that U.S. farmers had asked for 120,000 more braceros, an article in *Excélsior* described how a bracero mutiny aboard the *Mercurio* had ended in tragedy. As the vessel neared the port of Tamaulipas, Tampico with over five hundred kilometers left of the voyage, thirty-seven braceros jumped off the ship, some of whom drowned.⁵²⁹ The story of the ill-fated ship made front-page headlines in newspapers as the country mourned the fate of those who had drowned and disappeared.

The Secretaría de Gobernación issued a statement on the matter that absolved it of any fault: "The return of those braceros, who enter the United States illegally, is not under the country of Mexico's government, but instead is that of the United States' government."⁵³⁰ However, the *Mercurio* was owned by Mexico, had a Mexican captain, and was operated by Mexican crewmembers. The following day, an article included a

⁵²⁷ "Nadie Opina Sobre lo de los Braceros," *Excélsior*, August 17, 2, 5, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵²⁸ "En condiciones inhuman Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.os transportan a Veracruz a los braceros ilegales," *La Prensa*, Mexico City, pp. 2,11, August 15, 1956, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵²⁹ "Motín de Braceros en el "Mercurio," *Excélsior*, August 27th, 1956, 1A-9A, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵³⁰ "Hay Indignación por la Infamia del "Mercurio"," *La Prensa*, August 28th, 1956, 3, 36, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

quote from a politician who denied accusations that that the long trip back to the south of the country functioned as a punishment for deportees. The treatment of these men who lacked bracero contracts correlated with the statements of the Mexican government, which urged migrants not to cross without contracts, a situation that would then mean that they would lack the supposed protections accorded to officially-contracted braceros. In this case, packing deportees aboard a vessel better suited for transporting produce reflects the state's attitude toward those who had disobeyed these warnings. As one headline proclaimed, the difficult passage back was meant to serve as "chastisement for dreamers."⁵³¹ Articles published tragic accounts of the situation for deportees aboard, forced to share the little water they had and buy bread for a dollar, and reported on the efforts of residents in the port city to help the braceros.

La Prensa featured the story of one deportee who had been aboard the *Mercurio*. In the piece, Agustín Barrón Olveda, who became a central figure in the tragedy of the *Mercurio*, detailed his experiences as he traveled north to the border and was then deported as an *espalda mojada*. The ship's captain, Jorge Noval Espinosa had claimed that Barrón Olvera was deathly ill, requiring the ship to make an unplanned stop in Tampico, where the mutiny happened and braceros jumped aboard. As Barrón Olvera explained, however, the stop in Tampico had been due to a mechanical failure that had left the ship without potable water, forcing the men to drink salt water.⁵³²

⁵³¹ "Indignan las Infamias con los Braceros," *La Prensa*, August 28th, 1956, 1, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵³² Jose Angel Aguilar, "Hace un Relato de lo que Pasó un Bracero Deportado," *La Prensa*, August 30, 1956, 2.

His struggles had begun long before boarding the vessel, and the details of his journey to and from the border map the complicated process of both migration and then deportation. For twenty-five days, he and two of his friends had walked and sometimes hitchhiked from Escandón, Mexico City to the border. They were robbed close to Pénajamo, Guanajato, had crossed the Caborca desert in Sonora, and then found work picking cotton for twenty-five cents a kilo. Their meager earnings went to paying for food at the ranch's company store, and the article critiqued how *tiendas de raya* still existed decades after the Revolution. After this, they went to Tijuana and crossed the border at a point where the fence was composed of "only three threads."⁵³³ They headed on foot to San Diego, until migratory agents apprehended them and took them to Chula Vista, and then to a detention center in El Centro, California. From there, they were flown in small, overcrowded planes to Brownsville, Texas, and then sent by bus to McAllen, Texas. During this time, he and his friends recalled, they were kicked and abused. By this time, he was feverish with a severe headache, but after a few days of hospitalization, was deemed healthy enough for deportation. While they wanted to deport him through the McAllen-Reynosa entry point, he asked to be sent on the ship which would leave him closer to Mexico City.

Once aboard the ship in the company of five hundred men, the "diabolical adventure" began. For this trip, each man who still had money on him had been charged nine dollars, Barrón Olveda claimed. As he described, "We were piled up like in a hive, so much so that the ship's rail was very short, it was said that two men fell off of whom we heard nothing else." Soon after, the freezing conditions of the ship (intended for the

⁵³³ Aguilar, "Hace un Relato de lo que Pasó un Bracero Deportado," 16.

preservation of bananas) resulted in a rapid worsening of his condition. As the ship neared Tampico and the captain declared that they would stop, those aboard began to discuss their options. As the article describes, some stated: “From here we’re close to Laredo, we should go by land instead.” Or: “If we go on like this they’ll kill us by hunger.” After considering their options and the situation aboard the *Mercurio*, some of the men aboard began to roll up their pants and jump off. As Barrón Olveda and his two friends who were also aboard the *Mercurio* recalled, the captain and crew only laughed while those aboard watched some of the men drown. Upon disembarking in Tampico, he and his friends took several buses to reach Mexico City. There, *La Prensa* reached out to contact him and sent an ambulance and doctors to his home, after which he was diagnosed with malaria. After pages of descriptions of the terrible conditions aboard the ship, his interview concluded with the statement: “I’ve sworn to never again go.” The article suggested that many Mexicans should think the same, illustrating how coverage of such incidents also meant to discourage emigration.

In the wake of the incident, El Movimiento Cívico Nacional sent a letter to to President Ruiz Cortines asking him to end the Bracero Program, which the group referred to as a “reproach to the homeland.” The statement by the Movimiento stated that this exodus, in which only some braceros returned, made the nation’s dignity suffer, while in the United States, “it is now proverbial that the Mexican is proper for vile work.” The statement was not only signed by the Movimiento, but also associations and organizations representing university professors, medical professionals, and industrial producers. Veracruz’s governor, Marco Alejandro Muñoz, also commented on the serious

problem presented by this emigration, stating all should work to “prevent *bracerismo* from being a drain on the homeland.”⁵³⁴

Not all coverage shamed the government, however. One piece praised a response by an SRE official who refuted the idea that the government could not involve itself in the matter of *espaldas mojadas*: “Legal or illegal, those deportees are, first of all, Mexicans, and if there is something that the Ministry should occupy itself with, it’s exactly about protecting nationals.”⁵³⁵ The Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico announced that it would help with efforts to transport braceros back to their hometowns.⁵³⁶ The ship had transported deportees south, but many were from northern states, and their deportation to southern Mexico made it difficult to get back. Fidel Velasquez, the leader of the CTM declared that its member organizations “are hurt by the way these men are returning back to their land, on a demonic trip.” Nonetheless, he stated that they had unfortunately failed to follow the regulations of the Bracero agreement, implying that the blame lay at their feet for violating the law.⁵³⁷

An oral history with a former U.S. Border Patrol agent revealed his understanding migrants’ perspectives of the boatlift: “That was the one that they dreaded.... I really don’t know just exactly where it originated but it went to Veracruz. Most of them were from the state of Sinaloa, along the border.”⁵³⁸ His comments illustrate the boatlift’s punitive nature and how migrants came to dread it, even before the incident with the

⁵³⁴ Ibid.,” 42.

⁵³⁵ “La Sría de Relaciones en espera de informes,” *La Prensa*, August 29th, 1956, 3, 37, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵³⁶ *Excélsior*, August 17th

⁵³⁷ “Falso que no Acompañen Sacerdotes a Braceros,” *Excélsior*, August 25, 1956, 2,35, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵³⁸ Interview with Ben A. Parker by Douglas V. Meed, 1984, "Interview no. 661," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso

Mercurio. Its infamy had spread so that migrants from the border state, far from Veracruz, knew of it. Additionally, the admission that many of those migrants apprehended and sent via ship to southern Mexico were from Sinaloa illustrates the intent to discipline them. After being deported, perhaps with little money in their pockets, the trip north back to the border region would be long and difficult. As the interview with Agustín Barrón Olvera pointed out, not even the Mexican consul in Port Isabel had attempted to intervene in the matter of migrants' deportation by sea.

One cartoon published days after the incident reflects popular perceptions of Mexico's role in abusing deportees. In the cartoon (pictured below), a hulking man labeled as a *Mercurio* crewmember viciously beats a barefoot man representing *espaldas mojudas*. Given the propensity of the Mexican press to criticize the emigration of so braceros, the critique of Mexico's government after the *Mercurio* incident illustrates the widespread outrage that citizens felt.



Figure 5.1: Cartoon, *La Prensa*.⁵³⁹

The treatment of men aboard the *Mercurio* illustrates the prioritization of deterrence over the safety and well-being of human beings. While braceros faced exploitation and abuse, wetbacks formed a “caste of illegals” whose lives mattered little for officials. However, the treatment of these men beyond the U.S. border represents how these ideas of illegality and deportability continued to place the lives of migrants at risk.

⁵³⁹ Cartoon was published in Mexico City’s newspaper *La Prensa* on August 29, 1956, page 8. Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City, Mexico.

After being deported from the U.S., their difficult trip south served as yet more punishment, this time at the hands of the Mexican state. After the tragedy of the *Mercurio* and the subsequent outrage in Mexico, the boatlifts that transported deportees came to an end, and deportations by plane resumed.⁵⁴⁰ However, deportees and returning migrants continued to face discrimination, violence, and stigma as they arrived in other parts of the nation.

End of the Bracero Program

The last agreement to import Mexican laborers, Public Law 78, was scheduled to end on December 31, 1964, with all workers repatriated less than a week later, on January 5, 1965.⁵⁴¹ While special exemptions meant that some braceros continued to be employed, by 1965, numbers had dropped to only slightly over 10% of the 1964 figure.⁵⁴² Reliance on bracero labor varied dramatically across the country, and even within the southwest, during the decades of the program. While braceros worked in over thirty states, during the period of Public Law 78, they were concentrated in four states on the border: California, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. At certain times of the year, such as the summer and fall harvest, Mexican workers made up ninety-five percent of the foreign agricultural workforce in the U.S. In particular, Texas and California employed the

⁵⁴⁰ Lytle Hernández refers to this idea of a “caste of illegals” in describing the evolution of Border Patrol strategies that targeted Mexican migrants. *Migra!*, 201.

⁵⁴¹ “Importation of Foreign Agricultural Workers: hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, United States Senate, Eighty-ninth Congress, first session on the proposed criteria for the importation of foreign agricultural workers, the difficulties in securing domestic help, and the immediacy of the problem,” January 15-16, 1965: 1.

⁵⁴² U.S. Department of Labor, *Year of Transition* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965): 5-6. Cited in Campbell, “Bracero Migration and the Mexican Economy,” 8. The number dropped to 20,3000 from 178,000

majority of foreign workers. In 1958, these two states employed three out of every four workers contracted from other countries.⁵⁴³ Thus, when the program ended, the agricultural industry had to find a new source of labor, and debates over the end of the program reveal how Mexican migrants had been constructed in the minds of U.S. politicians and agricultural employers as an replenishable source of deportable labor.

In 1965, as Congress heard debates on what the end of the program would mean for growers and others, Paul J. Fannin, the Senator of Arizona, argued before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry that the program benefited both the U.S. and Mexico in several ways. Firstly, he argued that it served as a boon to the Mexican economy “at the grassroots level” (although he did not specify how) and secondly, it “alleviated the serious problem of the illegal entry of Mexican workers into the United States.”⁵⁴⁴ Scholars since then continue to assert that overall, the Bracero Program undoubtedly *increased* unauthorized entry into the U.S. from Mexico. However, the reliance on numbers provided by the INS and the idea that Operation Wetback was a resounding success proved to be influential at the time.

Although agribusiness had a vested interest in maintaining guest work, resentment of foreign workers in the U.S. had built considerably by the 1960s and significantly contributed to the end of Public Law 78 and the end of bracero importation. Surveys by the California State Department of Employment revealed that employers nearly always set the wages they were willing to offer at the price they would pay Mexican migrants.

⁵⁴³ U.S. Department of Labor, *Farm Labor Fact Book* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing office, 1959): 156-158.

⁵⁴⁴ “Statement by Senator Paul J. Fannin Before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry,” *Importation of Foreign Agricultural Workers*, 40.

As Albert Tieburg of the California State Department of Employment argued, “people who wanted to work in agriculture would never be able to support themselves in agriculture as long as we had the Mexican nationals.”

Consequently, Mexican migrants continued to head north to work in agriculture, now without contracts. This actually benefited some wetback workers who now had the ability to move between farms a bit more easily, but it did have a number of drawbacks.

Tieburg summarized this change:

There were certain crops in certain areas where they never used contract nationals but “wetbacks” instead. I knew that’s what would happen after P.L. 78 expired, and that was fine with me because the Mexican national under contract couldn’t organize, he couldn’t seek higher wages, and he couldn’t take any job action at all. He was not a free man; he was a contract worker who could be sent back to Mexico at any time. A wetback, working with other wetbacks, could threaten to walk off the farm and leave the farmer without workers if he wouldn’t pay them a better wage.⁵⁴⁵

For Tieburg, the end of the Bracero Program meant that undocumented workers had the chance to participate in collective bargaining. His statement also illustrates how Mexican migrant laborers had become essential to the agricultural industry.

This system of importing and segregating workers led to the dehumanization of braceros on a number of levels. This extended far beyond the doctor at the Irwindale bracero camp who claimed that the workers had the intelligence of an infant, or employers who housed their workers in horrifying conditions. When the program ended, U.S. agribusiness interests had to devise new ways of keeping expenditures as low as possible. Congressional debates over the matter involved a number of suggestions,

⁵⁴⁵ Oral History with Albert B. Tieburg, Governmental History Documentation Project, Regional History Office, Bancroft Library, 39.

including recruiting workers from areas of the U.S. with high employment rates. However, the arguments for maintaining some sort of guest worker program with Mexico reveal how politicians had come to view Mexican male laborers a faceless source of labor, not as actual humans. The system of guest work had turned braceros into anonymous, disposable, interchangeable bodies.

Thomas H. Kuchel, senator of California, testified in 1965 before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry regarding the “farm labor crisis” which he viewed as a “crucial and tragic problem due to the ending of Public Law 78.”⁵⁴⁶ Despite advances in technology that would increase mechanization in agriculture, farmers would still struggle without access to an ever-expanding pool of temporary, inexpensive labor. As he argued, employers would still use foreign labor, but the program’s regulations regarding the importation of workers would fall by the wayside, making this importation even less organized. Suggestions had been made that workers could be brought in from other areas of the country, which he critiqued for a number of reasons. In a speech he made in October 1964 to explain the possible disastrous consequences of ending the Bracero Program, he explained what the costs would be to American workers traveling from other areas of the country to California to plant and pick crops:

Let us not take fellow human beings and offer them only a few months work each year in the fields of California. What is to happen to them during the remainder of the year? Are they to become welfare burdens on the property taxpayers of my State? Does it make sense to encourage a nomadic way of life even for domestic farmworkers and having them roam [the] various States of the Union seeking employment with all the hardships that such instability and constant uprooting means to their families and especially their children, not to mention themselves. About

⁵⁴⁶ “Importation of Foreign Agricultural Workers: hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry,” 6.

the only people getting ahead in that type of operation are the ones who sell the migrant farmworker the gasoline for his car as he moves from town to town seeking a few weeks employment here and there.⁵⁴⁷

While cognizant of the personal and financial costs that migrant labor posed for American men and their families, he entirely overlooked how Mexican braceros and wetbacks had faced even more risks and dangers. Instead of the risk of becoming “welfare burdens on the property taxpayers,” though, Mexicans could be deported. In this speech, Senator Kuchel concisely illustrates how “fellow human beings” only referred to Americans.

50 Years Later: ATEP and Deportation in the 21st Century

In June 2003, US border authorities began to employ a removal process known as “lateral repatriation” in which migrants apprehended at the border would be transported hundreds of miles away before being deported to Mexico. In the years since then, the US has halted and revived this program, which is now known as the Alien Transfer Exit Program (ATEP) yet not much work has been done to examine what the effects of such a process are for Mexico, especially since many migrants end up in unstable regions with high levels of drug violence. In 2011, then-Secretary of Homeland Security (and current UC President) Janet Napolitano described ATEP as “an ongoing program whereby the Office of Border Patrol, in collaboration with ICE’s Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), moves Mexican nationals apprehended in one Border Patrol Sector to another ERO Area of Responsibility before removing them to Mexico.” “ATEP breaks

⁵⁴⁷ Senator Thomas H. Kuchel, “The Need for Seasonal Farm Labor in California,” from the Congressional Record, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., Oct. 2, 1964, in “Importation of Foreign Agricultural Workers: hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry,”: 9.

the smuggling cycle,” Napolitano added, “by repatriating aliens into regions further east or west of their entry location and, thus, preventing them from immediately coordinating with their smugglers for re-entry.” While newspapers have reported on the lateral repatriation program and its effects, little scholarly work has been done, due largely to the difficulties of tracking down and interviewing deportees. However, one anthropologist who wrote about the program argues that “ATEP should be viewed as an enforcement strategy aimed at *systematically placing migrants in harm’s way* by relocating them geographically and by undermining the resources (i.e. human and social capital) that people have come to rely on for successful (and safer) border crossings.”⁵⁴⁸

This system presents enormous challenges for migrants who find themselves separated from their families and in dangerous and often unknown areas where they face discrimination and the everyday violence produced by the drug war. Additionally, these methods of “removal” present problems for the Mexican government which continues to struggle with how to manage return migration. Examining how deportation procedures affect migrants and communities, and the efforts of the Mexican government to address these problems, illustrates the myriad consequences of transnational labor migration. While the focus is usually on deported individuals, expanding the analysis to look the broader effects of deportation policy helps to illustrate just how destructive these policies can be.

While half a century has passed since the end of the Bracero Program, deportation and return migration continue to present problems for Mexico. A recent study conducted

⁵⁴⁸ Jason De León, “The Efficacy and Impact of the Alien Transfer and Exit Programme: Migrant Perspectives from Nogales, Sonora, Mexico,” *International Migration* 51:2 (2013), 10.

by researchers at the University of Arizona surveyed over 1100 migrants who had been deported to various cities in Mexico. Despite the claims of the US government that these methods promote the safety of migrants by discouraging repeated attempts to cross the border, the study concluded that ATEP had no impact on whether migrants would decide to attempt to cross the border again. Instead, the program resulted in increased vulnerability for migrants who deported to unknown cities and in some cases separated from their families who were also trying to cross.

In addition to transporting migrants hundreds of miles away from the point of apprehension, ATEP also separates male migrants from their family members when authorities detain them as a group. Thus, a family detained while attempting to cross the border at the Arizona/Sonora border could possibly see the father deported in Tamaulipas while the mother and young children end up in Sonora. Compounding the problem, authorities do not inform migrants as to where their family members end up.⁵⁴⁹ For a family that has spent its savings and likely even borrowed money at exorbitant interest rates to pay the fees charged by *coyotes*, or human traffickers, this system might delay the eventual crossing of families, but it also places them in incredibly vulnerable positions.

As Mexico's National Migration Institute reports, over several years approximately one fifth of respondents were deported through ATEP, and one fifth were deported between the hours of 10pm and 5am. Thus, a program that purportedly aims to help protect migrants deported a significant number of them to unknown areas and/or in

⁵⁴⁹ De León, "ATEP: Migrant Perspectives from Mexico," 17.

the middle of the night.⁵⁵⁰ While only men are supposed to be processed through ATEP, both male and female overall are disproportionately sent to the northeastern Tamaulipas which in recent years has been overtaken with violence related to the drug war.⁵⁵¹ In fact, according to Mexico's INM, in 2012, over 114,000 migrants were deported to that state.⁵⁵²

The Washington Office of Latin America reports that now the INM's Grupo Beta (the search and rescue unit) focuses on protecting returning migrants from the violence of the city, rather than on rescuing those who encounter trouble while attempting to cross the border.⁵⁵³ Interestingly, before the increase in drug violence, nearly one third of Mexicans were deported to Ciudad Juárez which has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Now, nearly a third are sent to Tamaulipas, up from only 5% in 2006.⁵⁵⁴

Conclusion

As deportations continue, Mexico struggles with how to address the mass return of its migrants. Today, Mexico's government publicly promotes its efforts to help returning migrants. For example, the program "Migrante: bienvenid@ a la Ciudad de México" (Migrant, welcome to Mexico City) began in 2006 and aims to help deportees

⁵⁵⁰ Jeremy Slack, et al., *In the Shadow of the Wall: Family Separation, Immigration Enforcement and Security. Preliminary Data from the Migrant Border Crossing Survey*, Tucson: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Arizona, 2013: 33.

⁵⁵¹ Nora Hernández, "Siguen deportaciones masivas por Tamaulipas," *Hoy Tamaulipas*, May 19, 2014.

⁵⁵² Instituto Nacional de Migración: Unidad de Política Migratoria, "Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias, 2012," México, 2012: 147. Out of these, 87,000 selected to take part in Mexico's Programa de Repatriación Humana which tries to help migrants communicate with their families to return home.

⁵⁵³ Adam Isaacson and Maureen Meyer, "Border Security and Migration: A Report from South Texas," Washington Office on Latin America, 2013. wola.org

⁵⁵⁴ WOLA report, 12.

and other returning migrants re-establish themselves in Mexico. Under this program, the Secretary of Rural Development and Equality for Communities sets up stations in Mexico City's airport and bus terminals, as well as at major points of interest such as the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Bellas Artes, where government officials and other officials and supporters hand out information and answer questions. In recent years, the government has also introduced a program known as "Repatriación Ordenada y Segura" (Orderly and Safe Repatriation) which was ostensibly designed to help repatriates and deliver them home. However, the program also means that deportees who are sent to border cities and possibly hope to return to the US are promptly removed from cities such as Ciudad Juárez. As a recent article explains, residents fear that repatriates might contribute to crime and instability:

Social and political sectors seek to impede the entry of the deportees practically and discursively or to shorten the stay of those recently repatriated by sending them back to their communities of origin in Mexico. Latching onto the "*Repatriación Ordenada y Segura*" (orderly and safe repatriation), a policy of the Mexican federal government, these social and political forces demand that deportees leave Ciudad Juárez immediately or as soon as possible.⁵⁵⁵

These processes illustrate the multiple processes of resettlement and removal that migrants endure. Instead of the neat pattern illustrated by the idea of circular migration in which migrants return to their hometown and then back to the US various times, these migrants are forcibly removed from the US, sent to dangerous areas of Mexico, and sometimes forcibly removed again.

⁵⁵⁵ Padilla and Coronado, "Migrations and Contradictory Discourses Regarding Repatriations," 202.

As Hector Antonio Padilla and Irasema Coronado write, “These deportees have been expelled three times – first, when they leave their communities of origin in Mexico because they cannot find employment or educational opportunities; the second time is when they are detained in the United States and deported to Mexico; and the third time is when they arrive into the border city to which they have been deported and are “encouraged” to return to their community of origin.”⁵⁵⁶ The situation is particularly difficult for deported migrants who have spent years or even decades in the US and have few remaining family members in Mexico. For them, deportation to faraway cities makes the process of removal only more traumatic and increases the difficulty of obtaining work and becoming stable again, to say nothing of the resentment they face from residents. While the US profits from affordable and deportable labor, the intertwined systems of labor migration and border enforcement wreak havoc on migrants, their families, communities and on Mexico as a whole. Much more than simply a legal process, deportation engenders trauma and violence that reverberate far beyond the border.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion: Post-1965 Deportation, Migration, and Border Enforcement

In October of 1968, just before the Olympics that Mexico would hold, the massacre of student activists in Tlatelolco rocked Mexico. The PRI-dominated government censored newspapers from publishing any mention of its role in the massacre, reflecting a longer history of censorship and oppression. From 1964 to the mid-1980s, Mexico, like many other Latin American nations, found itself embroiled in a “Dirty War” marked by violence, repression, and state control of the press, as well as the emergence of local guerrilla groups.⁵⁵⁷ In Mexico’s national archives, records after this period remain mostly inaccessible and archivists report that many of the documents have been destroyed. Thus, examining post-1964 Mexico presents a number of difficulties, including limited access to sources. However, recent works have begun to explore the history of Mexico-U.S. migration and Mexico’s policies between 1965 and the passage of the Immigration and Reform Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. One recent work argues that after 1965, the Mexican government viewed emigration as a way to permanently rid itself of unwanted, “superfluous” citizens.⁵⁵⁸ Meanwhile, both the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 and IRCA in 1986 led to a change in migration patterns as Mexican migrants began to stay in the United States, rather than return to Mexico. Mexican migrants began to be viewed as

⁵⁵⁷ For more on this period, see: Eds. Fernando Herrera Calderón and Adela Cedillo, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁵⁸ Ana Raquel Minian, “Undocumented Lives: A History of Mexico-U.S. Migration from 1965 to 1986,” (Ph.D. Diss, Yale University, 2012).

permanent settlers, who received legal support from Mexican American organization instead of from Mexican consuls.⁵⁵⁹

The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act facilitated the legalization of Mexican migrants who had been in the U.S. for years and introduced another guest worker system between the U.S. and Mexico. IRCA made amnesty possible for undocumented migrants, and the U.S. subsequently began to experience significant demographic changes as the Latina/o population grew. In response, anti-immigrant sentiment rose precipitously. In California, Proposition 187 forbade undocumented migrants from accessing public services, including health care and public education. While the proposition was later overturned and was never enforced, its anti-Mexican bent pushing the Mexican government to address the issues that could arise from a potential wave of mass return migration. That year, Genaro Borrego Estrada, head of the Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social, assured that in the face of such a “racist and intolerant law,” repatriates in Mexico “had the right to sanitary and health services like any other conational and we have sufficient capacity to provide them this service.”⁵⁶⁰

In 1994, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement lowered tariffs to facilitate trade between the United States, Canada and Mexico. As then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari argued, “the whole point of NAFTA for Mexico is to be able to export goods and not people. That means creating jobs in Mexico.” Instead, NAFTA

⁵⁵⁹ María Balandran-Castillo, “After the Braceros: Mexican and American Immigration Politics, 1964-1986,” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Chicago, 2016). For more on the history of Mexican American organizations and Mexican migration, see Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*.

⁵⁶⁰ Rubén Torres, “Garantiza Borrego Estrada Atención Médica a Todos los Repatriados,” in *Migración Hacia las Fronteras Norte y Sur: Dossier Hemerográfico, 1993-1997, Parte II*, compiled by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, July 1997. Fondo Documental 45/0193, Comisión para el Desarrollo de Pueblos Indígenas, Biblioteca Juan Rulfo, Mexico City, Mexico.

fomented sweeping economic changes that severely affected the agricultural sector, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Mexican agricultural workers. Douglas Massey and Patricia Fernández-Kelly argue that this produced “a lopsided process of development in North America, in which rising capital mobility and growing U.S. investment south of the border coincided with repressive efforts to limit the cross-border movement of Mexicans.”⁵⁶¹ Despite the ostensible closing of the border to migrants, many displaced workers migrated north as recruiters continued to hire workers from Mexico’s interior.⁵⁶² Other migrants followed neighbors or family members who had already traveled to the U.S. One coordinator of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, an organization focused on the rights of Mexico’s indigenous groups, stated, “There are no jobs...and NAFTA drove the price of corn so low that it's not economically possible to plant a crop anymore. We come to the United States to work because there's no alternative.”⁵⁶³

While the rates of deportation of Mexican migrants had remained relatively stable for much of the mid-20th century, these numbers increased at the end of the century as the Latina/o population grew and attention once again turned to Mexican migrants as a threat to American culture and well-being. Samuel P. Huntington’s treatise on the subject became particularly well-known as he viewed Mexican migration as a harbinger of the

⁵⁶¹ Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Douglas Massey, “Borders for Whom? The Role of NAFTA in Mexico-U.S. Migration,” *Annals of the American Academy for Political Science* (March 2007), 105, 99.

⁵⁶² For more on the long history of recruitment, see: Nestor Rodriguez, ““Workers Wanted”: Employer Recruitment of Immigrant Labor,” *Work and Occupations* 31 (November 2004), 453-473.

⁵⁶³ David Bacon, “Displaced People: NAFTA’s Most Important Product,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* (Sept/Oct 2008), 23.

collapse of American society.⁵⁶⁴ However, the Department of Homeland Security strategically conflated the numbers of migrants who returned to their home countries and those formally deported, claiming numbers that exceeded one million per year.⁵⁶⁵ Although the wave of return migration to Latin American countries has risen, the manipulation of these numbers again serves to portray Latin American migrants as deportable and illegal, while positioning U.S. border authorities as a powerful force capable of securing the border.

Current Border Issues

Deportees and returning migrants arriving in Mexico's border cities today experience a very different process as they re-enter the country. A project founded in 1993 and led by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, the National Population Council (CONAPO), and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (STPS), along with a number of other Mexican government agencies, began track migrants entering Mexico via its northern and southern borders. This survey is known as the *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera* (EMIF). The EMIF-Norte tracks Mexican migrants re-entering the country via the U.S.-Mexico border, asking questions regarding the circumstances of their return and how they were deported (if applicable). The questionnaires are available in English or Spanish, reflecting the fact that some deportees and returning migrants have spent most of their lives in the U.S. and prefer to speak English. Migrants are asked about their education, work experience, family, ethnic identity, access to medical care in the

⁵⁶⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Hispanic Challenge," *Foreign Policy* (March/April 2004).

⁵⁶⁵ Jessica M. Vaughn, "Deportation Numbers Unwrapped: Raw Statistics Reveal the Real Story of ICE in Decline," Center for Immigration Studies (October 2013).

U.S., experiences with crossing the border, and plans after arriving in Mexico. In total, the survey consists of thirteen pages of questions. For researchers of migration, this data offers tremendous opportunities to explore the nature of deportation and return migration today, ranging from the specific amount migrants paid coyotes to cross, to questions relating to discrimination and workplace conditions.⁵⁶⁶ The existence of the survey also reflects how, contrary to stated goals of U.S. border authorities, the border has not been closed. The U.S. economy continues to rely on both the labor of undocumented migrants and on legal guest workers imported through the H-2A and H-2B visa programs.

While *módulos* at border entry points now survey deportees, provide information, and (at the Chaparral station in Tijuana) register migrants with health conditions, these procedures have a very recent history as the Mexican government slowly accommodated the unending waves of deportees. Despite more attention by the Mexican government and researchers to the subject, the process of forced removal remains a traumatic experience for migrants. Their struggles after re-entry echo those of migrants discussed in this dissertation. In border cities such as Tijuana, many deportees remain effectively exiled from society in slums where intravenous drug use and prostitution are much more common than in the general population. Rates of tuberculosis are far higher in border cities than elsewhere in the country, reflecting the difficulty of controlling a disease across borders.⁵⁶⁷ As the director of the Binational Center for Human Rights summarized

⁵⁶⁶ <http://www.colef.mx/emif/eng/cuestionariosnte.php>

⁵⁶⁷ A number of studies discuss health issues in the 1980s and 1990s in *U.S.-Mexico Border Health: Issues for Regional and Migrant Populations*, Eds. J. Gerard Power and Theresa Byrd (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998). For more recent work on the subject, see: Steffanie A. Strathdee, et al., "Differential Effects of Migration and Deportation on HIV Infection among Male and Female Injection Drug Users in Tijuana, Mexico," *PLoS ONE* 3 (2008), e2690; Victoria Ojeda, et al., "Associations Between Migrant Status and Sexually Transmitted Infections Among

of the deportee crisis in Tijuana, “When they enter the city, that’s the problem. They are like undocumented migrants in their own country. They often don’t have Mexican identity documents. There is no drug treatment for them or job assistance. They have no future here.”⁵⁶⁸ In addition to these overwhelming challenges, residents also discriminate against deportees and associate them with violence and theft.

In the United States, meanwhile, investors have found other ways to profit from the illegality of migrants. An increasing number of migrants spend anywhere from days to months in immigrant detention centers, and the Department of Homeland Security has more than doubled these numbers within the last decade to reach near half a million per year.⁵⁶⁹ However, these statistics also reflect an increase in for-profit detention centers, paralleling the rise in privately-owned prisons. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, for-profit contractors provided the U.S. Department of Justice with sixteen thousand beds per day, facilitating an increase in the number of migrants detained for lengthy periods of time.⁵⁷⁰ Today, an increasing number of these beds are reserved for

Female Sex Workers in Tijuana, Mexico,” *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 85 (2009), 420-426; K Brouwer, et al., “Deportation Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Its Relation to Drug Use Patterns and Accessing Care,” *Journal of Immigrant Minority Health* 11 (2009),1-6.

⁵⁶⁸ Randal C. Archibold, “As Mexican Border Town Tries to Move On, Some Are Stuck in Limbo,” *New York Times*, November 27, 2014.

⁵⁶⁹ “Annual Detention Population,” *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics.

⁵⁷⁰ According to a report from the Department of Justice, “The INS relies on private contractors because it lacks the funds to build and operate additional facilities and, like the [U.S. Marshals Service], it sometimes has difficulty obtaining space from state and local governments. According to an INS official, the INS is seeking to increase the number of beds by more than 1,500 in its private contract facilities in Houston, TX; Laredo, TX; and Seattle, WA.” “The Department of Justice’s Reliance on Private Contractors for Prison Services,” U.S. Department of Justice, Audit Report 01-16, July 2001.

immigrant detention centers (3,700 alone in California).⁵⁷¹ Troublingly, the existence of for-profit detention centers requires contracts that mandate a minimum number of beds filled per day. Researchers argue that this booming business contributes to an “immigration industrial complex” that “functions as an economy of power that works to *manage* the existing system and discourages fundamental reform.”⁵⁷² Thus, immigrant illegality continues to serve as a source of profit not only for the employers that rely on the vulnerability of deportable workers, but also for the complex system of federal and private interests that profits from their detention and deportation.

⁵⁷¹ Patrick McGreevy, “‘It’s a nightmare inside’: Bill would place new restrictions on private immigrant detention centers,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2016.

⁵⁷² Roxanne Lynne Doty and Elizabeth Shannon Wheatley, “Private Detention and the Immigration Industrial Complex,” *International Political Sociology* (2013), 426-443.

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