

“Illegals”:  
An Examination of U.S. Immigration Policy and  
Public Discourses Regarding Mexican Migration into the  
United States from 1942-1964

by

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*To all the people I met in Arizona who pushed me to keep asking questions*

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## Introduction

Tucson was starting to get chillier that night. Up until this point, I had been entirely prepared for the weather, in wardrobe and mindset. (“Football practice was never cancelled until it hit 125 degrees,” I remember an Arizonian friend warning me). But somehow thinking that the desert would be scorching hot for the entire semester, I had left all of my jackets back on the East Coast.

The night I met Luz, I was shivering sweater-less in the back of a blue Honda Accord. Everything about her captivated me: her leather boots, her sassy hair, her knitted scarf, the way she pronounced the ‘u’ in her name, and the way she moved her hands, swanlike. From the start, I felt both mesmerized and terrified, wanting to feel the electricity of her presence but also wanting to avoid getting bulldozed by her unapologetic Chicana feminist thoughts.

Just a few hours earlier, I had received a message from Elisa inviting me along for the ride. “Hey Mel! We’re going to see *Papers*, the new documentary about the DREAM Act. Come with us?” That’s how my life was unfolding those days. Driving across Arizona with strangers, constantly delving deeper into thornier questions, knowing that I just had to have faith that all of this—five months of living and working inside the zone of influence of the Mexican-United States border—might lead me to a wiser, more holistic understanding of America’s contemporary immigration issues.

On the car ride home, it was just Luz and me in the backseat. She carried herself so boldly; every word out of her mouth came with fierceness and intention. And I, the awkward newcomer in unfamiliar surroundings, tried hard just to listen and take her words in.

I sat up, leaned forward, trying to match her confidence. “What did you think of the documentary?” I asked.

Her response was quick. “I think the DREAM Act is just another way to discipline brown people into fitting norms of white hegemony.” I had a hunch that she kept the seminal Chicana feminist texts of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa close to her on her bookshelf. (My hunch was confirmed a few weeks later at dinner).

She continued, “It’s a way to make brown people feel that they need to be affirmed by the institutions of academia and the military to be human beings. Two major institutions created by white people and maintained by white people to keep white people in power.”

I kept silent. I agreed with her to some extent, but I also knew that the reality of these institutions was more nuanced, more complicated than the one conveyed by her suggestion that white people have all the power and brown people have none. But my response was incredibly weak. I think I just smiled and nodded. I had no idea how to engage in this conversation.

I didn’t immediately challenge Luz’s views. I carry my own frustrations with the academy: the social inequities and inaccessibility to higher education. During my first two years of college, upon realization of my own implications in perpetuating educational inequalities, late Olin nights were often filled with guilt. I thought to myself: “The walls of this library are high and plated in gold. The languages of these theories only make sense to a select few who can afford to pay for a translator.” Even upon starting research for this project, I held my grudges tightly, angered at the fact that academia is often regarded as the primary avenue to becoming a person of

“worth.”

But in a region so emotionally, politically and economically strained by controversies of immigration and undocumented peoples, it seemed to me that the DREAM Act—a pathway to higher education for undocumented young people—would be a positive change for migrant communities. To what extent was I allowed to criticize an institution that could provide opportunities and benefits to an otherwise restricted life?

For the rest of my time in Tucson, Luz would be the one to push me out of my fear of engaging in conflict and strong opinions; she would be the one to push me to formulate my thoughts more clearly and to be more outspoken about them, especially when disagreeing with *her* opinions. My tendency to compromise or stay silent did not satisfy her.

“Mel, you are a strong woman of color,” she said to me one night at the back of a café. “You cannot remain silent. Especially here.”

I know that I will never be as radical as Luz. But I hope that I will someday be as confident in my opinions as she is. This work is largely influenced by the early car ride conversation with Luz about the politics of the DREAM Act. My questions, thoughts and frustrations all come from my painful silence after her comment about the ways in which “brown people are being disciplined to fit norms of white hegemony.” I understand that, like most things in life, there is much more nuance in the reality of the situation.

Being among activists and politicians reminded me that it is not in my nature to be loud and angry to conquer others in moral debates. However, feeling the weight

of other people's hurt, frustration, fear, disappointment and hope also reminded me that it is my responsibility as a witness to sift through the many perspectives from Arizona and to form my own opinions.

This work is my response and my gratitude to Luz, for always pushing me to be a part of the conversation.

1.  
**The Discursive Construction of “Illegal” Immigrants**

After reading about Arizona’s controversial immigration policies in newspapers for over a year, I decided to spend the fall semester of my sophomore year in Tucson. What began as my desire to talk to the people most impacted by SB 1070 – a state law that would give border patrol agents the authority to ask any “suspicious persons” for identification – and the ethnic studies cuts in the Arizona educational system, gradually became a desire to understand how “illegal immigrants” are constructed, as persons, in public discourse in the United States.

In order to gain a variety of perspectives about the controversial presence of undocumented migrants in the United States, I spoke to people from many different walks of life: migrant laborers, border patrol agents, immigration judges, politicians, student organizers, cattle ranchers, queer activists, detainees, university professors, local storeowners, pesticides researchers and farmers. Quite naively, I had hoped that gaining new perspectives would allow me to leave Arizona with comprehensive solutions to “The Immigration Problem.” But the more I questioned, the further away I strayed from digestible answers.

My collection of interviews became a never-ending blame game. The activists blamed the border patrol agents for violence. The border patrol agents blamed the migrants for crossing. The migrants blamed the law for injustice. The judges blamed the politicians for inaction. The farmers blamed the consumers for demanding cheaper tomatoes. My attempt to unveil the “source” of contemporary immigration issues seemed futile.

At the end of the day, after having spent a semester “in the field” and another

semester immersed in text-based immigration rhetoric, I will admit that I am no closer to any grand suggestion for comprehensive immigration reform. The best I can do is to illustrate the historical and contemporary complexities at the border, as they have been unveiled to me.

Luz's frustration with how education is seen as a way through which "illegal" immigrants can be "redeemed" to full personhood continues to resonate with me. I still do not believe that dissolving all semblances of academia or the military will be the answer to racial and class-based power struggles. But I am frustrated with the extent to which the language of the "productive immigrant" is used, relentlessly it seems, on all sides of the immigration debate to measure one's "worthiness" of remaining in the United States. Whether it is in political rhetoric, newspaper articles, interviews with experts, legal texts, or advocacy reports, "citizenship" seems to have been constructed as the grand prize of personhood for undocumented immigrants and education-for-economic-contribution as the primary means to becoming a "full person."

During the months I spent in Arizona, I heard it said often: "Arizona is the Birmingham of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." The country's eyes turned towards Tucson as the symbolic battleground of civil rights for the next demographic: Central and Latin American migrants crossing the Mexico- United States border. Activists and politicians on all sides, fight with program cuts and policy changes to set the new precedent for immigrant rights. For me, being in Tucson last year was to be on the border of a significant national moment of rapidly shifting sociopolitical frontiers. However, bike rides through El Barrio Viejo could never tell me all the stories that

were woven deeply into the streets.

Leaving Tucson has allowed me the opportunity to zoom out and understand these immigration issues more broadly, both geographically and historically speaking. The origin of this senior essay comes from a drive to understand Arizona within a larger historical context, to glean any insight into how the immigration issues on the Mexico-US border came to be *so* violent and politically charged.

This essay is a close examination of a disturbing period of U.S. immigration policy between the years 1942 and 1964. In direct reaction to the needs of the American economy, factions of the United States government authorized two contradictory programs during that time period: one bringing Mexican nationals *into* the United States and one pushing them *out*. By analyzing the “inclusive” “Bracero” Program (Public Law 45), the “exclusive” Operation “Wetback” and historical accounts from the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, I will focus on the ways in which public discourses homogenized and reduced the personhood of Mexican laborers to their capacity to work as laboring bodies, regardless of their immigration status.

I draw upon Nicholas De Genova’s theories<sup>1</sup> on the construction of migrant “illegality” in order to bring attention to the inconsistent, and seemingly arbitrary, nature with which the categories of “illegal” and “legal” were applied to Mexican nationals from 1942-1964. I argue that these inconsistencies in upholding immigration law correlated directly with the labor needs of agricultural farmers and a

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<sup>1</sup> De Genova, Nicholas P. “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31. (2002): 419-447. Print.

migrant laborer's potential for economic contribution. By pointing out the hypocrisy and corruption that occurred in immigration law half a century ago, I aim to deconstruct notions of migrant "illegality" and to introduce alternative ways of navigating inconsistencies in the contemporary immigration debate. Although I acknowledge that academia and farm labor are very different in racial and class-based implications, I have found that both are discussed heavily in the language of "productivity." In contemporary discourse, both college and farm labor are depicted as institutions through which undocumented immigrants can best contribute to the national job market's specific needs and consequently "redeem" their "crimes" of existing in the country without permission.

### **"Illegal"**

In its essence, the word "illegal" is simply a linguistic skeleton, a specific arrangement of letters and sounds. The first human beings who created the word probably pronounced it differently each time, molding the tongue in different contortions to try it on for size. Taken literally, the word "illegal" is an adjective used to describe an action that is forbidden by the law. However, through repeated usage, the word "illegal" has become a noun used to describe an immigrant whose presence in the United States is unlawful. The shift from the usage of "illegal" from an adjective to a noun is significant. While the former marks an *action* as outside the bounds of social acceptability, the latter marks a person's *entire being* as forbidden. The common usage of the term 'illegal alien' or 'illegal immigrant' automatically

implies that the very existence of an unauthorized migrant in America is unlawful.<sup>2</sup> By crossing the border without authorization or by overstaying a visa, a transformation occurs, where the personhood of the migrant is automatically criminalized.

Nicholas De Genova argues that the “illegality” of the undocumented migrant is a political identity and constructed concept, reified through daily practices. Without the existence of a state that defines the parameters of what constitutes “legality,” a person could not be described as “illegal.” It is necessarily a relational identity with the nation-state, inscribed onto a person by the nation-state.<sup>3</sup>

On a day-to-day basis, their illegality may be irrelevant to most of their activities, only becoming an issue in certain contexts... Much of the time they are undifferentiated from those around them, but suddenly... legal reality is superimposed on daily life.<sup>4</sup>

Hereafter, I approach the concept of “illegality” as an outer-garment of sorts. A coat or sweater that is “superimposed on daily life,” but is more of a label and a covering than an essential part of the human. The outer-garment, unlike skin or bone, can be “irrelevant” in most contexts; one does not need a sweater when it is hot outside.

De Genova argues that conducting research on undocumented migrants as a naturalized group works to “perpetuate a rather egregious kind of epistemic violence

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<sup>2</sup> Garcia, Charles. “Why ‘illegal immigrant’ is a slur.” *CNN*. 6 July 2012. Web. 9 Dec. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> De Genova, Nicholas P. “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31. (2002): 419-447. Print. 422.

<sup>4</sup> Corcoran, Mary. *Irish Illegals: Transients Between Two Societies*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993. 144-151. Print.

on the social reality of every life for those migrants.”<sup>5</sup> By continuing to write about undocumented migrants as an objectively determined category of anthropological study, a writer “becomes an agent in the aspect of the everyday production of migrant ‘illegality’ –in effect, an accomplice to the discursive power of immigration law.”<sup>6</sup> I admit that De Genova destabilized and then illuminated my own conceptions of “illegality.” I acknowledge that, in this essay, I run the risk of perpetuating the notion that to study “undocumented” or “illegal” subjects is to study an objectively determined and bound demographic. Therefore, I state clearly that I approach “illegality” as a transient legal identity, very much like my metaphorical sweater that one (under political force) can take on and off. The sweater does not permanently define the body, but it unavoidably identifies and delimits the human in the moment she wears it. To illustrate an example of a transient identity of “illegality,” I acknowledge that many of the Mexican nationals affected by the Bracero Program and Operation Wetback could very possibly have fluctuated between the two categories of “legal” and “illegal” at some point in their lives.

*Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1954: “Officials of the United States government have been dealing with... the problem of transient agricultural laborers. A man caught as an illegal entrant or ‘wetback’ could become a legal immigrant by hopping across the border and hopping back again...”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> De Genova, Nicholas P. “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31. (2002): 419-447. Print. 422.

<sup>6</sup> De Genova, Nicholas P. “Migrant...” 423.

<sup>7</sup> “Bracero-Wetback Problem is Serious.” *Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 28, 1954): A4. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

As seen by this statement in the *Los Angeles Times*, the social categories of “legal” and “illegal” disintegrate when the potential to fluctuate between categories can be achieved as erratically as “hopping across the border and “hopping back again.” I navigate this ethical dilemma by deriving methodological inspiration from Susan B. Coutin’s ethnography of Salvadoran legalization struggles. Coutin acknowledges her political implication in imposing legal identities on her subjects.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, she is explicit in her characterization of the research as “an ethnography of a legal process rather than of a particular group.”<sup>9</sup>

In analyzing legal texts and widely circulated newspaper articles, I shift my focus away from the “undocumented migrant” himself. Instead, one could think of my essay as an ethnography of the *language* used by socially influential texts to describe the demographic of Mexican nationals that cross the Mexico-United States border for the purpose of working. In doing so, the process of constructing migrant “illegality” becomes a “distinctly anthropological critique of nation-states and their immigration policies, as well as of the broader politics of nationalism, nativism and citizenship.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Coutin, Susan Bibler. *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993. Print. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Coutin, Susan Bibler. *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants’ Struggle for U.S. Residency*. Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. Mich. Press, 2000. Print. 23.

<sup>10</sup> De Genova, Nicholas P. “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31. (2002): 419-447. Print. 423.

## 2. The “Bracero” Program: 1942-1954

The “Emergency Mexican Farm Labor Supply Program,” nicknamed the “Bracero” Program, was designed by Congress, and agreed upon by the Mexican government, as a temporary measure to meet the needs of the labor shortage of World War II. Between the years of 1942 and 1964, the United States government issued 4.6 million “bracero” contracts,<sup>11</sup> granting Mexican nationals permission to come to the United States for the sole purpose of aiding America’s economy. As stated by immigration scholar Manuel García y Griego:

It can be argued without exaggeration that the Bracero Program helped to establish the major contours of modern Mexican migratory flows and to create many of the economic, political, and cultural issues that dominate debate over immigration at the present time. By the time the controversial program reached its peak in the late 1950s, it had become an institutionalized feature of U.S. and Mexican agriculture.<sup>12</sup>

With a large portion of the American workforce at war overseas in the 1940s, Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho to agree upon an emergency contract-labor program in order to supplement labor and production needs for agricultural and wartime products.

From earliest documentation of the program, the language very explicitly and unashamedly acknowledged that the purpose of the Bracero Program was to ensure “that a permanent labor pool be formed at Mexicali [region near the border], upon

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<sup>11</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 49.

<sup>12</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers...” 45.

which the United States could draw.”<sup>13</sup> On March 12, 1943, Congress released a house report that outlined the provisions of the “Bracero” Program. The report was entitled: *Appropriation to Assist in Providing a Supply and Distribution of Farm Labor*. By the fall of 1942, the country was still at war, there was an anticipated food shortage, and the agricultural sector had lost approximately 1,600,000 workers to the armed forces and other war industries.<sup>14</sup> Out of desperation and fear of an “impending national disaster,” Congress proposed “the recruitment, importation and distribution of approximately 50,000 Mexican laborers.”<sup>15</sup>

It is crucial to illustrate the *desperation* with which the United States government desired the Mexican laborer. The following passage demonstrates the extent to which the “importation” of Mexican nationals was justified as a patriotic war effort.

The situation is critical and impending. . . Unless agricultural producers can be assured of adequate help, there is grave danger that our national food effort, crucial as it is, may suffer irreparable diminution with consequent disastrous effects upon our national economy and a lowering of the morale and effectiveness of the fighting fronts.<sup>16</sup>

America’s long history of dependency on the labor of migrants is undeniable.

In contemporary immigration discourses, the dependency tends to be much more

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<sup>13</sup> “Bracero-Wetback Problem is Serious.” *Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 28, 1954): A4. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>14</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print. 2.

<sup>15</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation...* 4.

<sup>16</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation...* 3.

taboo, which is why the blatant cry for help from the United States Congress in 1943 astounds me. There are statements of the same urgent tone sprinkled throughout the report, supported by staggering statistics of how detrimental the labor shortage could have been.

The production of agricultural commodities for the calendar year 1943 is to meet a need, which exceeds that of the year 1942 –the greatest production in our national history... The Department [of Agriculture] estimates that 3,500,000 to 4,000,000 additional workers will be needed on the farms in the peak months.<sup>17</sup>

The House Report of the “Bracero” Program constructed the Mexican national as a laboring body whose sole purpose was to work for the American war effort and prevent the impending agricultural crisis. The recruitment and transportation of Mexicans was described with the same language that one would use to ship cargo and other non-human entities. The following excerpts<sup>18</sup> illustrate the ways in which the language deployed in this congressional document constructs Mexican nationals as a homogenous demographic that is primarily characterized by its productive characteristics. [*Emphasis Added*]

(a) The appropriation is designed to assist in *recruiting, transporting and distributing* such part of the requirements for farm labor (1).

(b) Provision is also made... to the Farm Security Administration for *importing workers* from Mexico (6).

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<sup>17</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print. 3.

<sup>18</sup> All excerpts borrowed from: United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print.

(c) *Farm labor supply* has been under discussion for too long a time without adequate steps being taken to cope with it (3).

(d) Some work of this nature has already been undertaken... as a Government project in the solution of the *agricultural manpower* problem (8).

In (a) and (b), I emphasize verbs that are most often utilized when shipping masses of cargo. In (c) and (d), we see *farm labor supply* and *agricultural manpower*, objectified collective nouns, used to describe the ambiguously quantified conglomeration of Mexican nationals that will presumably be relieving the American agricultural labor shortage.

In review, we see the 1943 “Bracero” Program characterized by two major elements: (1) the urgent language of dependency on “farm labor supply” to avert a national food crisis and (2) the dehumanizing language of Mexican nationals as “importable cargo.” The combination of these two elements led farmers to disregard the regulations and hire thousands of “illegal” laborers to work their farms in order to ensure consistent access to a “cheap” reserve of labor. I will support these claims in later analysis of historical newspaper articles, but it is important to discuss the implications of the farmers’ desperation for workers, the dehumanizing language, and the farmers’ willingness to disregard the laws for economic benefit.

From this legal document alone, we see how the general categories of “legal” and “illegal” begin to unravel. If the Mexican nationals coming across the border to work are held to the strict standards of law abidance, I argue that the farm employers and the “Bracero” report writers must be held to the same, if not higher, standards. One cannot pick and choose when a law should and should not apply. Arbitrary law enforcement defeats the purpose of having law in the first place.

I use the text of the “Bracero” Report to foreshadow and provide context for

how the combination of desperation and dehumanization led farm employers to disregard the social categories of “legal” and “illegal” when hiring workers. For many growers who had already begun planting and harvesting for the 1943 agricultural season, finding whatever means necessary to ensure a successful crop season did not abide by the law of the State, only the law of economics and of Nature.

The committee is cognizant of the importance of an adequate supply of farm labor at the right day and in the areas and in the areas that will require it. Farm operations are largely governed by the laws of nature. There can be no evasions, court orders, stays, appeals or postponements in the operation of these laws. They are immutable and inexorable. Farm labor either must be on hand when Nature decrees the time or the national food supply will suffer.<sup>19</sup>

The categories of “legal” and “illegal” also seem to not apply to the constructors of the “Bracero” House Report. The authors of the “Bracero” document used momentum from the patriotic war effort in order to permit, or at least not prohibit, exploitation of the Mexican laborers. It seems as though the authors used the instability of wartime America to authorize a social fabric in which the stringency and ethicality of the law can be lifted. This report is disturbingly blatant about how it would actively not prohibit the exploitation and substandard treatment of the laborers contracted under the “Bracero” Program.<sup>20</sup> [*Emphasis Added*]

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<sup>19</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print. 8.

<sup>20</sup> All excerpts borrowed from: United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print. 7-8

The committee has incorporated a provision prohibiting this appropriation... from being used directly or indirectly to fix, regulate, or impose minimum wages or housing standards, to regulate hours of work, or to impose or enforce collective-bargaining requirements or union membership with respect to any agricultural labor...

The committee regrets that inclusion of such a provision is necessary. Some of the practices at the inception of the program gave farmers and farm organizations... reason to believe that these practices would result in a critical situation between farm employers and farm labor which would not harmoniously promote the ends sought for food production.

The committee feels that this provision will not interfere with the Mexican-United States agreement.

The committee has also denied funds for the investigations of farm wages... The necessary data should be readily obtainable without further funds or much research. These studies... do not impress the committee as having any great substantial value as a Government project in the solution of the agricultural manpower problem.

We are at war and frustrations, avoidable delays and unnecessary requirements are inexcusable.

I believe that it is of the utmost importance to shed light upon the way America's lawmakers seemingly disregarded the categories of "lawful" and "unlawful," "right" and "wrong" for the sake of ensuring economic, agricultural, and political success. Although this document was constructed almost 70 years ago in a very different sociopolitical climate, I argue that the justification for "using Mexican labor" in 1940s wartime America set the precedent for many of the inconsistencies that happen in immigration law enforcement today. Most often then not, a migrant's ability to work and productively contribute to America's economy is what allows law enforcement authorities to turn a blind eye to those labeled "illegal."

## **Early Depictions of “Bracero” Laborers**

On May 11, 1943, regulations were issued authorizing Mexican laborers waiting at the border to enter for a period of one year. The formalized recruitment and “distribution” process required that Mexicans first apply to the Mexican government as “bracero” candidates. The applications were given to Department of Labor representatives, who, acting as agents for employers, “selected those they thought fit for agricultural work.”<sup>21</sup> Next, Immigration and Naturalization Service officers took fingerprints and documentation for the accepted candidates and transported the candidates to U.S. contracting services at the border. “Candidates were then screened by U.S. Public Health Service and were left to be considered by visiting employers and their agents.”<sup>22</sup>

The “Bracero” bill allotted \$26,100,000 for “recruitment, transportation, subsistence, protection, shelter, health and medical and burial services” specifically for the “adequate supply of workers for the production and harvesting of agricultural commodities.”<sup>23</sup> Depending on whether one uses Mexican or US statistical sources, the average number of contract workers that entered per year during 1943- 1946 was

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<sup>21</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Galarza, Ernesto. *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*. Charlotte, NC: McNally and Loftin, 1964. 82-83. Print.

<sup>23</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print

49,000 or 82,000. The wartime program of formal recruitment represented the beginning of a process Ernesto Galarza calls “managed migration.”<sup>24</sup>

I draw from a collection of 50 newspaper articles spanning the 1940s, 50s and 60s in order to glean a more longitudinal understanding of the waxing and waning patterns of language used to depict the “Mexican laborer” in the national imaginary. In analyzing the discursive constructions of the “Mexican laborer,” I also scrutinize the constructions of America as “the giver” and the “Mexican laborer” as “the receiver.”

On February 7, 1954, the *Los Angeles Times* printed an article entitled “Bracero Only Asks a Chance to Work: Harvest Labor in U.S. Offers a Way Out of Poverty to Independence. Writer Bill Drudge reports:

Juan Garcia became a newspaper headline all across America last week. There are thousands of him, the John Smiths of Mexico. They come, legally or illicitly, into this country every year to do the job of picking the crops of this rich nation. They are called braceros- Spanish for field worker.

They come with hope. For often they leave behind the crushing poverty of Mexico. And they come with the dash, the daring, the spirit of adventure that is the inheritance of the Mexican.

Here, they solve a great American problem. For their northern cousins lack the physique, the native ability and the desire to do the work which Juan Garcia yearns for.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Galarza, Ernesto. *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*. Charlotte, NC: McNally and Loftin, 1964. 82-83. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Dredge, Bill. “Bracero Asks Only a Chance to Work.” *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 7, 1954): B1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

In Drudge's painfully racist and patronizing opening, he actively stripped all Mexican nationals of their personal identities and homogenized them under one collective existence: "Juan Garcia." Drudge described all "Juan Garcias" as having the same path and purpose: to escape the "crushing poverty" of Mexico and to find hope in America through picking crops for "this rich nation." For the entirety of this article, all Mexican nationals are continuously referred to as "Juan," flattening every nuance in personality, life story, aspirations, and the like, that exists in any individual. In the last statement, Drudge relied on tropes of biological determinism to justify why "Juan" is more "naturally" suited in physique, ability and desire to work and solve a "great American problem."

In contrast to the "Bracero" House Report's expression of farmer desperation for Mexican labor, Bill Dredge expressed a reversed sentiment, in which the Mexican laborer was desperate for the chance to work and make money in America. "Juan" acts as the "receiver" of America's "gift" of providing the opportunity to work. As seen in title of the article, the United States "offers way out of poverty to independence."

Embedded in the article is a black and white photograph of the United States from the Mexico side of border. In the caption, America was described as the **PROMISED LAND** of high wages<sup>26</sup> and the Mexican national peers over the gates, yearning to enter and harvest crops. "He cannot understand why the border gates are closed to him and other times he is allowed to cross."

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<sup>26</sup> Dredge, Bill. "Bracero Asks Only a Chance to Work." *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 7, 1954): B1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

Juan walks from his home in Mexico to the border. Or he sells his last cow to pay rail passage. When he gets to the line, he wants work- the work he has been promised in this country. He wants it- he needs it- or he must go hungry, perhaps starve.<sup>27</sup>

Drudge alluded to religious themes of leaving one's country behind to search for divine promise. In the Hebrew bible, the "Promised Land," also known as the "Holy Land," is the land given to the Israelites by God, which "faces the entrance to the spiritual world, the sphere of existence that lies beyond the physical world known to us."<sup>28</sup> The religious imagery used in the newspaper caption is undeniable; America was depicted as a land of promise, "Juan" yearned to leave his country to enter in order to survive or achieve some myth of salvation.

Most commonly, Mexican laborers were described as desperate for America's "gift" of work and promise. In reality, Mexican workers and American farm employers have always been engaged in a mutually dependent relationship, with both parties offering resources to the other. However, the history of co-dependence is rarely expressed in immigration discourse.

### **Simultaneous Flows of "Illegal" Migration**

Throughout all 22 years of the Bracero Program's existence, "formally" contracted migration was consistently accompanied by "illegal" migration flows into

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<sup>27</sup> Dredge, Bill. "Bracero Asks Only a Chance to Work." *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 7, 1954): B1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Schweid, Eliezer. *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny*. Farleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1985. 56.

the United States. Within weeks of negotiating the Bracero Agreement, tens of thousands of unemployed and underemployed Mexicans learned of the U.S. work opportunities and traveled to the recruitment center in Mexico City to be formally contracted.<sup>29</sup>

People throughout Mexico, particularly those from the central region with the largest population and the nation's lowest agricultural wage rate, found that the economy of their home area could not provide them with adequate work to support their families.

When braceros were asked why they had left Mexico for the United States they generally responded that they left because they and their families were starving and that their salaries remained low while the prices for subsistence goods continued to soar.<sup>30</sup>

However, local authorities only selected a narrow demographic of Mexican nationals as eligible candidates for the Bracero program. "Many poor Mexicans, who were too young or too old, too sick, or female, were turned away by Mexican authorities."<sup>31</sup> For poor Mexicans, therefore, labor migration to the United States was often a crime; their inability to pay U. S. immigration fees and/or pass literacy exams often forced them to surreptitiously cross the border in violation of U. S. immigration

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<sup>29</sup> Hernández, Kelly Lytle. "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37:4. (Winter, 2006): 421-444. Print. 425.

<sup>30</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. Print. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Galarza, Ernesto. *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*. Charlotte, NC: McNally and Loftin, 1964. 82-83. Print. 58.

law.”<sup>32</sup>

Disappointed by the limits of the Bracero Program, thousands of poor Mexicans headed to the U.S. Mexico border, where they crossed the border without authorization from the Mexican government or sanction from the U.S. Government.<sup>33</sup> Because many unauthorized migrants entered the United States by swimming across the Río Grande, “illegal” migrants were labeled with the racial slur: “wetbacks.”

Many farmers contributed to the migration “pull factors” by welcoming “wetback labor” due to the “illegal alien’s” willingness to work for less money. “From the earliest appearance of Mexican “wetbacks” on the railroad and farms of the Southwest, Anglos commented on their seeming docility, and employers cheerfully contemplated the benefits of having an easily manipulated labor supply.”<sup>34</sup>

I take a moment to pause from historical analysis of unauthorized migration in 1943 in order to step back to discuss the phenomenon of “illegal immigration” in general.

During my time in Arizona, when tackling the philosophical and moral aspects of border issues, I struggled profoundly with the “dead-end” argument of “illegality.” The common argument: “At some point in time, someone [who crossed the border without permission] did something bad. They broke the law. These people

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<sup>32</sup> Hernández, Kelly Lytle. “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954.” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37:4. (Winter, 2006): 421-444. Print.” 425.

<sup>33</sup> Hernández, Kelly Lytle. “The Crimes and Consequences...” 425.

<sup>34</sup> Reisler, Mark. “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 25.

are still lawbreakers, and –by definition—illegal immigrants.”<sup>35</sup> As soon as some variation of this opinion was made, I fell silent, unable to prove this wrong and continue defending my stances.

A year later, I offer a more nuanced understanding of migrant “illegality” that shifts the focus away from the “illegal immigrant” and places the scrutiny on the larger sociopolitical system that created the defined the parameters of “legal” and “illegal” in the first place. “The law defines the parameters of its own operations, engendering the conditions of possibility for ‘legal’ as well as ‘illegal’ practices.”<sup>36</sup> An individual’s action of crossing the Mexico-US border without permission is not inherently “illegal” without the discourses and consequences surrounding the action that define it as such. In the context of 1943 immigration law, I suggest that the concept of “illegality” was constructed by the collection of actions and discourses performed by the farmers, the lawmakers, the presidents, the border patrol agents and the migrants *alike*.

Susan Coutin draws relies on a Foucauldean conception of power in her understanding of “immigration law as more than legal codes, government policies and bureaucratic apparatuses.”<sup>37</sup>

The lived reality of immigration law is constructed by a “myriad of practices,

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<sup>35</sup> Navarrette, Ruben Jr. “Illegal immigrant’ is the uncomfortable truth.” *CNN*. 6 July 2012. Web. 11 Dec. 2012.

<sup>36</sup> De Genova, Nicholas P. “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31. (2002): 419-447. Print. 424.

<sup>37</sup> Coutin, Susan Bibler. *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993. 88. Print.

usually carried out by people who have no connection to the government, that produce knowledge that constitutes individuals as citizens, illegal aliens, legal residents, asylees, and so forth.”<sup>38</sup>

There is bountiful evidence of moments in which farm employers *and* law enforcement officials turned a blind eye to the regulations of the “Bracero” Program. I am not suggesting that unlawful actions be excused as soon as a law is broken multiple times. However, I *am* suggesting that the categories of “legal” and “illegal” become severely weakened after several parties (especially members of law enforcement) completely disregard these man-made distinctions between “right” and “wrong.”

Returning to the context of 1943 “Bracero” Program, I introduce passages that shift away from the “illegality” of the migrant border crossing and focus primarily on the “illegality” of farm employer recruitment tactics and the immorality of law enforcement agents who turned a blind eye. Following Coutin’s logic, our assigned political identities (citizen, “illegal alien,” “permanent resident,” etc.) become reified through the performed actions and discourses of people “who often have no connection to the government.”<sup>39</sup>

I begin with accounts of farmers and farm organizations that disregarded “Bracero” regulations (negotiated by the Mexican government to protect its citizens) and intentionally hired “illegal” labor because Mexicans without contracts

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<sup>38</sup> Coutin, Susan Bibler. *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993. 88. Print. 88.

<sup>39</sup> Coutin, Susan Bibler. *The Culture of Protest...* 88

represented a more “easily manipulated labor supply.”<sup>40</sup>

The Mexican government repeatedly negotiated labor conditions to protect Mexican nationals from exploitation. The conditions for an international labor agreement were related to: (a) the location of the recruitment centers in Mexico, (b) the process of recruitment, (c) wages paid to contract laborers, including transportation and medical benefits, (d) the permission for contract laborers to stay in the United States permanently and (e) the unacceptability of racial discrimination.<sup>41</sup>

However, it was not uncommon for American employers to complain about these regulations as an obstruction to their “full access” to Mexican labor.

The president of the American Farm Bureau complained about the extensiveness of the program’s regulations, expressed the view that they were unnecessary: “Why not just let the growers go into Mexico and get the workers they needed [illegally] as they had done in the past?”<sup>42</sup>

To these American employers, the legal process of bracero recruitment posed a hindrance to their “access” to “cheap Mexican labor.” As implied by the American Farm Bureau’s question, the regulations (set in place to protect Mexican workers’ rights) were disregarded because they were deemed “unnecessary.” As demonstrated by the above passage, not only did farm organizations disregard the “illegality” of hiring unauthorized Mexicans, the farmers had a history of bypassing the “formal” recruitment procedures by *actively* traveling to Mexico to “get the workers they

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<sup>40</sup> Reisler, Mark. “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 25.

<sup>41</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 60.

<sup>42</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers...” 52.

needed.”<sup>43</sup>

Ed Bird, State Department of Employment farm placement chief was reported to have said in the *Los Angeles Times*, 1954:

Some small farmers have long made a practice of hiring illegal entrants from Mexico in preference to using legal contract workers. Some farm groups, have even kept entire wetback families on their farms and have depended on them to provide year-around labor on small scale farming operations.<sup>44</sup>

*Los Angeles Times* writer Bill Dredge further dehumanized and homogenized Mexican laborers by asserting:

Juan has come here for as many years as we can remember to do our farm work. *He comes by two routes – the underground, or wetback way, and the legal, or contract way.* For the most part, *his American boss doesn't care which road he uses.* As a contract laborer, he's a more expensive and not so fluid labor supply as the wetback. *But legal or wetback, he's the same Juan.* He's between 15 and 40 years old... He has an appetite for work that few Americans can understand.<sup>45</sup> [*Emphasis Added*]

This passage explicitly admitted that for “Juan’s” American boss and for Bill Dredge himself, the social differentiation between “legal” and “illegal” (regarding people or actions) was insignificant enough to ignore in the hiring process. Although the assertion, “But legal or wetback, he’s the same Juan,” was incredibly racist and homogenizing, Dredge provided indirect support for the deconstruction of

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<sup>43</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 52.

<sup>44</sup> “Aid Offered in Mass Raid on Wetbacks.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 16, 1954): A1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17. Dec. 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Dredge, Bill. “Bracero Asks Only a Chance to Work.” *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 7, 1954): B1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

superimposed legal identities. At the end of the day, the labels of “legal” and “wetback” were transient and arbitrarily assigned. Dredge seemed to say, “No matter which path Juan took to get to America, farmers still hired him for his capacity to perform agricultural labor. He is still the same person, and can remain in the country, as long as this “same person” proves his contribution to the American economy.”

It is also significant to identify historical moments in which the fraying of the distinctions between “lawful” and “unlawful” happened at the level of law enforcement itself. The following passages expose moments in which political authorities and chief immigration officials intentionally turned a blind eye to hiring of “illegal” migrants.

As early as 1949, Senator Clinton P. Anderson of New Mexico had introduced a bill (S.272) arguing for an “open border” and “virtually unrestricted recruitment from Mexico.”

The following year, the chief inspector at the port of Tucson, Arizona, testifying before the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, noted that he “received orders from the District Director at El Paso each harvest to stop deporting illegal Mexican labor.”

The explanation for this flexible approach to the enforcement of immigration law was expressed in testimony before Congress in 1951 by the chief INS official responsible for this enforcement in a bald-faced assertion of authority to enforce the law selectively: “We do feel we have authority to permit to remain in the United States aliens who are here as agricultural workers whether they are here legally or not.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 57.

The “flexible approach to the enforcement of immigration law” in 1950 seemed to be entirely at the mercy of the needs and wants of the American harvesting season. I introduce the above passages to shed light upon blatant inconsistencies and abuses of power that seem to determine legal statuses on a seasonal whim.

In the context of Mexican immigration into the US from 1942-1964, I would concede that, at face value, thousands of Mexicans who crossed the border without authorization broke the law. However, I would also argue that the law itself did not hold much weight, due to repeated instances in which farmers and law enforcement officials ignored regulations in order to ensure American “economic security.”

The United States did not follow a clear, consistent, or coherent policy on Mexican immigration throughout most of the period proceeding “Operation Wetback.” Instead, on several occasions, it chose to selectively relax its immigration policies along its southwestern border to acquire the Mexican labor it deemed necessary to its economic security. Even though such practices often violated existing immigration statutes, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which was charged with enforcement of those laws, usually did little to publicly protest or block such actions.

On the other hand, when Mexican labor was no longer needed in large quantities, the United States would apply its immigration policies.<sup>47</sup>

As constructed by the “flexible” approach to law enforcement by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, I argue that there was no clear distinction between actions of “lawful” and actions of “unlawful” nature. This fact alone must be considered when one formulates her own opinions about the nature of migrant “illegality.”

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<sup>47</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. Print. 106.

### 3. “Operation Wetback”: 1954-1955

Since the first implementation of the “Bracero Program,” public discourse published opinions that considered the presence of the “illegal aliens” a threat to the moral fabric of American society. California State Attorney General Brown was quoted in 1954 as saying that illegal migrants into California constituted a “grave social problem, involving murder, prostitution, robbery and narcotics infiltration on a giant scale.”<sup>48</sup> Health officers warned the American public that “illegal hiring worsen[ed] health conditions among the border.” In the *New York Times* (1955), Henry Hollie, Texas health officer, released the following statement:

Illegal Mexican immigrants did not receive necessary health protection from Mexican contractors, and often are kept in unsanitary conditions in the United States. As a result, wetbacks are among the principal carriers of contagious disease in the border area.<sup>49</sup>

From an economic point of view, American citizens often complained of “illegals” as a drain on their resources. According to Richard Eckels of *The Reporter* (1954), “illegals” were costing the Imperial Valley in California at least \$250,000 a year in “disproportionately high police, hospital and welfare costs.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> “Bracero-Wetback Problem is Serious.” *Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 28, 1954): A4. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>49</sup> “Warning on ‘Wetbacks’: Illegal Hiring Worsens Health Conditions, Texas Aid Says.” *New York Times* (May 9, 1955): 15. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17. Dec. 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Eckels, Richard P. “Hungry Workers, Ripe Crops and the Non-Existence Mexican Border.” *The Reporter* (April 13, 1954): 28. Print.

By 1954, about a decade after “Bracero” was first implemented, President Eisenhower and Attorney General Herbert Brownell could not ignore the perceived problem of an “illegal alien invasion” for long. The solution to the “illegal problem” was “Operation Wetback,” a drive by U.S. Border Patrol during the Eisenhower administration “to roundup, often brutally, the wetbacks in the United States and ship them back to Mexico on foot or by bus or plane.”<sup>51</sup> In May of 1954, *while the Bracero Program was still actively recruiting Mexican migrants*, U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell met with representatives of the Immigration, Labor and State departments to plan the U.S. Border Patrol’s implementation of “Operation Wetback.” In his own words, “Operation Wetback would be an intensive and innovative law enforcement campaign designed to confront the rapidly increasing number of illegal border crossings by Mexican nationals.”<sup>52</sup>

On June 16, 1954, the day before “mass raid on wetbacks” was scheduled to begin, Governor Knight of California released a statement pledging “full resources of the State of California in the roundup of illegal aliens.”<sup>53</sup>

In his statement, the Governor called attention to the plight of American workers displaced by the invasion of wetbacks and to the increase of crime and disease brought about by the increasing flood of illegal migrants.

State Director of Employment, William Burkett, said there are 70,000 wetbacks employed in California industry, in addition to uncounted other

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<sup>51</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. Print.

<sup>52</sup> Hernández, Kelly Lytle. “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954.” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37:4. (Winter, 2006): 421-444. Print. 2.

<sup>53</sup> “Aid Offered in Mass Raid on Wetbacks.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 16, 1954): A1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17. Dec. 2012.

thousands in agriculture. He pledged support of his office in rooting out this illegal population and shipping it back to Mexico.<sup>54</sup>

At 11:00PM on June 17, 1954, the first of twenty-eight Greyhound buses left El Centro, California for Nogales, Mexico. In all, the buses transported 1,008 “illegal aliens.”<sup>55</sup> By July 27, a total of 52,374 Mexican “aliens” had been apprehended and expelled.<sup>56</sup> In total, by the end of the official “Operation Wetback” drive, the Immigration Service reported that 107,000 “illegal aliens” had either departed voluntarily or had been apprehended and deported from Arizona.<sup>57</sup>

It is significant to mention that after thorough research of Congressional records, I could not find any official documentation of Eisenhower’s authorization of Brownell’s “vigorous alien cleanup.”<sup>58</sup> This suggests another example of the integrity of law being loosened in order to achieve the goals of the people in power, further fraying the distinction between that which is legal and that which is “illegal.”

I introduce “Operation Wetback” in order to compare and contrast the language used in the “Bracero” Program with the language in “Operation Wetback” commentary. In the “Bracero” House Report, the “importation” of Mexican laborers was discussed with a tone of desperate need. (“Farm labor must be on hand when

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<sup>54</sup> “Aid Offered in Mass Raid on Wetbacks.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 16, 1954): A1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17. Dec. 2012.

<sup>55</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. Print. 184.

<sup>56</sup> Patridge, Frank. United States Immigration and Naturalization Service Office. Special Border Patrol Force. *Wetback Operation*. Washington DC: July 9, 1954.

<sup>57</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback...202*.

<sup>58</sup> Dredge, Bill. “1259 More Wetbacks Deported in Single Day.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 19, 1954): A1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17. Dec. 2012.

Nature decrees the time or the national food supply will suffer.”<sup>59</sup>) While this type of discourse still reduced the Mexican migrant to his laboring body, the “Bracero” Program valued the migrant as a being that can greatly assist the nation in its war time agricultural labor shortages. In a way, the “Bracero” discourse “invited” the Mexican migrant to cross the border and contribute to the American economy.

On the other hand, the language surrounding “Operation Wetback,” degraded the Mexican migrant to a “flood,” an “invasion,” and a source of contagious diseases. I provide several examples to illustrate the severe contrast between the (relatively) inclusive language of the “Bracero Program” and the hatefully exclusive language of “Operation Wetback.” However, I notice that even in deportation rhetoric, Mexican migrants were reduced to their laboring bodies. Sometimes, their bodies even discursively conflated with the cargo or agricultural animals. The *Los Angeles Times* article entitled “Wetbacks *Herded* at Nogales Camp” depicts a scene of 1,187 Mexican migrants waiting to be deported.

The task of *shipping human freight* is a giant job... the drive to clear the nation of the *engulfing tide of illegal aliens* was stepped up in intensity today. Tomorrow morning the co-operating Mexican federal government has agreed to accept the *biggest human cargo* ever to cross the Mexican-American boundary in a *single deportation shipment*.<sup>60</sup> [*Emphasis Added*]

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<sup>59</sup> United States. Cong. House. Committee on Appropriations. *Appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor, calendar year 1943*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. H. Rept. 246. Washington: GPO, 1943. Print. 8.

<sup>60</sup> Dredge, Bill. “Wetbacks Herded at Nogales Camp.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 20, 1954): 1A. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

Another *Los Angeles Times* article, entitled “10 Bus Loads of Mexicans Leave L.A.,” officials give a deportation report, also referring to the Mexican laborers as if they were goods that could just be casually “returned” to sender.

“We shipped back about 250 during the day,” said Herman Landon, director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service office at Los Angeles. “We’ll keep on until we get them all.”

The *aliens were loaded* aboard buses at the Immigration Service office at 458 South Spring St... *Aliens are shipped directly* from Los Angeles to Nogales, Mexico.<sup>61</sup>

The “success” of driving out Mexican migrants was even discussed in economic terms of “saving.” In another *Los Angeles Times* article entitled: “U.S. Agents to Continue Wetback Drive in L.A.,”: “Brownell praised General Swing’s handling of ‘probably the greatest migration on this continent in modern years’ and said it had *saved U.S. taxpayers millions of dollars and made thousands of jobs.*”<sup>62</sup>

By the summer of 1955, The *Los Angeles Times* noted the “Operation Wetback Success on First Anniversary.” “Today, the main result of Operation Wetback is far-reaching. It is that the Mexican wetback has been virtually erased from the American scene. For the first time in controversial history of the wetback problem, there is hardly any problem left.”<sup>63</sup> Contracted laborer continued through

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<sup>61</sup> “10 Bus Loads of Mexicans Leave L.A.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 21, 1954): 2. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>62</sup> “U.S. Agents to Continue Wetback Drive in L.A.” *Los Angeles Times* (July 30, 1954): 7. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>63</sup> “U.S. Patrol Halts Border Invasion.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 17, 1955): 26. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec 2012.

the “Bracero” Program for at least ten years after that summer.

These passages also serve to illustrate the significance of the ways in which a Mexican migrant’s level of productivity or education allowed him to be “saved” from deportation among this “anti-wetback” environment. I juxtapose two newspaper articles that employ religious language of damnation and salvation to describe the processes of deportation and “redemption through work” among Mexican migrants in the 1950s and 60s.

A 1956 *New York Times* article, entitled “Wetback’ Vessel Held No ‘Hell Ship,” described the common practice of deportation of Mexican migrants by boat.

**Washington, August 23-** The Justice Department defended today its use of a so-called “hell ship” to deport illegal “wetbacks” to Mexico. Rep. Robert H. Mollohan had asked the Justice Department why it permitted the Immigration Service to crowd 50 Mexicans aboard a ship that normally carried seventy to ninety persons... Investigators had learned that the vessel, the *Mercurio*, had carried only two life boats.

Williams P. Rogers, deputy attorney general, denied that Mexicans had been transported in the ship as a form of punishment... “There is no intention on the part of the Department of Justice to impose any punishment upon the illegal entrants,” he said. Mr. Rogers called the use of the ship the most efficient means of deporting the “wetbacks” to Mexico.<sup>64</sup>

In this *New York Times* article, the deportation to Mexico was literally ascribed with the imagery of being “shipped to hell.” Although Williams Rogers

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<sup>64</sup> “Wetback’ Vessel Held no ‘Hell Ship.” *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 1956): 33. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

claimed that the Justice Department had no “intention” to “punish” the Mexicans for their illegal crossing, the investigators of the House Government Operations Committee said “the vessel resembled an ancient ‘penal ship’ and had been described as a ‘hell ship.’”<sup>65</sup>

Education and the potential to work were constructed in 1950s public discourse as the dominant pathways to becoming productive and contributing members of society, redeeming the Mexican migrant from a criminalized and morally damned status. To support this claim, I draw upon a *Los Angeles Times* article (1956) entitled: “Youth, Former Wetback, Keeps Promise to Remain Out of Jail: TELLS GRATITUDE TO AMERICA.”

This article describes the path of Joe Toscano, a “former Mexican wetback.” Joe’s story began in Mexico City in 1949 when he dreamed of an American education and followed his dream across the border. An illegal entrant, he faced “imminent deportation” after being taken into custody by Immigration officers.

When the story of his dream and his perseverance came out, his friends went to his aid and the immigration men from District Director Herman R. Landon went to bat to help Joe in every way they could.

Joe was deported, walked across the border from San Ysidro, but his dream was not forgotten on this side of the border. He seemed to have somehow risen beyond the scope of rigid immigration laws –laws that were tempered by higher considerations.

Next Wednesday night at Fairfax Adult High School, Joe will put the final seal on that promise when he receives his 12th grade diploma and speaks before the graduating class.

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<sup>65</sup> “Wetback’ Vessel Held no ‘Hell Ship.’” *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 1956): 33. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

“I stand here tonight,” he will say, “because America *forgave me my sins* to reside in your great country permanently so I could have the advantages of an education- a privilege Americans take for granted.

The diploma Joe will receive Wednesday night will be his third most precious piece of paper, outranked only by his visa and his 8<sup>th</sup> grade diploma.<sup>66</sup>

In this article, Joe Toscano’s dream of working hard to receive his American education was the redeeming factor for his crimes of “illegally” crossing the border. District Director Herman Landon (previously cited as having “shipped 250 back to Mexico”) “goes to bat” for Joe’s permanent residence because the his “illegal” act of crossing was painted as dedication and perseverance to his dream of an American education. Joe’s story, involving education and presumably a greater potential to contribute to the American economy, “rises above the scope of rigid immigration laws.” The desire to go to school, to work, to be productive, “saved” Joe from the “hell ship” of deportation.

At his graduation, hypothetical Joe will hypothetically say: “America forgave me my sins to reside in your great country permanently.” The language of this statement was undeniably religious and evoked God’s power of redemption. In this article, Joe was constructed as a sinner who was at America’s mercy for redemption of his soul and status of citizenship. The capacity to be productive granted him America’s mercy.

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<sup>66</sup> “Youth, Former Wetback, Keeps Promise to Remain Out of Jail.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 1, 1956): A1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

#### 4.

#### Remainder of the “Bracero” Program: 1955-1964

As I began to organize my collection of 1940s-1960s newspaper articles into a three-ring research binder a few weeks ago, I realized that I could not separate the “Bracero” Program articles and the “Operation Wetback” articles into two distinct sections. This inextricability is significant because it illustrates how those deemed “braceros” and those deemed “wetbacks” were not too distinct demographics of people. It is noteworthy to mention that most of the unsanctioned workers came from “the same regions [as sanctioned workers], worked for many of the same employers in the United States, and often only worked for a few months before returning to Mexico.”<sup>67</sup> It was also not uncommon for a Mexican laborer to have crossed the border multiple times, having both labels of “bracero” and “wetback” superimposed onto his legal identity at different points in his lifetime.

While “Operation Wetback” occurred for only a year out of the “Bracero” Program’s twenty-year life, it must be acknowledged that both programs were happening simultaneously from 1954 to 1955. Mexican laborers were simultaneously being contracted inwards and deported outwards.

As the roundup of ‘wetbacks’ proceeded, the United States Employment Service intensified a parallel effort to keep farmers supplied with legal labor – either American citizens or Mexicans imported under the existing intergovernmental program. Farmers deprived of “wetback” labor were

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<sup>67</sup> García y Griego, Manuel. “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964.” *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Ed. David G. Gutiérrez. Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1996. 45-85. Print. 71.

hastening to maintain pools of this contracted labor.<sup>68</sup>

In the “Bracero” years following “Operation Wetback,” the original language of urgent dependency on Mexican labor for agricultural success began to sprout up again in public discourses, especially when the program was under threat of termination. The following articles from the *Los Angeles Times* echoed the sentiment expressed in the original “Bracero” House Report of an urgent need for Mexican labor, in whatever “legal” or “illegal” form, for the sake of diverting agricultural shortages.

**Bracero Ruling Worries County:** Farm labor experts in Orange County predict scrapping of the Mexican bracero program by Congress will deal a body blow to the area’s agriculture with the first effects to be felt late this summer.

“Without the bracero program, the Orange County farmer can’t stay in business,” says Yoshiki Yoshida, manager of the Orange County Vegetable Growers, Inc. They will probably use as much wetback help as they can get.

Yoshida also predicted removal of the braceros will mean higher prices to consumers, particularly for tomatoes, strawberries and citrus products.<sup>69</sup>

**Lobbyists Push for Revival of Bracero Bill:** Washington- Intensive lobbying is under way on Capital Hill to revive the bracero bill. Large corporate farmers in California, Texas and Arizona have organized a massive effort to rescue the bill.<sup>70</sup>

**Controversy on Bracero Program Stirs Fear of ‘Grapes of Wrath’ Era:** Jack E. Bias, executive vice president of the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association of Central California told the Board of Agriculture that the

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<sup>68</sup> Hill, Gladwin. “Wetback’ Stream Stemmed in Part.” *New York Times* (June 20, 1954): 75. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Gettemy, Bob. “Bracero Ruling Worries County.” *Los Angeles Times* (June 6, 1963): F1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>70</sup> “Lobbyists Push for Revival of Bracero Bill.” *Los Angeles Times* (Aug. 8, 1963): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

Mexican bracero program is the only answer to solving the very serious problem of supplementary farm labor in California.<sup>71</sup>

**Bracero Loss Perils State's Billion-Dollar Farm Industry, Nearly All California Could Be Severely Affected Next Year:** Growers say they cannot recruit American domestic workers for the “stoop labor.” They say they’ve tried, but failed.

One thing that worries officials is that most Californians just don’t care—because they are unaware of how much their livelihood and California’s entire economy depend on the state’s farm industry.<sup>72</sup>

Even through a national drive to deport a hundred thousand Mexican migrants from the United States, the agricultural sector still clearly maintained a need for “imported foreign labor 20 years after the original “Bracero” House Report was published.

Countless sources admitted that farmers and agricultural corporations disregarded the regulations throughout all twenty-years (and beyond) of the “Bracero” Program. As illustrated by the tone of urgency from newspaper headlines, many American employers had been “uninhibited by moral or legal restraints to safeguard their labor supply.”<sup>73</sup> Professor Juan Ramon García depicted the plight of the Mexicans, one of whom summarized their condition in five words: “Our necessity knows no law.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Salazar, Ruben. “Controversy on Bracero Program Stirs Fear of ‘Grapes of Wrath’ Era.” *Los Angeles Times* (July 19, 1964): F1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Blake, Gene. “Bracero Loss Perils State’s Billion-Dollar Farm Industry.” *Los Angeles Times* (Aug. 16, 1964): B1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

<sup>73</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. Print. xiii.

<sup>74</sup> García, Juan Ramon. *Operation Wetback...* xiii.

## Conclusion

In the last newspaper articles of 1964, as the “Bracero” program started being phased out of existence, a spokesman for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (who wished to remain unnamed) said: “The bracero program is not ending; its just changing its name. To say that the bracero system is ending is like saying that Los Angeles County is getting rid of all of its dogs by calling them cats.”<sup>75</sup>

Unfortunately, there is too much truth in this statement. My experience in researching and writing about historical immigration policies towards Mexican migrants was disheartening; I could draw too many parallels between the 1950s and today. As the unnamed INS official stated, the names change, but the terms will stay the same.

While the media does not admit America’s dependency on immigrant labor as explicitly as newspaper articles did in the 1960s, I argue that this country still bends the law constantly for those who can “redeem” their “illegal” presence through productive labor and contribution to the American economy.

In a 2011 NPR interview about the benefits of the DREAM Act, Education Secretary Arne Duncan states:

We have, in these touch economic times, about two million high-wage, high-skill jobs that are unfilled today because we don’t have the talent to fill those jobs. And when we have all these smart, talented [undocumented] young people, who have the potential to fill those jobs and then be productive citizens and to pay taxes and to contribute to society, to deny that opportunity

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<sup>75</sup> Salazar, Ruben. “Only Name Change seen for Bracero.” *Los Angeles Times* (Nov. 8, 1964): B1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.

doesn't make sense. The final point I'll make on this is that the Congressional Budget Office, which is, you know, nonpartisan, has estimated that over the next 10 years, if we educate these [undocumented] young people, if we allow them to go to college, this will actually reduce the deficit by a billion dollars because of their increased productivity.<sup>76</sup>

The Mexican laborer is, and has always been, under intense scrutiny from national discourse. From public commentary in the 1940s, 50s and 60s the increased presence of Mexican nationals, I argue that Mexicans have always had to “prove” that their worth and potential for economic contribution outweighs the burden and risk of allowing foreignness into the country. The personhood of immigrants tends to be limited by the language of productivity and utility, stigmatized as burdensome aliens until proven productive.

America is still uncomfortably dependent on “cheap” foreign labor to do much of our “stoop labor,” in agricultural and in other industries. Early one Saturday morning in Arizona, I accompanied a Tucson-native named Charles through the Sonoran desert to leave tanks of water for any migrants passing through. As we hopped out of his truck to fill an empty tank, I asked him if he had any thoughts about solutions to the border issues.

He replied, “Until we, as American citizens, are ready to pay \$3 or \$4 for a head of lettuce, *nothing is going to change.*”

We are all implicated in these issues at the Mexico- United States border. I know that my everyday action of choosing the cheaper tomato at the grocery store

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<sup>76</sup> “Arne Duncan: How Dream Act Can Cut Deficit.” *NPR News*. 7 July 2011. Web. 12 Sept. 2012.

turns a blind eye towards the potential “illegal” immigration status of the person who picked the tomato. I know that my parent’s intentional action of hiring the undocumented Chinese immigrant to help fix our roof is comparable to the 1960s farmers’ choice of hiring cheaper “wetback” labor over regulated “bracero” labor. We want universal human rights and fair treatment for marginalized populations. But we also want to be able to feed our families affordably and not have to pay a fortune for a head of lettuce. As a nation, we need to admit and reckon with this contradiction.

This essay has been my space reckoning and reflection of all that remained unanswered upon leaving Arizona. There have been people, stories, and interviews from Arizona that have been replaying in my mind throughout this entire process of writing. Due to time constraints, I chose not to include these experiences. This was a difficult decision because I wanted to intertwine moments from my own experiences in Arizona as a way to paint the spaces between the cracks: to provide blood, breath and candid words to legal and economic discussions that can seem removed from human reality. There are so many stories of struggle, doubt, regret, grief, perseverance, excitement, hope, and celebration of the familial trajectories of first and second-generation immigrants. These are stories that are meaningful in ways that transcend a person’s potential to be economically productive. However, at the end of the day, one semester of writing was not enough time to do any justice to the nuance of my friends’ lives. The stories and the people will continue to stay with me; they are worthy and valuable in and of themselves.

## Margarito

The first time I met Margarito, we spent the morning squatting side-by-side, drawing pictures in the dirt with broken twigs. It is my turn. I use the bottom of my shoe to wipe the ground clean and draw a square with a horizontal line running through the middle.

He takes his hands out of his pockets and turns his head sideways. He asks me “¿Qué significa este símbolo en el idioma Chino?” [*What does this symbol mean in Chinese?*]

I look upwards and trace the sun with my fingertips. “Es el sol.” I sketch a more complex character, trying to imitate each intentional curve of my father’s Chinese calligraphy. “Esta es la luna y esas son las montañas. ¿Puedes ver los imagenes en los caracteres?” [*This is the moon. Those are mountains. Can you see the image in the characters?*]

He smiles and nods, picks his twig up off the ground and begins writing the Spanish alphabet below my sketches. When he is done, he takes a step back, puts his hands back in his pockets and grins. “Esas son las letras de *mi* lengua.” [*These are the letters of my language.*]

We spend the rest of the afternoon trading stories on a bench near our makeshift chalkboard. I ask him about what it was like to leave his family behind; he doesn’t seem much older than I am. The sun makes its way around us, reshaping the shadows at our feet. We share stories about our families, our hometowns, our dreams, our biggest fears and challenges. We try and figure out how it is that we both got to this particular bench on this particular day.

The conversation moves slowly; I still need several moments to find the right Spanish words. The sounds fit awkwardly in my mouth, only scraping the surface of what I really want to say to him.

“Por qué te fuiste de México?” [*Why did you leave Mexico?*]

Margarito picks up his twig as if to draw in the dirt again. “Salí por la razón de que tenía unas ganas inmensas de conocer los Estados Unidos. Tengo un espíritu de aventurero.” He grins and laughs, “Ya me había aburrido allá. Quiero conocer lugares nuevos.” [*I left because I had an immense desire to see the United States. I have the spirit of an adventurer. I was bored there. I want to see new places.*]

I chuckle to myself; I’ve heard this before. Young people, feeling trapped by their surroundings, travel the world to free their spirits. The romance of this sentiment is too familiar.

He adds casually, “y tambien salí porque en Veracruz se gana poco porque casi no hay trabajo...” [*And I left also because I made very little money in Veracruz because there was almost no work... So, yes, I’m here to make money to send back home, but a lot of it is also for myself. There are still so many places I want to see. California is next.*]

We hear the whistle of the cargo trains behind us, crossing the tracks behind 4<sup>th</sup> and Euclid. I wonder where this takes us. We pick up our twigs and continue on with our lesson. There is still so much left to learn.

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