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Chapter 7
Empalmado y Contratado: The Valorisation and Coexistence of Labour Mobility and Immobilisation in the Experience of Mexican 'Braceros', 1940s–1960s

In the nineteenth century, the world experienced a considerable proliferation of labour forms relating to capital, as well as a massive surge of worker mobility between and within continents.[1] Although characterised by different logics of coercion, most of these forms of labour shared the feature of mobility required by the emerging mode of operation of capital and increased global production. Within this stream of mobile workers, there were attempts by institutional and private actors to profit from workers through direct recruitment and importation. There are many well-known and emblematic cases of labour mobility to the American continent as well as some lesser-known but nevertheless significant instances of mobility within the Americas – like the Mexican *vaqueros* brought to Hawaii to "handle horses and cattle" in 1832, an early example of the relevance of skill in the selection of foreign workers.[2] The 1800s witnessed the multiplication of labour mobility as a driving force for the booming primary sector of the economy during the great cycle of capital accumulation in the Second Industrial Revolution.[3]

The extensive movements of workers to and within North America, along with the processes of immobilisation intertwined with them, provide a varied bundle of stories depicting forms of labour coercion. One well-known case sheds light on the varied ways in which mobility and immobility functioned as drivers of labour coercion through the valorisation of workers – that is, the sum of all means applied to derive value from the lives of workers from the very beginning of their process of mobility: The temporary movement of Mexican labourers to

1 This work is funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU and by the 2021 STARS Grants@Unipd programme, research project ESSENTIA- *The Mobility Regime across Mexico and United States: the case of farmworkers from Tabasco and Oaxaca (1930s–1970s).*

2 National Archives of the United States, *Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General,* 92-FL-4-4-12.

3 Isabella Black, "American Labour and Chinese Immigration," *Past & Present* 25 (1963): 61–67; Kristin Surak, "Guestworkers: A Taxonomy," *New Left Review* 84 (2013): 87.

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the United States of America during the twentieth century is exemplary for the strong intervention of institutions and capitalists in shaping the management of workers.[4] In particular, a treaty enacted between the two countries as an exceptional measure during the Second World War was eventually extended until 1964 under the unofficial and contested name "Programa Bracero/Bracero Program" as a series of bilateral agreements.[5] A host of academic literature has described and analysed this program's mechanisms and effects, the states' interventions and national debates, the frictions between migrant and resident populations, and the role of the program as a means of modernisation for Mexicans.[6] The

4 For a long-term perspective on Mexican contract labour migration in the twentieth century, see Luis F.B. Plascencia, "'Get us our privilege of bringing in Mexican Labor': Recruitment and Desire for Mexican Labor in Arizona, 1917–2017," in *Mexican Workers and the Making of Arizona*, ed. Luis F.B. Plascencia and Gloria H. Cuádraz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018).

5 In Mexican Spanish, *braceros* are literally individuals 'who use their arms', from the word *brazo* (arm). In Italian, the term *bracciante* derived from the word *braccio* (arm) was similarly used since the late eighteenth century to identify workers employed in low-skill tasks that primarily require muscular strength. In Mexico, the term *bracero* entered public discourse since it provided a clear image of the migrant workers' function: They were reduced to the body parts needed for their tasks, reified and degraded by the inner workings of a labour regime; see Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2008). Although it only came into widespread use and entered institutional discourses during the Second World War, the term had been applied to previous experiences of labour-managed migration in the area as well, substantiating the notion of Mexican workers as a 'reserve army of labour', a well-known concept in Marx's critique of political economy; see Cindy Hahamovitch, "Creating Perfect Immigrants: Guest Workers of the World," *Historical Perspective 1- Labour History* 44, 1 (2003): 70–94). The so-called *bracero* turned this negative label into forms of self-organisation and protest such as the "Alianza Bracero Proa"; see Abel Astorga Morales, "Breve historia del movimiento social de ex braceros en México," *Revista Historia Autónoma* 5 (2015): 133–147. Available online at: https://revistas.uam.es/historiaautonoma/article/view/14 (accessed 3 May 2022). The first pivotal study on the Bracero Program is Carlos Alberto Madrazo, *La verdad en el "caso" de los braceros: Origen de esta injusticia y nombre de los verdaderos responsables* (México: published by the author, 1945).

6 For detailed studies on the functioning of the Bracero Program and its history, see Richard C. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Naomi Verdugo, "The Bracero Program: A History of Foreign Contract Labour in California," *Agenda* 11, 4 (1981): 9–13; Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New Orleans: Quid Pro Books, 2010); Richard S. Street, "First Farmworkers, First 'Braceros': Baja California Field Hands and the Origins of Farm Labour Importation in California Agriculture, 1769–1790," *California History* 75, 4 (1996/1997): 306–321; Fernando S. Alanís Enciso, *El Primer Programa Bracero y el Gobierno de México 1917–1918* (San Luis Potosí: El Colegio de San Luis, 1999); Jorge Durand, *Braceros: Las miradas mexicana y estadounidense. Antología (1945–1964)* (México: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2007); Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Bracero Program has also been examined within the broader topic of Mexican migration to the United States,[7] within the history of United States and Western labour contract migrations, and particularly within the history of the plethora of guest worker programs at the global level.[8] More recent studies have contributed to the understanding of the role of recruitment centres together with local governments in selecting workers and shaping the program.[9] Notably, these studies have expanded our knowledge concerning the political infrastructure that allowed worker mobilisation.

This contribution is linked to these most recent studies, as it primarily investigates the ways in which mobility and immobility coexisted during the lifetime of the Bracero Program. There has recently been a growing interest within migration and mobility studies in investigating the causes and consequences of immobility that affect the static population as well as returning migrants. The focus is primarily on immobility as a spatial constraint that migrants are subject to as a result of border militarisation respectively securitisation and related to refugee camps and detention centres for asylum seekers, but also as a voluntary choice within the aspiration-capability framework – for example, immobility of one family member within a household might allow the mobility of another member, or migration may function as a temporary solution in order to stay.[10] From this perspective, the various forms of immobilisation are considered either an outcome of the exclusion and potential deportation of migrants, or a voluntary choice by

Carolina Press, 2011); Aidé Grijalva and Rafael Arriaga Martínez, *Tras los pasos de los braceros: Entre la teoría y la realidad* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editor, 2015).

7 Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Area of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002); Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

8 Hahamovitch, "Creating Perfect Immigrants"; Nur Banu Kavakli Birdal, "The Bracero and European Guestworker Program Revisited: A Comparative Analysis," *Çalişma ve Toplum* 4 (2012): 149–164; Surak, "Guestworkers"; David Griffith, *(Mis)managing Migration*: *Guest Workers' Experiences with North American Labour Markets* (Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press, 2014).

9 Martha J. Sánchez Gómez and Raquel O. Barceló Quintal, "Una mirada a la intermediación laboral desde la figura de un mayordomo oaxaqueño: La importancia de las redes étnicas," *Norteamérica*, 12, 1 (2017), accessed 23 November 2021, doi:10.20999/nam.2017.a004; Diana I. Córdoba Ramírez, "Los centros de contratación del Programa Bracero: Desarrollo Agrícola y acuerdo político en el norte de México (1947–1964)" (PhD diss., El Colegio de México, 2017).

10 Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies," *International Migration Review* 54, 2 (2020): 328–355, accessed 23 September 2021, doi:10.1177/0197918319831952; see also Hein De Haas, *Migration and Development in Southern Morocco: The Disparate Socio-Economic Impacts of Out-migration on the Todgha Oasis Valley* (Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2003).

individuals driven by the evaluation of cost and benefit. This article subscribes to a different point of view by considering immobilisation of workers to be a constituent of the process of mobilisation, since the two aspects coexist and enable each other's existence. Immobilisation does not simply equate to a spatial condition of confinement, imprisonment, or constraint to a static state, however; it also has an immaterial dimension that shapes workers' subjectivity through coercion. What is more, various forms of immobilisation can be employed within the same regime: Control over labour, coercion and indebtment, exploitation of waiting times, and moulding workers into disposable subjects are all means of valorising immobility.

Secondly, this article identifies the various means of valorisation applied to workers across the space spanning Mexico and the south-western United States by the actors involved in the Bracero Program. Scholars have regularly focused on the ways in which various actors including federal, regional, and local governments, growers, and formal and informal intermediaries profited from the official program.[11] Taking a different stance once again, the following pages investigate the proliferation of ways in which workers created value through the very process of their mobility, rather than just profits at the worksite. In other words, it highlights the elements composing the varied means of valorisation of labour mobility as a process beginning with the departure of workers from their homes and extending across their entire trajectory. In reality, mobile workers were already productive before their arrival and remained so after their return, and Mexican society was deeply involved in this elaborate process established and exploited by various actors across a multi-scale space.[12]

In particular, this chapter considers the ways in which mobility and immobility were intertwined within a labour mobility regime understood as a means of capture, management, coercion, and valorisation of workers' (im)mobility. By analysing the means and strategies of valorising workers, it aims to situate Mexican peasants within the greater labour mobility regime extending beyond the specific function of the Bracero Program.[13] This view allows us to overcome the idea of a "migration industry" as "the ensemble of entrepreneurs, businesses and services

11 Galarza, *Merchants of Labour*, 1, 50–54.

12 Claudia Bernardi, "Within the Factory of Mobility: Practices of Mexican Migrant Workers in the 20th Century US Labor Regimes," in *Precarity and the International Relations*, ed. Vij Ritu, Kazi Tahseen, and Wynne-Hughes Elisa (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 253–277.

13 The term 'peasant' is used here to refer to the Mexican 'worker of the land' who could be the owner of a small plot, a farmer on a collective land possession (*ejidos*), an employed agricultural worker in vast land possessions, a temporary worker hired as a picker, etc. Although differences among these forms of agricultural labour are relevant, they are beyond the scope of this chapter.

which, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, facilitate and sustain international migration" and the notion of a "factory of irregular labour migration".[14] More broadly, the concept of valorisation considers the logics and practices that turned peasants into a means of advantage and benefit not just in terms of monetary profit or financial gain. It also takes into account the many actors involved in the process in an informal fashion – citizens, recruiters, local actors – besides the formal actors whose roles were regulated by the legal contract or the binational agreement. Finally, it incorporates the peasants' subjectivity in terms of their social recognition as workers and valuable citizens.

Through the use of primary sources collected in the presidential archive of the Mexican Archivo General de la Nación and the oral histories published in the Bracero History Archive,[15] this chapter lends a voice to the program's protagonists – former *braceros*, growers, unions, institutional representatives, and others – while also introducing a novel perspective that analyses and highlights the coexistence of the means of valorising mobility and immobilisation along with workers' desires that together constitute the labour mobility regime encompassing Mexico and the United States.

"Programa Bracero": The agreement and its modes of operation

During the Second World War, Mexico was asked to contribute to the Allies in terms of manpower, leading to the signing of the international agreement known as Convenio Internacional de Trabajadores Temporales in Mexico respectively as the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement in the United States. This agreement was also referred to by its unofficial name "Programa Bracero/Bracero Program", and the massive and constant importation of labour it allowed and regulated – initially justified as an exigency of the war – was subsequently extended until 1964.[16] In fact,

14 Rubén Hernández-León (2005), "The Migration Industry in the Mexico–U.S. Migratory System," *UCLA: California Center for Population Research*. Accessed 2 October 2022, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3hg44330, 1; Catherine Lejeune and Manuela Martini, "The Fabric of Irregular Labor Migration in Twentieth-Century Western Europe and North America: A Comparative Approach," *Labor History* 56, 5 (2015): 614–642, doi: 10.1080/0023656X.2015.1116825.

15 Bracero History Archive, accessed 23 November 2021, https://braceroarchive.org.

16 Ignacio García Téllez de la Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social al Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, 2 May 1942, México City; "Condiciones Socioeconómicas de los Braceros," *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 4, 4 (1980), 21; Rudolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Longman, 2000), 286; Moisés González Navarro, *En México y los mexicanos*

U.S. agricultural employers and powerful grower associations maintained their request for Mexican workers, reiterating a labour-shortage argument “for which the only evidence provided is the assertion of employers themselves. Federal regulatory agencies, as well as most members of Congress, accepted employer attestations as factual and without need of verification.”[17] More to the point, there was no actual shortage of labour but rather a “shortage of wages” that rendered the exhausting work in the fields undesirable for U.S. citizens.[18] Around 4.6 million contracts were signed during the lifetime of the program, with some individuals returning more than once on different contracts. Between 1951 and 1957, *braceros* went from representing 15% of seasonal farmworkers to 34.2%. Some 94% of hired Mexicans worked in fields in the U.S. Southwest, especially in California, Arizona, and Texas; most of them returned to Mexico once their contracts expired.[19]

The program was based on a complicated mesh of institutions, entrepreneurs, capitalist associations, and state authorities as well as local officers, representatives and professionals, workers, and their affective networks. It created a multi-scale spatial organisation of mobility: Diverse means of transportation brought Mexican workers from villages to processing centres that were connected to recruitment centres by train or bus; from there, the housing camps of associations’ labour pools and finally workplaces were reached by truck. Upon arrival, workers were placed in specific housing lots or barracks and would spend the entire season working in the nearby fields far from the city. While also employed in the construction of railways early on, Mexicans were later mostly signed on as pickers, and sometimes as truck drivers or for other medium-skill jobs in the fields. They were primarily hired as seasonal workers to harvest crops of cotton, strawberry, tomatoes, lettuce, and sugar beets, as well as other commodities.

The processing centres were core elements of this logistic system and soon became an issue of friction between local governments, since they attracted massive numbers of workers who waited in small cities lacking the necessary infrastructure

en el entranjero: 1821–1970, vol. III (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994), 312; Kavakli Birdal, “The Bracero and European Guestworker Program revisited,” 155; Patricia Morales, *Indocumentados mexicanos: Causas y razones de la migración laboral* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1989), 157.

17 Plascencia, “‘Get us our privilege of bringing in Mexican labor’,” 124. The term “labour shortage” is considered here as a fictional condition of the economy imposed by top actors like employers and institutional forces upon workers to mobilise them into a process of valorisation, turning them into a more docile, cheap, and racialised workforce at their disposal.

18 Craig, *Bracero Program*, 29.

19 Acuña, *Occupied America*, 289; Cohen, *Braceros*, 21; Julian Samora, *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 19; Calavita, *Inside the State*, 238.

to host them.[20] In these centres, Mexicans were assessed by the commissions that controlled the documents necessary for entering the selection process. They were inspected, submitted to medical examinations, and – if deemed eligible – sanitised.

Over a period of more than twenty years, this articulated system of selection, control, and recruitment changed the involved space, institutions, and peoples of Mexico and the United States. The program was unprecedented in terms of its scale, the quality of state intervention, the capital profits for growers, the variance of its modes of operation, and its systematic and strategic use of mobility in the increasingly globalised world. It played a crucial role in capitalism's transformation during the economic boom of the Glorious Thirty and became a permanent and structural feature in the years to come as well, albeit within a different juridical framework.

"Pos son listos": Profiting from contract workers

For our purposes, labour mobility is understood as a form of labour characterised by an absence of support and recognition of workers' reproduction as well as their intrinsic weakness due to their status as foreigners. "Immigrant labour is not just any labour" – rather, it is based on "the institutional differentiation of the process of labour-force reproduction and maintenance",[21] where 'reproduction' refers to the effort and means required to sustain human's lives. The fragile position of mobile workers as temporary labourers and non-citizens exposes them to poor working conditions despite existing legal frameworks and labour contracts. Scholars therefore often consider this outcome part of the institutionalised (but fictitious) differentiation between the *static* native and the *mobile* foreign worker – in other words, as the primary evidence of an exploitation of foreign labour that would cause further disqualification of native workers and impoverishment of their working conditions. Attention is focused on the destination country, where the various processes of hierarchisation and differentiation take place, and on the workers' experience as individuals.

One of the primary issues of contestation – especially by scholars and unionists – was the labour contract itself. It was written both in English and Spanish and signed by the respective grower or growers' association, a Mexican government

20 On the disposition of centres and governmental negotiation, see Córdoba Ramírez, "Los centros de contratación del Programa Bracero".

21 Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labour and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labour Flow* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37.

official, a U.S. Department of Labour representative, and the individual worker. Contracts were usually seasonal with a clearly stated duration; there was a minimum wage per hour, reduced by 10% for a deposit to be repaid once the worker returned to Mexico; and work was guaranteed for 75% of the contract period, with workers receiving a minimal sum of money on non-working days. In the words of Mexican American activist and professor Ernesto Galarza, "while the contract is theoretically free, in practice there has grown up in Mexico a fringe industry consisting of the procurement of contracts."[22] Galarza questioned the very nature of the liberal idea of freedom in the contract. While the two governments had established a legal framework that theoretically afforded free choice to Mexicans in signing up for a temporary contract in the United States, officials in both countries built up a veritable industry in which contracts could be bought. This mechanism may be considered a form of coercion, since it jeopardised the freedom of entering a binding legal agreement – the contract – as a fundamental condition for the modern idea of free labour. In addition, it undermined the autonomy of workers and restricted them to subordinate relations with top actors like the intermediaries.[23]

Clearly detectable forms of valorisation existed in the sites of production, the fields of the south-western United States, as a result of the identical working conditions arranged in the contracts – as well as due to their violation. The *braceros*' labour was much cheaper than that of native workers, with their wages usually 8–15% lower for the same jobs in similar locations.[24] In other words, since they received less pay, their labour generated greater added value compared to that of natives. Despite the conditions stipulated and agreed on in the contracts negotiated under the bilateral agreement, the time and form of payment were uncertain and became part of the valorisation process. Shifting wage schedules were communicated at the last minute, fragmenting time into uncertain shifts and forcing workers to be permanently available despite their contracts stating otherwise. Indeed, the *braceros*' wages were usually paid irregularly – sometimes per hour, other times per box of picked agricultural goods – and they would generally not know until payday. When they asked for clarification concerning the changes to their remuneration, they were told that it depended on varying picking conditions or on their

22 Galarza, *Merchants of Labour*, 36.

23 Jairus Banaji, "The Fictions of Free Labour: Contract, Coercion, and the So-called Unfree Labour," *Historical Materialism* 11, 3 (2003): 69–95; Claudia Bernardi and Ferruccio Ricciardi, "Il contratto nel groviglio dei rapporti di lavoro (XIX–XX secolo)," in *Le frontiere del contratto: status, mobilità, dipendenza (XIX–XX secolo)*, ed. Claudia Bernardi and Ferruccio Ricciardi, (Palermo: New Digital Frontiers, 2021), VII–XXII.

24 Galarza, *Merchants of Labour*, 32.

transfer from one field to another.[25] Uncertainty regarding wages as a result of employers' tactics was part of the valorisation process – and mobile workers were well aware of the reasons, as described concisely by former *bracero* Miguel Zavala López.

López was an agricultural worker born in Copándaro in the Mexican state of Michoacán in 1925; his family later moved to the village of Aguascalientes within the same state. He began working on the family-owned plot of land at an early age, sowing beans, corn, chickpeas, and wheat. In 1955, he arrived at the processing centre at Empalme to be assessed for the Bracero Program. López was well aware of the schemes applied by employers to improve their profits by paying workers as little as possible. Swapping between criteria for payment was one of these ploys, as he explains: "Most of the time we work on a contract basis. Well, I think when it didn't suit them, they paid us by hours – for example, when the orchard or field was good, they paid us by hours. When it was very bad, then they paid us by contract. Well, they are smart."[26] In other words, growers determined the criteria of payment on the basis of maximum profitability: Workers were subject to arbitrarily varying criteria or could be moved to another field, thereby losing "access" to the regulated payment governed by the international agreement and stipulated in their contracts. According to – or in spite of – regulations, Mexican peasants had to be disposable to be profitable. As López tersely put it: "Pos son listos" [Well, they are smart].[27]

Most of the paycheques included deductions for taxes and benefits that should not have applied to the *braceros*, and some of the workers inquiring about these deductions received answers like these from their growers: "The extra nine cents is for the county"; "I took off the round dollar because I haven't time to make change for 200 men"; "I don't keep the money, I just send it to the consul."[28] Despite the prevailing legal standards, the mobile worker was managed to better valorise the process of mobility in ways that often amounted to evasion of the contracts and the binational agreement.

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25 Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour*, 12; Galarza, *Merchants of Labour*, 33–57.

26 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*, edited by Violeta Domínguez, 12 June 2002, Bracero History Archive, no. 132, accessed 3 October 2022, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/132. Original text: "Casi la mayoría de las veces trabajamos por contrato. Pos yo creo cuando a ellos no les convenía, nos daban por horas cuando, por ejemplo, la huerta o el field estaba bueno, nos daban por horas. Cuando estaba muy malo, ya nos daban por contrato. Pos son listos." All translations from Mexican Spanish to British English are by the author.

27 Ibid.

28 Galarza, *Merchants of Labour*, 33–57.

Another form of valorisation relied on the legal diminishment of the *braceros*' pay by the government, which "deducted money for taxes, pensions, social benefits from workers' pay checks".[29] Despite their legitimacy, these kinds of deductions were used to fund social services that the Mexican workers clearly would not benefit from. In addition, there were "illegal deductions for rooms, board, transportation, and farm tools and supplies", including blankets and "the twist ties used in banding carrots together".[30] Employers deferred taxes and benefits to the labourers' salaries, converting even their basic reproduction needs into value: Food and housing as well as supplies were not considered basic needs whose fulfilment workers were entitled to, but instead supplementary benefits to be paid for.[31] Whereas minimum reproduction was required by the agreements, entrepreneurs limited their expenses wherever they could, creating a fresh business by selling supplies to the *braceros* and thereby making them dependent on the firm. In other words, if the reproduction of workers could not be completely ignored, it had to at least become a profitable affair for the growers.

The value of mobility

A range of credentials was required to obtain access to the selection process, and passports as well as papers documenting good health and good behaviour became a means of screening as much as a source of profit for 'intermediaries' of various kinds. Far from only mediating between grower and workers, these figures – which included illegal recruiters (*coyote*), foremen (*mayordomo*), commissioners, military officers, mayors, local and state government officials, and immigration policemen, among others – fostered a shadow economy and featured as independent but constitutive actors on the fringes of this refined regime. The Bracero Program was also used by local office holders to reward their allies, supplement their own salaries through bribes, and for political purposes. On the one hand, the municipal governments in Mexico used the opportunities provided by the program to manage local political conflicts and protests by assigning *bracero* cards to get rid of political opponents. In Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán, for instance, the *sinarquista* were presented with the many possibilities of earnings abroad and sent to the U.S. – in other words, they were moved to another country to neutralise domestic

29 Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour*, 13.
30 Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour*, 12–13.
31 Galarza, *Merchants of Labour*, 41.

political turmoil.[32] The required papers thus established a valorisation process in the form of profits coming from bribes as well as by increasing the political power of local governments that were able to expel their opponents.

On the other hand, certificates were sold to persons wishing to be *contratado* (contracted) by local officials both in the U.S. and in Mexico. As early as 1944 in the United States, "military officers had already swindled braceros out of at least forty thousand pesos through the sale of counterfeit certificates."[33] Relations established between illegal intermediaries and officials in the recruitment centres as well as along the paths of mobility may have facilitated and sped up the process for potential labourers willing to pay: It was a network of relations and an infrastructure – both legal and illegal – that was sold to the mobile workers,[34] and indebtedness was a common outcome for many of them. Guillermo Cervantes Manzo, a former *bracero* born in Michoacán, made his first trip to the recruiting centre at Empalme in Sonora with his father when he was seventeen or eighteen years old. He fell ill upon arriving at the centre, however, so that his father had to take him to Guanajuato, a three-hour trip from their home in Michoacán, leaving him there and returning to the centre to be hired. After recovering, Manzo completed the final part of the journey back to Michoacán by himself. He would be recruited the following year, and every subsequent year until the end of the program. The first of seven children, he joined the ranks of the *braceros* explicitly to make money and improve his living conditions in Mexico. His first attempt to be recruited ended in nothing but money spent: "You came with money on loan, you didn't come with your own money. You had to be paying interest and then some [workers] were barely able to pay what they had committed to, and some would not even be able to pay."[35] Workers were often indebted – and hence valorised –

32 Alberto Maldonado García, *The Politics of Bracero Migration* (PhD diss., University of California: Berkeley, 2016). *Sinarquista* were members of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, a far-right Mexican political organisation established in the 1930s that opposed the revolutionary process begun in 1910 as well as the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* that ruled the country during the following decades. Each municipal government had to communicate the number of potential eligible workers in the municipality to the central government, which would distribute eligibility cards to them on the basis of proportionality. These cards allowed workers to be selected in the contracting centres.

33 Cohen, *Braceros*, 95.

34 Bernardi, "Within the Factory of Mobility."

35 *Interview with Guillermo Cervantes Manzo*, edited by Veronica Cortez, 20 May 2006, Bracero History Archive, no. 366, accessed 29 November 2021, http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/366. Original text: "Uno se venía con dinero a rédito, no se venía con su propio dinero. Había que estar pagando intereses y entonces algunos apenas si alcanzaban a pagar lo que se traían de compromiso y algotros ni lo alcanzarían a pagar."

from the moment of their departure in Mexico. It was the very process of mobilisation itself that was the origin of this debt, as prospective *braceros* needed money both to reach the processing centre and to obtain the documents required for access to the program. In fact, local officials and government members regularly intercepted workers on their way to the centres, using the program as an opportunity to sell documents and contracts.[36]

It is worth noting that the valorisation of mobile workers through debt did not necessarily imply the obtainment of a contract, as the abovementioned case of Guillermo Cervantes Manzo proves. These costs were incurred not only by *contratados* who would subsequently have the possibility to repay their debts, but also by workers rejected at the processing centres in Mexico due to health problems, lack of required documents, or undesired profiles or traits. In fact, it has been calculated that only "one out of every ten job seekers ever attained bracero status. In 1952, a total of 31,990 men were rejected at the processing centres in Mexico, compared to 21,000 in 1954 and 44,411 in 1955."[37] Hundreds of thousands were rejected in total over the years, but all of them had been mobilised by the existence of the program. The simple act of providing access to the competition to become a contract worker was simultaneously the first means of valorisation – in other words, the *expectation* of potential recruitment became part of the labour mobility regime that created value from the selection for inclusion in the program. Debt was a component of value production and related to the workers' lives far beyond the terms and durations of their contracts.

The entire transnational space that was part of the labour mobility regime was involved on different scales. In Mexico, peasants paid for the cost of transportation from their homes to the processing centres to potentially become eligible for a contract. Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum, a clerk and typist working at Rio Vista, the processing centre in Socorro, Texas, recalls the *mordida* (bribe) Mexicans had to pay to move faster towards the centres in Mexico in an interview with Carrillo Fernanda:

> Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum: Most of time they walked. They would get rides with people. They didn't have any money, so they would bring out whatever [they had]. They brought their money to pay, because they had to pay so much to get across. They didn't have to, but in order to get there faster they would always – (both talking at once).

36 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), 254.

37 Henry Anderson, *Harvest of Loneliness: An Inquiry into a Social Problem* (Berkeley: Citizens for Farm Labor, 1964), 143, cited in Gilbert G. González, *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?* (Boulder/London: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 73.

> Carrillo Fernanda: Oh, okay, like a fee.
>
> Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum: Somebody was going to take their money and say, "Hey, I can get you there faster, but you pay me." They were paying the mordida to get there faster. Some of them would never make it across, and they would have to go back to Juarez, or Chihuahua, or wherever they were from.[38]

It was not just simple transportation to reach the centre that was needed. Testimonies emphasise the payment of bribes "to get there faster", meaning that it was *time* Mexicans were paying for. Bribes were required not only to gain access to the selection process, but also to get in more quickly than others. In fact, once the quota requested by growers was filled, workers were sent back until the next season, or until a new quota opened. Miguel Zavala López recalls the costs of accelerating the process:

> At the time they charged us about $400, the coyote, to put us on the list for Empalme, Sonora. So there I think they already had connections with those who were calling the names on the list, or I don't know how they did it, the fact is that they had already signed us up and we were already going to Empalme and there we waited, every day we went there to the recruiting centre to see if they called us by name and on the day they did not call us, well, you would go away all disconsolate, and get in the shade because it was hot. And early the next day, again there. So we were a large crowd in a huge field waiting for people to be named by microphone, and you were just there listening for your name to see if you would be hired.[39]

Since the *mordida* to speed up the process was not always successful, Mexicans were sometimes delayed and had to wait for months before being employed despite their bribes:

> There were times when you were hired soon, but there were times when for one, two, three months you could not enter. It could be that the coyote was not well related to the people inside, or I don't know what the reason was, but sometimes you waited one, two, three, four

38 *Interview with Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum*, edited by Carrillo Fernanda, 3 April 2003, Bracero History Archive, no. 77, accessed 12 November 2021, http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/77.
39 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "En ese tiempo nos cobraban como $400, el coyote, pa llevarnos ya en la lista hasta Empalme, Sonora. Entonces allá, yo creo que ellos tenía ya conexiones con los que están nombrando la lista, o no sé cómo le hacen ellos, el caso es que nos llevaban ya apuntados y ya nos íbamos hasta Empalme y allí nos esperábamos, allí a diario estábamos yendo allí al centro de contratación a ver si nos nombraban y ya el día que no nos nombraban, pos ya se iba uno por allí todo desconsolado, por allá sombreado porque hacía unos calorones. Y al otro día tempranito otra vez allí. Así el gentío que estábamos en un campo grandísimo que estaba para estar nombrando la gente por micrófono y estaba uno ahí nomás al pendiente escuchando su nombre a ver si ya se contrataba."

> months there and were already without money, and already out there searching for where you could work a little for a meal.[40]

The network and relations the prospective *braceros* paid for were less valuable than the money invested and the debt incurred. Debt was a common outcome even for those able to enter the program if they could not successfully accelerate their acceptance; the waiting times outside the processing centres can thus be considered a form of coercion as well, since they induced indebtedness after the recruitment process but before employment.[41]

Transfer from the recruitment centres in the U.S. to the fields was organised in an efficient and cost-effective manner, with employers implementing tight bus schedules to keep expenses down. This often meant that transports were not available, leaving workers stuck in fields. Besides the schedules, other corners were also cut to increase profits: Unqualified drivers and disregard for safety measures made accidents a common occurrence.[42] Beyond this article's focus on the specific travelling conditions faced by *braceros*, it is important to stress the overall role of mobility in restructuring social hierarchies. In fact, conditions of transportation are highly relevant for the way in which the logistical organisation of mobile workers' movements contributes to devaluing their lives, which are often not considered worthy enough to be protected as much as those of other humans. The efficiency and low cost of transportation provided to foreign workers frequently prevailed over their safety, qualifying them as less valuable and placing them at a lower level in the social hierarchy.

Finally, on their way back home to Mexico after the end of their contracts, *braceros* entered another scenario of valorisation. Complaints sent directly to the President of Mexico by numerous workers described the "fees" they had to pay while crossing the border. Clemente Armenta Jiménez, for example, wrote from Pewaukee in Wisconsin – presumably the place where he was employed – about the practices at the border: "At the border where we all cross back to our land, our beloved Mexico, the authorities of these places (North America or ours)

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40 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Había veces que pronto se contrataba uno, pero hay veces que duraba uno hasta dos, tres meses que no podía entrar. Sería que el coyote no estaba bien relacionado con las personas de adentro o no me imagino cómo era, pero a veces duraba uno hasta dos, tres, cuatro meses allí y ya sin dinero y ya por ahí a ver dónde trabaja uno un ratito por la comida."

41 On the relation between debt and coercion in *bracero* mobility, see Claudia Bernardi and Nico Pizzolato, "Logics of Debt: Rethinking Im/Mobility and Coercion in the Context of the *Programa Bracero*, 1942–1964," in *Labour and Coercion: Doing Social History after the Global Turn*, ed. Juliane Schiel and Johan Heinsen (forthcoming).

42 Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour*, 15.

attempt to charge us 30% of our shirts and other articles of clothing and other and objects."[43] Clemente was aware of the due contribution he had to make, so he appealed to the president to be exempted before embarking on the journey back home. All returning workers were forcefully required to share their new clothes or highly desirable commodities like radios. This was a form of coercion imposed upon mobile workers that occurred after they had fulfilled their contracts and left their respective worksites but was nevertheless embedded in the overall regime of labour mobility. The contract also stipulated the 10% deposit on wages that was to be returned to the *braceros* when they returned home. The circulation of labour was thus accompanied by a circulation of money in the form of a deposit at Wells Fargo and Union Trust Co. in San Francisco, which was then transferred to the Banco Nacional de Crédito Agrícola in México.[44] Thousands of workers never received their deposits back, however, so that these deductions ultimately contributed to enriching the Mexican government through valorisation of workers' mobility.

The labour mobility regime was far-reaching not only in terms of the processes extending beyond the worksite; it also mobilised and involved many more workers beyond those accepted into the Bracero Program. As peasants abandoned Mexican fields in large numbers to be recruited into the program, Mexican growers complained of labour scarcity – for example in Sonora, where the Asociación de Productores de Cereales de la Region Agricola de Hermosillo affirmed to have recruited workers from the interior Mexican states. They wrote a telegram on the matter to President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines: "In Sonora we have a scarcity of hands for our work in the field and in the present harvest of cotton and wheat that we are starting to sow, we had to bring people from the interior of the country. Stop recruitment in Hermosillo, it causes serious damage to the agricultural economy of this region."[45] Peasants were moved inside Mexico to replace

43 *Clemente Armenta Jiménez, Pewaukee, Wisconsin, to the President of Mexico*, 5 October 1945, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN), Manuel Ávila Camacho, 1940–1946 (hereafter MAC), caja 0795, 546.6/120-8, 3: "Que en la frontera al pasar todos los que retornamos a nuestra tierra, nuestro México querido, las autoridades de dichos lugares (norte américa o del nuestro), tratan de cobrarnos el 30% de nuestras camisas y demás artículos de Ropa y de otro objectos."

44 Jorge Durand, "El Programa Bracero (1942–1964): Un balance critico," *Migración y Desarrollo* 9 (2007): 27–43, 37.

45 *Asociación Productores de Cereales de la Región Agricola de Hermosillo to the President of Mexico*, 20 October 1954, AGN, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines 1952–1958 (hereafter ARC), caja 883, 563.3/246: "Estamos en Sonora escasos de brazos para nuestras labores del campo y en las actuales cosechas de algodón y trigo que principiamos a sembrar, hemos tenido que traer gente del interior del país. De llevarse a cabo contratación en Hermosillo, causar graves perjuicios a la economía

others leaving to become *braceros*, opening up a further path of labour mobility for which a system of recruitment within the country was organised by growers. In other words, the circuit of labour mobility from Mexico to the United States established by the Bracero Program was accompanied by a second, smaller circuit of labour within Mexico. Taking this process into consideration, the regime of labour mobility appears even more far-reaching and complex than has previously been assumed, as peasants living in the internal Mexican states who were not recruited into the program were nevertheless part of a larger system of labour mobility.

The valorisation of immobility

The discursive apparatus of individual liberty for contract work and free movement within the Bracero Program masked complex forms of coercion and exploitation at their worksites, where immobilisation was a further device applied by entrepreneurs in order to maximise profits. Whereas the process of selection and recruitment was protracted and complex, the control over workers that resulted in immobilisation was much more immediate: "If you violated the 45-day contract and didn't come home on time, they wouldn't renew your contract. They wouldn't let you go back."[46] Every *bracero*, regardless of the availability of fields to pick, had to stay on his assigned farm until the end of his contract and return to Mexico immediately thereafter unless the contract was renewed. Any other movement was considered an infringement that annulled the contract and consequently changed the respective worker's status to 'illegal', costing him the possibility to be recruited again within the framework of the international agreement. The regulation and valorisation of workers' mobility was thus closely entangled with immobilisation through control that aimed to dispose of workers at any time. The immobilisation at the worksite was complementary to the rapid mobilisation at the end of the contract. The contract in combination with the immobility imposed by the employers' control practices restricted each worker to a specific location and bound him to the employer under penalty of deportation – that is, forced mobility.

agrícola de esta región." For an analysis of the mobility of workers within Mexico as well as between Mexico and Guatemala, see Claudia Bernardi, "Matching Movements at the Borders: The Connected Mobility of Guatemalan and Mexican Workers (1940s–1950s)," in *Atlas Histórico de América:* Nuevas Miradas en la Huella del Americano. *Siglos XIX y XX*, Volumen III. Publicac*ión 566* Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia (2021).

46 Cited in Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour*, 13.

The distribution of processing and recruitment centres together with labour pools and mobility routes created a complex space that prospective *braceros* had to navigate for a certain period. They often had to wait days or months before obtaining a contract despite their eligibility, and they were unaware of how long they would have to wait before being employed in the fields. In other words, they were immobilised in a state of limbo. Miguel Zavala López describes his corresponding experience with specific reference to the contractor:

> The longest I lasted was about two months when he couldn't hire me. I do not know why, I tell you, because the man would no longer be well connected with the people, with those in there, or he was not assigned calls, or who knows what it was, the fact is that sometimes we took a long time. And sometimes you would hardly arrive in the morning and get ready and they would already call your name. As soon as you arrived at Empalme, you could be recruited, and that very day they might call your name. And other times, I tell you, no, you had to wait there for months, I waited for two months, but others could wait longer.[47]

Waiting at the recruitment centre in Empalme, Sonora, represented an obstacle in the path of mobility and a black hole in which workers were kept in uncertainty and timelessness.[48] The town's name itself even became a way of referring to this condition as experienced by the prospective *braceros* – when a worker's name was not called through the megaphone for months, they were said to be "empalmado":

> What you suffered when *empalmado* there, you were *empalmado* and, that is, we called it *empalmado* when we couldn't get through, they were *empalmado* (laughs). In Empalme you were *empalmado* and you couldn't get through, but as I told you, you can't explain why.[49]

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47 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Lo más que yo duré fueron como dos meses cuando no me podía contratar. No sé porque, te digo, porque pos el señor ya no estaría bien con la gente, con los de allá dentro o no les daría, o quién sabe cómo estaría, el caso es que a veces nos tardábamos mucho. Y a veces apenas llegaba uno hoy en la mañana y ya se armaba uno y ya le gritaban a uno de volada. Apenas llegaba uno de Empalme y luego, luego se iba uno a las contrataciones y ese mismo día le gritaban. Y otras veces, te digo, no, tenía que uno durar allí meses, yo me aventé dos meses, pero otros duraban más."

48 For detailed studies on the recruitment process and the city of Empalme, see Gabriela González Barragán, *El sistema de contratación para los trabajadores migrantes en la región costa-centro de Sonora (Hermosillo–Empalme 1949–1962)* (Tesi de licenciadura, Universidad de Sonora, México, 1988); Carlos Moncada, *Me llamo Empalme* (El Hermosillo: Sembrador, 2005); José Fernando Gámez Rodríguez, "Los Braceros en Empalme 1955–1964," in *Barrios y Pueblos de Sonora: Historias por Contarse*, ed. Aarón Grageda Bustamante et al. (Hermosillo: Universidad de Sonora, 2011).

49 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Lo que sufría uno cuando se empalmaba allí, se empalmaba uno y, o sea, le nombrábamos empalmar cuando no podíamos pasar, se empalmaban (risas). En Empalme se empalmaba uno allí y no podía uno pasar, pero es como te digo, no se explica uno por qué."

Waiting times allowed a labour supply pool to be maintained. A labour supply is generally understood as the disposable reserve workforce granted to growers and entrepreneurs that is displaced and moved to the site of production for employment; this view understands the labour supply as an amount of workforce that is always available to be commodified as needed, with valorisation of a worker beginning at the moment they are hired. From a different perspective, however, waiting times prior to employment can be considered a constituent part of the valorisation process. An important mobility hub into which large numbers of workers were channelled naturally became a location for buying and selling staple goods, a valuable site for small informal businesses started by locals to take advantage of the massive presence of waiting men.[50] The areas around the centres became proliferation spaces for informal economies and satellite activities that generated value from the waiting time of the prospective *braceros* by selling food, providing accommodation and transportation, and procuring cheap hands for manual work:

> And when I had been there for a month or two, I no longer had anything to eat and we fought there asking for work from the same people who sell food. [. . .] Once we also worked in the fields. We were hired by a man, after the processing, he was already waiting for us and took us there to the field to work in the field. We worked in the field for the man, clearing the land of stones and sticks and everything.[51]

To avoid these poor working conditions and survive the limbo, daily commuting to the United States became a viable solution:

> Others worked on the other side, in restaurants, cleaning large houses, that was where you settled when you were not getting a contract, because days and days could pass before you were named. Some days you looked for work, or to see what you could do to get something to eat. The next day, you would be there again and they didn't call you to work again, or you could already have a small job, just for when someone left there, helping to wash dishes or whatever. And there you suffered a lot.[52]

50 Sergio Chàvez, "The Sonoran Desert's Domestic Bracero Program: Institutional Actors and the Creation of Labour Migration Streams," *International Migration*, 50, 2 (2012): 20–40.
51 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Y ya cuando llevaba uno un mes o dos, pos ya no tenía uno para comer y hacíamos la lucha por allí a pedir trabajo a los mismos que venden pa la comida [. . .] Una vez trabajamos también en el campo. Nos contratamos con un señor, después de las contrataciones, ya nos esperaba y nos llevaba por allá al campo a trabajar en el campo. Al señor le trabajamos en el campo, a limpiar la tierra de piedra y de palos y todo."
52 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Otros trabajaban en otro lado, allí en los restaurantes, en casas grandes limpiando, por allí se acomodaba uno cuando ya no se podía uno contratar, porque pasaban días y días y no te nombraban. Otro día te ibas ya pos a buscar trabajo, o a ver qué le hacías para comer. Al otro día, otra vez a estar allí y no te nombraban otra

In order to not remain *empalmado*, workers were accustomed to bribing foremen and officials in the processing centres to be accepted faster, as mentioned above. In fact this seemingly dead time also became a prime occasion for selling acceleration of the process: Those able to pay immediately could turn their immobilisation into a new step in the process of mobility towards the place of work. Recruitment and processing centres were sites of valorisation as much as the fields in which mobile workers were employed (see Fig. 7.1).

Fig. 7.1: Leonard Nadel, "A woman serves food and drinks to braceros at the Monterrey Processing Center, Mexico", National Museum of American History-Division of Work and Industry, *Bracero History Archive*. Accessed 3 November 2022, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1419.

In Mexico, other forms of immobilisation with the purpose of valorising worker mobility occurred as well. Already in the early 1940s, many landowners, growers, unions, and local representatives complained to the President of Mexico about the "abandoned fields" in several Mexican states. The letters sent to the president referred directly or implicitly to the allure of the Bracero Program as the main cause of peasants leaving, demanding efforts to make them stay in the local fields

vez a trabajar, o ya tenía uno su chambita, ya nomás pa cuando saliera uno de allí, de ayudar allá a lavar platos o lo que fuera. Y ya desde allí sufría uno bastante."

and not leave the country.[53] The mobilisation towards the U.S., they stated, meant there were no longer enough workers "to pick cotton".[54] This labour shortage argument was reiterated repeatedly, with some complainants arguing for outright termination of the Bracero Program[55] or the introduction of measures "to prevent the exodus of braceros".[56] The term "exodus" reflects the perception of the phenomenon by Mexican growers, or at least the alarm they wished to communicate to the government. Given the situation, various steps were eventually taken in response.

In 1944, the government prohibited the mobilisation of workers from the central Mexican states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán, and over the following years, a list of ineligible persons was compiled: minors under the age of 21, skilled workers with a job, unhealthy persons, individuals weighing less than 50 kilograms, those who had not completed their compulsory military service, and *ejidatarios* – peasants sharing a form of collective possession called *ejido*. Also, since credentials for obtaining access to the selection process – so called *mica* – were distributed by local officials, unpaid work could be required in

53 For an extensive analysis of the relation between mobility and immobilisation to land, see Claudia Bernardi, "*Ejidatarios* and *Braceros*: The Troublesome Relation between Land and Mobility in Mexico (1930s–1950s)," in *Mobility, Labor, Right: Historical Trajectories and Interactions in the Americas and Europe (XVII–XX Centuries)*, edited by Claudia Bernardi. Torino: Annals Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, 2022.

54 *Juan Rodríguez and León Guanajuato to the President of Mexico*, 11 November 1943, in AGN–MAC, caja 0794-10341, 546.6/120-4; *Victor M. López, Secretario Comité Regional Soledad Veracruz, to the President of Mexico*, 3 March 1945, AGN–MAC, caja 0794-103401, 546.6/120-4; *Eugenio Elorduy, Presidente Cámara Nal. de Comercio de Mexicali, Baja California, to the Secretario de Gobernación,* 22 September 1948, AGN, Miguel Alemán Valdés 1946–1952 (hereafter AGN-MAV), caja 592, 546.6/1-2; *Juan F. Acosta, Presidente Unión de los sin Trabajo – Zacatecas, Zacatecas, to the President of Mexico*, 16 October 1953, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 172.

55 *Confederación Nacional Pequeña Propiedad Agricola to the President of Mexico*, 20 October 1947, AGN-MAV, caja 594, 546.6/1–32; *Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Transformación de Mexicali, Baja California, to the President of Mexico*, 22 September 1948, AGN-MAV, caja 592, 546.6/1-2; *Federación Nacional de Defensa Revolucionaria to the President of Mexico*, 25 January 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6–7; *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación to the President of Mexico*, 20 January 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6–7; *Heriberto G. Ramos, Union de Productores de Algodon, to the President of Mexico*, 12 August 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31; *Camara Agricola y Ganadera de Torreón Coahuila to the President of Mexico*, 13 August 1955, AGN-ARC, caja 883, 546.6/31.

56 *Antonio Vizcarra Espinosa – P. los Nuevos Centros de Población Agrícola, Sonora, to the President of Mexico*, 23 January 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 6–7; *Bartolomé Vargas Lugo to the President of Mexico*, 13 January 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 172; *Ing. Alberto Salinas Ramos, Presidente Asociación Nacional Cosecheros, Ciudad de México, to the President of Mexico*, 14 January 1954, AGN-ARC, caja 893, 548.1/122, leg 172.

return. In Baja California in 1954 and in Chihuahua in 1955, workers had to perform unpaid field work, picking cotton in order to receive a certificate allowing them to be recruited.[57] State governments also sometimes demanded money from prospective *braceros* to fund public infrastructure, for example in Oaxaca.[58] In addition, local administrations and growers jointly enacted various strategies for benefiting from mobilised labour: Workers faced the threat of seeing their dreams and aspirations unfulfilled if they did not pay their 'fees', making imposed immobility a form of coercion or extortion for access to the desired mobility.

The valorisation of subjectivities

Waiting times represented a part of the process of valorisation not least because they moulded the subjectivity of workers. They constituted a period of unfulfilled desires, of suspense and expectation, that shaped the relationship between *braceros* and the states, recruiters, growers, and nations they came into contact with.[59] Immobilisation is not only a spatial constraint or physical confinement – it also includes an immaterial dimension.

Migrants were not aware of the concrete workings of the selection and recruitment process managed by the states, and above all of the possibility of being stuck in a recruitment centre like Miguel Zavala López in Empalme. He reports how workers had to seek small jobs to survive the waiting times, sometimes even by commuting to the United States, and that they were unaware of what characterised the recruiting process itself:

> VD: Clear. Did you already know these things before you left?
>
> Miguel Zavala López: Well, no. I still didn't know about them, because I remember that just when we started going there at that time, it was the time when the recruitments began there in Empalme. And I'm not sure from what date the recruitments began in that town, but when I started going, I still didn't know anything about all that.[60]

57 González Navarro, *Los extranjeros*, 281–284.

58 "Estado Libre y Soberano de Oaxaca," as cited in González Navarro, *Los extranjeros*, 285.

59 Calavita, *Inside the State*; Cohen, *Braceros.*

60 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "VD: Claro. ¿Usted estas cosas las sabía ya desde antes de irse? MZ: Pues no. Todavía no las sabía yo, porque pos yo me acuerdo que apenas cuando empezamos a ir en ese tiempo, fueron las contrataciones que se abrieron allí en Empalme. Y no estoy seguro desde qué fecha se abrieron esas contrataciones allí en ese pueblo, pero yo cuando empecé a ir pos todavía no sabía nada de todo eso."

Workers experienced bewilderment and confusion, and they had no knowledge of the concrete workings of the program – as López said: "you can't explain why."[61] After leaving their homes to work abroad, they became immobilised and felt bogged down for no apparent reason. Informal recruiters actively participated in keeping workers in this state of suspension and uncertainty when their bribes to accelerate the process were not successful. The prospective *braceros* could not understand why their *mordida* did not lead to the expected result. Not only had the nations established a labour program that was supposed to manage mobility while effectively leaving workers immobilised in processing and recruitment centres, but under-the-table payments to informal (illegal) recruiters in order expedite the procedure were unsuccessful as well. Workers' expectations of a smooth process were dashed in the limbo of unexplained waiting times that immobilised them. As Miguel Zavala López put it: "I do not imagine what was the reason. [. . .] You had a hard time when you had to wait."[62]

When analysing the available oral sources, a peculiar additional form of immobilisation emerges as well: the lack of recognition. People often consider work to be an expression of desires, the fulfilment of expectations, a means of social mobility, and an appreciation of workers' abilities. Besides the skills and expertise needed to complete a task, every job implies a certain type of acknowledgment and credit to the worker. *Braceros* were certainly in search of recognition, both in the workplace and at the (trans)national level, as they had been acknowledged in their role of drivers of modernisation by the Mexican nation state.[63] Describing the (lack of) relations with his hierarchic superiors, Miguel Zavala López affirms this:

> The foreman was the one who dealt with us and he was the one who did everything. We never knew the owners, most of us never knew the owners. Now, there were good people for picking, some very good workers, who turned out good, I never saw that they gave them benefits or something because they were a good worker. We never had prizes because someone picked so much and performed so much. They never gave us any of that. If he was

61 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Lo que sufría uno cuando se empalmaba allí, se empalmaba uno y, o sea, le nombrábamos empalmar cuando no podíamos pasar, se empalmaban (risas). En Empalme se empalmaba uno allí y no podía uno pasar, pero es como te digo, no se explica uno por qué."

62 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Había veces que pronto se contrataba uno, pero hay veces que duraba uno hasta dos, tres meses que no podía entrar. Sería que el coyote no estaba bien relacionado con las personas de adentro o no me imagino cómo era, pero a veces duraba uno hasta dos, tres, cuatro meses allí y ya sin dinero y ya por ahí a ver dónde trabaja uno un ratito por la comida. Se la pasaba uno a duras cuando se tardaba uno."

63 Cohen, *Braceros*.

> a good worker, then that was it. We never had prizes like this because we picked so many boxes of fruit or whatever.[64]

The contract worker was pushed to work harder, to prove his work, to earn more, and to receive credit for the results, as he received compensation on the basis of piecework: "When you are under contract, in order to earn more, you work hard, because look, they paid us $0.12 for a box of tomatoes."[65] The "prize" ("el premio") referred to by López stands for the recognition of a good worker, "un buen trabajador", as well as to potential additional payment for quality work. Lack of recognition implied a devaluation of this work, and the refusal to grant additional remuneration for high effort made the *braceros*' labour even cheaper. Whereas recognition of work bolsters dynamicity, commitment to improving one's condition, and success in social mobility, its devaluation – both material and immaterial – confirms the immobilisation of migrant workers from the subjective point of view. The curtailed spatial mobility of the *braceros* was thus accompanied by a diminishment of expectations and recognition:

> If you were a good worker, that was it, you earned more money than the others, but they never recognised you. They never said: 'You are a good worker, you do not make mistakes and you are a clean worker, and you are never a jerk.' They never took you into account. They could have said: 'You are a good worker, now we are going to reward you, we are going to give you an extra check,' or 'We are going to let you emigrate,' or something else they could have said. No, it was the same, good and bad worker, it was the same.[66]

The *braceros*' desire to change and improve their lives was increasingly catalysed during the waiting period when they suffered a lack of food, credit availability,

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64 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "El mayordomo era el que trataba con nosotros y era el que hacía todo. Los dueños nunca los conocíamos, casi la mayoría nunca conocíamos los dueños. Ahora, sí habíamos gente buena para piscar, unos trabajadores buenísimos, que salieran buenos, yo nunca vi que les dieran utilidades o algo que les dieran algo porque es un buen trabajador. Nunca tuvimos premios de que, pos éste piscó tanto y tanto nos rindió. Nunca nos dieron nada de eso. Si era buen trabajador, pues hasta allí nomás. Nunca tuvimos así premios porque piscábamos bastantes cajas de fruta o lo que fuera."

65 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Cuando uno anda por contrato, con tal de ganar más, tú pos le entras duro al trabajo, porque pos fíjate, nos pagaban la caja de jitomate a $0.12 centavos dólar."

66 *Interview with Miguel Zavala López*. Original text: "Si eras un buen trabajador, pos hasta allí nomás, ganabas más dinero que los demás, pero nunca te reconocieron. Nunca dijeron: 'Tú eres un buen trabajador, no faltas y eres un trabajador limpio y nunca estás de marrullero'. Nunca te tomaban en cuenta. Que hubieran dicho: 'Eres un buen trabajador, ahora te vamos a premiar, te vamos a dar un cheque de más', o, 'te vamos a emigrar', o alguna cosa que hubieran dicho. No, pos era igual trabajador bueno y malo, pos era lo mismo."

and resources. At the same time, as they perceived a lessening of workforce demand (when recruitment was reduced) or when their names were simply not called, they may have approached potential employment with diminished expectations concerning working conditions. In other words, the desire to be awarded a contract could make their labour cheaper since they faced the threat of not being employed at all, of wasting money, or of becoming highly indebted – a subjective dimension that likely influenced their work relations and demands. Their acknowledgement as subjects within the social process of mobility was limited, and more research could help to further elucidate the role of their feelings within the workings of the Bracero Program – especially with regard to their decision to enrol more than once.

It was not just that workers experienced various forms of labour – unpaid and contractual – but one particular form could be the *conditio sine qua non* for access to a better job in the future. Ultimately, it was access to the selection process, and thus to potential recruitment, that was sold to them. In other words, Mexicans were mobilised towards the recruitment centres by the *expectation* of being employed to work in U.S. fields, for which they were often forced to go into debt or provide unpaid labour. The condition for access to a potential, temporary job became a reward to be earned – a prize desired with eager anticipation and for which hardship was endured. But the social process of recognition became stuck there, and workers' subjectivity was immobilised.

Conclusion

Historical analysis of the labour mobility regime created by the Bracero Program provides various insights contributing to the current intellectual debate on labour migration in relation to the emergent discourse on mobility and immobility.

The profitability of workers has been discussed with reference to the idea of a "migration industry", which foregrounds the complex of companies, agencies, and services that facilitate and support international migration.[67] Within this approach, the idea of a "factory of irregular labour migration" allows us to analyse the policies of restriction and regulation implemented in North America and Western Europe since the end of the Second World War.[68] Nevertheless, the approach is limited to considering migration an industry only for its ability to generate profits through a set of binational institutions and structures, omitting the

67 Hernández-León, "Migration Industry."
68 Lejeune and Martini, "Irregular Labor Migration."

crucial role played by the overall labour mobility regime and its management as well as by the processes of hierarchisation and construction of subjectivity, chains of mobility, and the aspect of work ethic, to name but a few fundamental issues. It is the very productive dimension of mobility that weaves a story which cannot be reduced to borders standing in defence of the nation, nor dilated in the global flows that characterise the later understanding of contemporary capitalism. Nor can this story be traced back exclusively to a migration industry in which valorisation only covers profits obtained from the services provided for mobility to another country, and which is analysed only in relation to migration policies – albeit from a transnational perspective. From the point of view taken in this contribution, the exploitation and valorisation of mobile workers does not begin at the worksite but instead involves a much larger timeframe, a multi-scale space, and heterogeneous forms of labour. This approach seeks to avoid the pitfalls typical of labour studies in which productivity is strictly connected to the workplace and immobile labour power, as in the case of migration and mobility studies in which individuals are rarely considered as productive and valorised subjects along their paths of mobility.

The valorisation process relies not only on places as static geopolitical objects; it also has to do with the profitability of mobility itself, which turns space into the very battlefield continuously recreated by frictions and crossings. Mobile workers do not produce value exclusively at the worksite; on the contrary, they are already productive when they leave their homes, and they remain so for a long time after the end of their formal employment contracts. The circulation of workers itself as well as with the immaterial dimension produce value at every step in this cartography of mobility. The simple act of providing access to the competition to become a contract worker was immediately valorised in the context of the Bracero Program – in other words, the *expectation* of recruitment became part of the social and economic process created by the selection procedure for participation in the program. Practices of mobilisation and immobilisation coexisted to maximise valorisation of workers' movements and waiting times, involving not only the destination worksites and recruitment centres in the United States but also the processing centres in the northern and central regions of Mexico as well as farms throughout Mexico. This article's approach considers immobility as being constituent to and coexistent with mobility within the same regime: Control over labour, coercion and indebtedness, exploitation of waiting times, and the moulding of workers into disposable subjects were all means of generating value out of immobility. Waiting times played a key role by breaking both the supposed continuum of moments of labour and the linearity of paths of migration, thereby affecting both the temporality and the subjectivities of workers.

Various forms of immobilisation were employed by formal and informal actors: Institutions, officers, representatives, and other legal as well as non-legal individuals and groups profited from this complex mechanism of (im)mobility valorisation.[69] The wide range of required credentials, unpaid work, deductions, fees, deposits, debts, bribes, taxes, uncertain contracts, waiting times, and shifting schedules formed constitutive components of a well-established labour mobility regime that coerced and valorised workers along their paths of mobility, at their sites of immobilisation, and through their expectations.

In short, the articulation of the labour mobility regime established through the "Programa Bracero" relied on manifold processes that led to valorisation of Mexican peasants through the coexistence of their mobility and immobilisation.

69 Bernardi, "Within the Factory of Mobility".