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Author(s): Lori A. Flores

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Figure 1. Braceros enter a converted truck-bus after eating lunch on the edge of a Salinas Valley field, 1956, by Leonard Nadel, Leonard Nadel Collection, Bracero History Archive, Division of Work & Industry, National Museum of American History, item 2434. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

A TOWN FULL OF DEAD MEXICANS: THE SALINAS VALLEY BRACERO TRAGEDY OF 1963, THE END OF THE BRACERO PROGRAM, AND THE EVOLUTION OF CALIFORNIA'S CHICANO MOVEMENT

LORI A. FLORES

In 1963 a horrific accident took the lives of almost three dozen Mexican guest workers, or braceros, in California's Salinas Valley. This article examines the event's effects on various communities in the United States, including policy makers, civil rights activists, and farmworkers, while considering questions of race and labor, tragedy and historical memory, and the evolution of Chicano politics in California.

En 1963 un accidente terrible tomó las vidas de casi tres docenas de trabajadores mexicanos, o braceros, en el Valle de Salinas en California. Este artículo examina los efectos de este evento en varias comunidades en los Estados Unidos, incluyendo los políticos, activistas de derechos civiles, y los campesinos. Además considera cuestiones de relaciones raciales y laborales, tragedia y memoria histórica, y la evolución del movimiento Chicano en California.

They are viewed as commodities, as objects, as chattels . . . the average bracero-holder probably has less respect for his chattels than the average slave-holder had for his a hundred years ago. . . . You rent a bracero for six weeks or six months, and if he gets damaged, you don't care. You'll never see him again. You get next year's model—a newer, younger, healthier one.

—Henry Anderson, Advisory Board of Citizens for Farm Labor¹

LORI A. FLORES, assistant professor of history at SUNY Stony Brook, wishes to thank the archivists and interviewees who enriched the content of this piece; the various readers, including Albert Camarillo, Estelle Freedman, Stephen Pitti, William Deverell, David Torres-Rouff, Beth Lew-Williams, Timothy Tomlinson, Kevin Kim, Julie Prieto, and Josh Howe, who improved its

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IN THE EARLY MORNING hours of 17 September 1963, the crew of male Mexican guest workers (or *braceros*) who lived at the Earl Meyers Company labor camp in Salinas, California, boarded a bus to begin their work in two local vegetable fields. After a ten-hour workday harvesting celery and other crops, the men reboarded the vehicle near the town of Chualar, twelve miles south of Salinas. This “bus,” a flatbed produce truck with an affixed canopy and two long, wooden benches inside, was one of many converted vehicles growers used to transport *braceros* throughout California. (See figure 1.) The fifty-seven men crammed into the back, some sitting on the floor next to long harvesting knives or atop large food containers. A chain tied on the outside of the back doors kept the workers locked in the compartment, and the crew could not communicate with their driver and foreman, thirty-four-year-old Francisco “Pancho” Espinosa, or thirty-two-year-old co-foreman Arturo Galindo, sitting next to Espinosa in the passenger seat checking timesheets.²

Between 4:20 and 4:25 p.m., Espinosa approached an unmarked railroad crossing eight miles south of Salinas. Not seeing or hearing a train, he inched the front wheels over the tracks. He suddenly heard a whistle but still did not see anything. Espinosa gunned the motor to get across, but it was too late. A seventy-one-car Southern Pacific Railroad freight train, traveling at sixty-five miles an hour, smashed into the right side of the vehicle with enough force to shear it in half. The passenger compartment detached, sending bodies, pieces of wood, and work tools flying. Before the engineer could bring the train carrying sugar beets to a stop, fifty-six men lay scattered around the tracks, some thrown three hundred feet beyond the point of impact. Twenty-three died instantly. Tony Vásquez, a Mexican American foreman whose crew was thinning broccoli in a nearby field, witnessed the collision in horror and called authorities before rushing to the scene. “Bodies just flew all over the place,” he said. A truckload of soldiers from nearby Fort Ord saw the wreckage from the highway and stopped to offer aid. Meanwhile, other drivers slowed their cars to observe the accident, delaying ambulances trying to reach the workers. Paramedics and Monterey County Coroner Christopher Hill came upon a gruesome scene: “One body was hooked under the engine. Shoes, hats and cutting knives were all around. Everywhere you could hear the injured moaning.” As daylight faded, fifteen ambulances and several local residents with vehicles removed the dead and transported the injured to multiple Salinas hospitals, where three men died on arrival and two more died in surgery. Ambulance driver Gene Hopkins recounted the stories his coworkers told him about the tragedy: “They said that when they brought one ambulance

analysis; and graphic/map designer David Hackett.

¹ Henry Anderson, “Blood on the Lettuce,” 18 September 1963, transcript of radio broadcast, 2, folder 3, box 11, Ernesto Galarza Papers, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University (hereafter Galarza Papers).

² “Crash Kills 27: Train Smashes Makeshift Bus,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1963.

back to the garage from transporting the victims, they opened the back doors and the blood flowed out like water.”³

The dead braceros, hailing from the Mexican states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Sonora, Zacatecas, Puebla, and Michoacán, ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-nine. José Gómez Martínez died on his twenty-seventh birthday. Out of three pairs of brothers who had been riding in the bus, Federico and Salvador Olmedo Gallegos perished while José Meza Huerta and Salvador Orozco Contreras lost their brothers Roberto and Luis.⁴ Only one person was unharmed in the collision: Espinosa, the driver. Although in shock, he emerged from the bus with only minor cuts and bruises. After responding to two rounds of questioning by the California Highway Patrol (CHP) and the Monterey County district attorney, Espinosa was arrested and placed in the Salinas jail on charges of felony manslaughter. He, along with the bracero guest worker program at large, would become the central figures of blame in what the CHP deemed “the biggest single fatal vehicle accident in the history of California.”⁵

Some scholars have recognized the Chualar accident as an important event within the history of the Bracero Program (1942–1964), yet analysis of the event has been limited to details of the accident and the program’s lack of enforcement mechanisms for ensuring braceros’ safety.⁶ This article provides a critical examination of the 1963 accident, the communities involved in and affected by the incident, and the role this event played in the death of the Bracero Program and the evolution of California’s Chicano movement. The Chualar tragedy reminded the nation of braceros’ exploitation and vulnerability as guest workers in the United States. Likewise, the accident revealed the Salinas Valley—long praised as the “Salad Bowl of the World” for its agricultural production—as a dark nexus of farmworker mistreatment. Desperate to maintain their access to cheap Mexican labor, Salinas growers and officials attempted to control public opinion of the accident by handling the bracero victims’ funeral, impeding federal investigations, and silencing the crash survivors. Yet they could not escape critiques from union leaders, religious representatives, and Mexican American political activists who argued that Chualar was only symptomatic of the larger transnational tragedy that was the Bracero Program, which simultaneously exploited Mexican laborers and displaced U.S. workers

³ “27 Mexican Celery Workers Die as Train Hits Bus in California,” *New York Times*, 18 September 1963; “Crash Kills 27”; and Gene Hopkins, interview by author, 28 June 2009.

⁴ Ernesto Galarza, *Tragedy at Chualar: El Crucero de las Treinta y Dos Cruces* (Santa Barbara, 1977), 11.

⁵ “Bracero Train-Truck Crash Toll Reaches 31,” *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, 20 September 1963; Interstate Commerce Commission, “Railroad Accident Investigation, Ex Parte No. 237, Southern Pacific Company, Chualar, California, September 17, 1963. 260,” 5, 7, folder 7, box 16, Galarza Papers; “Bus Crash Probes Launched,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 19 September 1963; and Galarza, *Tragedy*, 7–12, 28.

⁶ Galarza, *Tragedy* and Gina Marie Pitti, “To ‘Hear about God in Spanish’: Ethnicity, Church, and Community Activism in the San Francisco Archdiocese’s Mexican American Colonias, 1942–1965” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2003) 283–384.

in need of agricultural jobs. The accident helped to amplify and galvanize these groups' opposition, proving a critical accelerant to Congress's decision to terminate the program the following year.

The tragedy also served as a pivotal point in California's embryonic Chicano civil rights movement. Before 1963 urban- and rural-based Mexican American activists and organizations in the state did not collaborate on issues of concern in significant ways. The significant loss of life in Chualar, however, pushed them to act together in person and in rhetoric to protest the Bracero Program's lack of safety measures and California's exploitation of its Mexican-origin agricultural workforce. Recognizing that they could create a better national profile through opposition to the program—and lift some barriers to Mexican American upward mobility by eliminating the figure of the bracero from the U.S. labor landscape—Mexican American activist groups throughout California spoke out together in a new way against bracero exploitation. Arguably, the collaboration that Chualar provoked constituted the first moment in which the concerns of rural Mexican Americans were enfolded into the state's emerging Chicano movement agenda, even before famed farmworker union leader César Chávez took the national stage in 1965.

By the morning of 18 September, headlines about the crash covered the front pages of U.S. newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Mexican newspapers such as *Novedades de México*, *Excelsior*, and *El Día* also reported on the accident, but details about who had lived and died remained sketchy for horrified relatives. "We held prayers and vigils for the dead and injured braceros. We didn't have any news about the dead . . . people were anguished," said Inez Sosa of her Mexican community.⁷ Before he could read his own newspaper in San José, California, scholar and labor activist Ernesto Galarza was awakened at his home by a telephone call from the Salinas Central Labor Council. "Turn on your radio," the caller said. "There's been a farm labor bus collision at Chualar. Better come and look. This town is full of dead Mexicans." A Mexican immigrant with a PhD in economics from Columbia University, Galarza had served as the director of research and education for the National Farm Labor Union, which became the National Agricultural Workers Union in 1956. In this role, Galarza became aware of how U.S. farmworkers—mostly Mexican American in California—suffered from depressed wages or unemployment due to growers' desire for cheaper, nonunionized workers. As he came upon the Chualar railroad crossing, Galarza observed glass shards, broken planks, and a blood-smeared hoe strewn across the area. Black utility poles looming above the railroad tracks formed somber crosses while braceros working in lettuce, beets, and carrots dotted the fields flanking the intersection. Along with Galarza, numerous public agencies had turned their attention to the site. The CHP; the offices of the Monterey County sheriff, district attorney, and coroner; the California Department of Industrial Relations; the California State Compensation Insurance Fund;

⁷ "Perecen 27 Braceros en un Grave Choque en California" and "Zapatos, Sombreros y Cuchillos Estaban Esparcidos Por Todas Partes," both in *Novedades de México* (Mexico City), 18 September 1963 and Sosa quoted in *Harvest of Loneliness: The Bracero Program*, directed by Gilbert G. González and Vivian Price (New York: Films Media Group, 2010), DVD.

CALIFORNIA and Salinas Valley Region

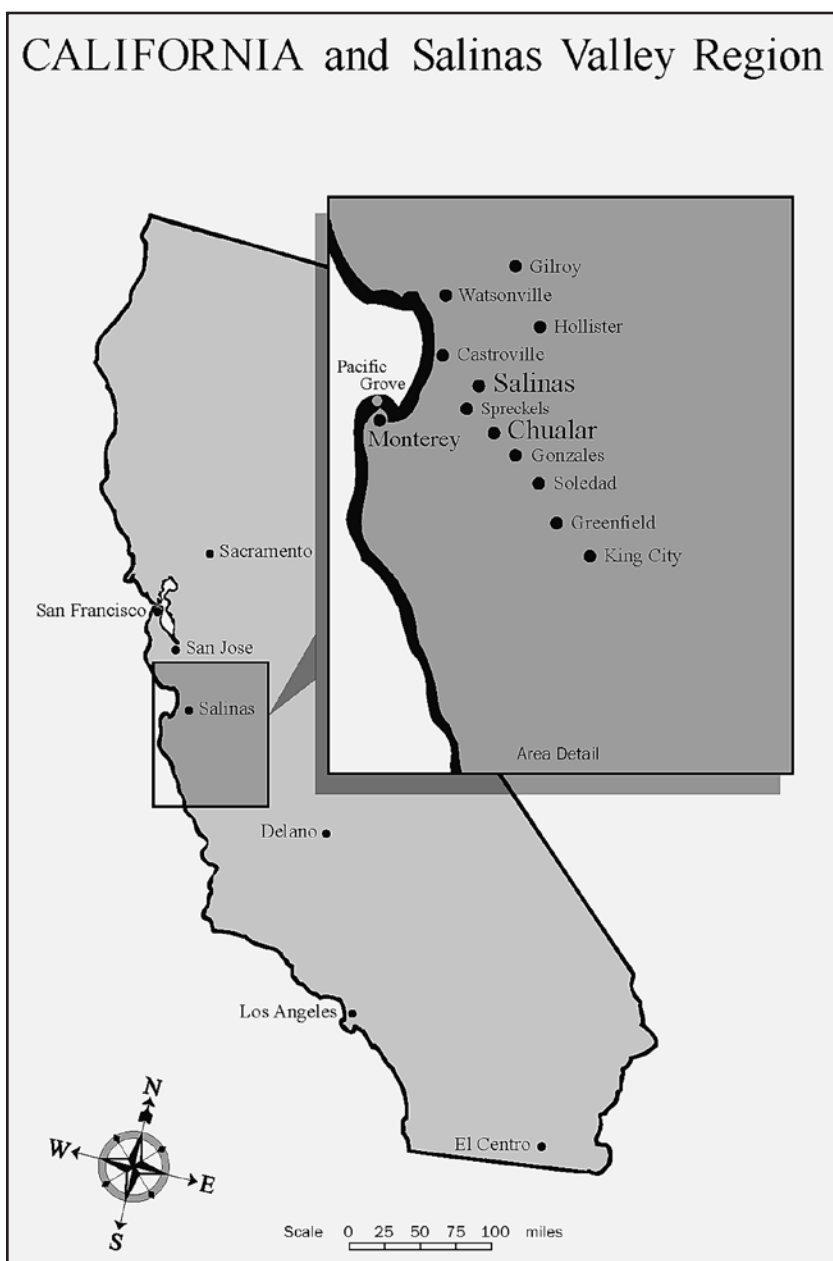


Figure 2. Map of California and the Salinas Valley region. Map by David Hackett.

the California Public Utilities Commission; the Interstate Commerce Commission; the U.S. Department of Labor; and the Mexican consulate had all sent representatives to carry out their own investigations.⁸

The presence of so many agencies pointed to the Bracero Program's profound impact upon the economies of California and the nation. First negotiated between the United States and Mexico in 1942 to address the wartime labor shortage in American agricultural and railroad industries, the guest worker program agreement was renewed by both countries multiple times. The program had lasted for more than twenty years, granting a total of 4.8 to 5.2 million labor contracts in all regions of the United States.⁹ Of the 186,865 braceros who worked alongside over 3.5 million U.S. citizens on American farms in 1963, California claimed 65,000 while Texas, Michigan, Arizona, and Colorado followed close behind. One in seven California braceros, including everyone involved in the Chualar accident, was contracted by the Salinas Growers Farm Labor Association (GFLA).¹⁰ (See figure 2.) Greatly dependent on braceros and hostile to organized labor, Salinas Valley growers had been some of the most persistent in persuading their representatives to renew the program time and time again, arguing that braceros were indispensable amidst a shortage of U.S. workers willing to perform stoop labor.

According to program terms, individual grower-employers or farm labor associations (FLAs) provided braceros with transportation to and from work sites, sanitary

⁸ Galarza, *Tragedy*, 1 and Ernesto Galarza, *Report on the Farm Labor Transportation Accident at Chualar, Calif.*, Sept. 17, 1963, 5, H.R. Rep., 88th Cong., 2nd Sess., April 1964, folder 7, box 16, Galarza Papers (hereafter Accident Report).

⁹ David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1995) and Manuel García y Griego, "The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942–1964," in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, ed. David G. Gutiérrez (Wilmington, 1996), 45–86. The United States had requested guest labor during World War I and received approximately 73,000 Mexican male workers. Despite claims that the program was a temporary war measure, it lasted until 1922 and was characterized by employer abuse of Mexican workers. Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942–1947* (Austin, 1990), 39 and Lisa Basurto, Charles D. DeLorme Jr., and David R. Kamerschen, "Rent Seeking, The Bracero Program and Current Mexican Farm Labor Policy," *International Economic Journal* 15 (Spring 2001): 1, 23. For more on the Bracero Program, see Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story; An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California, 1942–1960* (San Jose, 1964); Juan Ramon García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CT, 1980); Kelly Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York, 1992); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); and Ana Rosas, "Flexible Families: Bracero Families' Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries, 1942–1964" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2006).

¹⁰ "Administratively Confidential: Use of Labor in Agriculture and Effects of Ending the Bracero Program," 2–3, 6, folder Agricultural [2 of 2], box 4115, Security Classified General Correspondence, 1943–1972, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16, National Archives and Records Administration—College Park, MD; Galarza, Accident Report, 33–4; and Galarza, *Tragedy*, 56, 58.

housing, decent food, and the local prevailing wage for their work. These terms, however, were upheld minimally or not at all during the life of the program, causing writer Truman E. Moore and others to call braceros the “slaves we rent[ed]” during the twentieth century.¹¹ Although Mexico reluctantly continued the program at times, due to bracero complaints of racism and exploitation, it kept sending workers north because the nation remained in the grip of an economic crisis. The program offered both an economic safety valve and an opportunity to modernize Mexico from braceros’ exposure to U.S. culture, agricultural methods, and wages.¹²

By 19 September, three more crash victims had died, increasing the death toll to thirty-one. California politicians and agricultural interests began to fear the accident would convince Mexico to end the Bracero Program. California Governor Edmund “Pat” Brown rushed a telegram to Mexico’s president, Adolfo López Mateos, reassuring him, “we will make every effort to determine the cause of this tragedy and take every step to prevent such accidents in the future.” Meanwhile, California growers argued the accident could have happened anywhere and had nothing to do with the program itself.¹³ Salinas newspapers took the growers’ side, arguing that the program’s condemnation by “emotional, uninformed” opponents, such as Mexican American Democratic Rep. Henry B. González, compounded the tragedy. A *Salinas Californian* editorial wrote that the Texas congressman

stooped to a new low yesterday when he mixed politics with tragedy. . . . he called the accident “testimonial” to the law [Public Law 78] that permits such “slave labor” to enter this country. . . . we must not let our shock and heartsick feelings spread and endanger a worthwhile farm labor program that has solved the age-old problem of how to get our produce to market in the most feasible way.¹⁴

Individual Salinas growers also made their opinions about González known. In a letter to Catholic priest James L. Vizzard, who was against the Bracero Program, prominent grower William Garin wrote,

It would seem that if this terrible tragedy of this bus train collision had happened anywhere else in the country and[,] with no [Mexican] nationals

¹¹ Truman E. Moore, *The Slaves We Rent* (New York, 1965).

¹² Rosas, “Flexible Families,” 2, 37; Kelly Lytle Hernández, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (Winter 2006): 424–5. For more on braceros and Mexico’s modernization, see Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill, 2011).

¹³ “Inquiry Vowed in Salinas Crash,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 September 1963 and “Bracero Bus Called Safe By Growers,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 October 1963.

¹⁴ “Playing Politics With Tragedy,” *Salinas Californian*, 19 September 1963 and “Two Kinds of Blame in Birmingham and Salinas,” *East Bay Labor Journal* (Oakland, CA), 27 September 1963. In 1951 the U.S. Congress renewed the Bracero Program, codifying it as Public Law 78.

involved[,] someone like your Mexican friend in Congress from Texas would figure out a way to slant the story and make capital against the continuation of the national program. It is sad that these things ever happen and this one came at a most unfortunate time.¹⁵

Dismissively referring to González as Vizzard's "Mexican friend," Garin made clear that he and other growers did not believe the Chualar accident proved the Bracero Program was dangerous, but only that it came at a "most unfortunate time" for agribusiness. In late May 1963, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 174 to 158 to terminate the program on 31 December 1964. In August the Senate agreed to grant only a one-year extension. Growers believed, however, that they could mobilize on every level and use agribusiness's lobbying power to push for an additional extension of the program into 1965, before the full Congress voted on the matter in December.¹⁶ The Chualar crash, and the dead Mexican bodies it produced, violently collided with growers' ambitions.

Meanwhile, Vizzard and the Catholic Church, organized labor, and Mexican American civil rights organizations, including the Community Service Organization (CSO), the American GI Forum (AGIF), and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), viewed the accident as the ultimate manifestation of the program's dangers and exploitation. Paid only one dollar an hour in California (and even less in southern states like Texas and Arkansas), braceros endured ten- to fourteen-hour workdays of bending at uncomfortable angles to either pick crops by hand or use a two-foot short-handled hoe commonly known as *el cortito* (the short one).¹⁷ Subjected to backbreaking labor, low-quality food, a lack of water and rest, and segregated, substandard housing, braceros frequently suffered from respiratory illnesses, permanent spinal injuries, malnourishment, and the mental effects of isolation. The Chualar incident added the element of sudden death to what opponents already saw as the slow deaths of braceros in the program.

Moreover, the accident was not without precedent. Since the mid-1940s, California farmers had crowded braceros into poorly constructed vehicles manned by untrained drivers to transport them from field to field. For example, 14 men from Salinas and Brawley died in two separate bus-train crashes in 1953. Then, in 1958, 14 Salinas men burned to death when cans of gasoline in their labor bus caught fire and chains tied on the outside of the bus prevented the workers from escaping, as in the Chualar case.¹⁸

¹⁵ William Garin to James L. Vizzard, 20 September 1963, folder 8, box 23, James Vizzard Papers, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University.

¹⁶ "Bracero Defeat Shocks State, County Growers," *Salinas Californian*, 30 May 1963 and Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (New York, 2010), 94.

¹⁷ Luis Montaña, interview by author, 29 July 2008.

¹⁸ "6 Mexican Nationals Killed, 12 Hurt as SP Passenger Hits Truck," *Salinas Californian*, 19 February 1953 and "8 Killed, 6 Hurt at Rail Crossing: Freight Hits Labor Truck Near Chualar," *Salinas Californian*, 27 October 1955.

Braceros dying from entrapment brought to mind other labor tragedies such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, in which 146 New York City garment workers—mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant women—died because their managers regularly locked the factory exit doors. That incident led to legislation requiring improved safety standards for workers in industrial sector jobs, but not for agricultural workers. According to a California Department of Industrial Relations report, 125 farm workers died and 2,754 were injured in transportation accidents from 1952 to 1962, figures highly disproportionate to the state's general accident rate.¹⁹ More disturbingly, in 1963 the U.S. government still classified farmworkers as “types of loads” for vehicles along with metal, wood, and hay. An appalled Galarza later argued, “Farm laborers should be promoted in the law from the category of things to that of persons.” A *Corpus Christi Caller* editorial published after an accident in Del Rio, Texas—which killed 7 braceros and injured 60 when the driver of the cattle truck transporting them dozed off and crashed—emphasized racial minorities’ lack of personhood in U.S. working spaces: “North Americans, so the propaganda line will go, speak freely of ‘human values’ and the ‘decency of man’ and the ‘importance of the individual.’ In practice, of course, they herd minority groups, such as Mexicans, into cattle trucks . . . North Americans never consider them as anything but human cattle anyway.”²⁰

On Thanksgiving Day 1960, record numbers of Americans had tuned into the CBS television documentary *Harvest of Shame*, which graphically depicted the poverty and despair of U.S. migrant farmworkers, and they reacted by swamping both the network and Congress with “outraged and conscience-stricken” mail.²¹ The fact that both U.S. and Mexican farmworkers continued to suffer—and even die—from inadequate working conditions seemed all the more horrific amid the civil rights ethos of the 1960s and U.S. politicians’ efforts to craft a national image of freedom and equality. “We call ourselves the leaders of the free world, and yet we have tolerated a system of imported peonage within our borders for these many years,” scholar Henry Anderson, who wrote extensively on bracero health and working conditions, asserted in his Berkeley radio broadcast over station KPFA. “Do you believe, as I believe, that freedom ought to mean choice between viable alternatives? Braceros have no choices. They must work for whomever they are told, doing whatever they are told, wherever they are told, for as long as they are told, under whatever conditions they are told.”²²

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Labor statement, 29 May 1958 and Ernesto Galarza, National Agricultural Workers Union press release, 11 June 1958, both in folder 10, box 16, Galarza Papers; “Inquiry Vowed in Salinas Crash”; and “U.S.-State Probes of Bracero Bus Crash Pressed as Vote Nears on PL78 Extension,” AFL-CIO California Labor Federation *Weekly News Letter*, 27 September 1963.

²⁰ “Galarza Raps Labor System,” *Salinas Californian*, 20 April 1964; Galarza, Accident Report, 55, 57; and “Treating Humans Like Cattle,” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, 2 November 1954.

²¹ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 143.

²² Anderson, “Blood on the Lettuce,” 2 and Henry Anderson, “Beyond the Bracero System,”

For Anderson and many others, the Salinas bracero deaths served as the last straw. As the accident with the most bracero fatalities to date, as well as the most recent labor injustice, it could not be ignored.

Mexican American activists and civil rights organizations in particular voiced their opposition to the Bracero Program, out of both humanitarianism and self-interest. Ethnically linked to braceros, Mexican Americans still endured racialization and discrimination as “Mexicans” in their daily lives. Braceros threatened not only the livelihood of many Mexican Americans (as more lost their agriculture jobs to bracero and undocumented Mexican labor) but their social citizenship and acceptance in the United States. After the Chualar crash, Mexican American organizations in California, including chapters of the Community Service Organization, the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), and the American GI Forum, began formulating joint resolutions against the program, calling on President John F. Kennedy and Congress to end it once and for all.²³ The AGIF had spoken out in Texas a decade before about the impact of bracero and undocumented Mexican labor on Mexican Americans’ livelihood through its publication *What Price Wetbacks?*, but this was the first time in California that both urban- and rural-based Mexican American civil rights organizations galvanized to protest an agricultural labor issue. Mexican American activists believed that if they could eliminate braceros from the U.S. labor landscape, they would be performing a transnational service: preventing more deaths of exploited Mexican citizens while ensuring future work and unionization opportunities for Mexican Americans.

Meanwhile, some critics made a striking link between Chualar and a concurrent tragedy in the U.S. South to further articulate the injustice of unnecessary death in the civil rights era. In an article titled “Two Kinds of Blame in Birmingham and Salinas,” the *East Bay Labor Journal* memorialized the Salinas braceros together with the “four little girls in Sunday school dresses” murdered in a 15 September bombing at a black church in Birmingham, Alabama. Likewise, the AFL-CIO’s *Santa Clara County Union Gazette* published an article titled “There is Blood On Your Salad!,” in which author Jeff Boehm linked “in memoriam” the deaths of the young African American girls and the braceros: “We must stop ignoring the fact that these workers are treated worse than animals. We must end forever the slave labor which stains our food with human blood!” James Vizzard then drew national Catholic attention by writing, “Just as the killing of the four Negro children at Birmingham has revulsed [sic] the Nation, and may well be the turning point in the civil rights battle, so it can be hoped that the 28 bracero deaths will not be in vain. The Mexican farm labor program should be ended now.” As historian Gina Marie Pitti has argued, Vizzard and others used the Chualar tragedy as evidence of how “Mexican laborers suffered indignities and physical peril as

31 July and 1 August 1963, transcript of radio broadcasts, 2–3, folder 3, box 11, Galarza Papers.

²³ MAPA resolution against Public Law 78, folder 7, box 3, Galarza Papers and “Two Kinds of Blame.”

frequently as African Americans encountered violence and racism in the South.”²⁴ By linking the two separate tragedies, opponents of the Bracero Program drew the West and South together at a charged moment in the 1960s in hopes of gaining sympathizers engaged in civil rights struggles in other parts of the country.

Rhetoric surrounding death, the racialized body, and personhood continued after an autopsy report provided further details about the Salinas victims. Only twelve of the dead had been positively identified, not just because of the bodies’ condition but because employers and supervisors often knew braceros only by their work numbers, not their names. This custom of anonymity forced coroner Christopher Hill to seek help from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which sent a team to Salinas on 21 September with fingerprints provided by the braceros when they entered the United States.²⁵ FBI investigators soon learned more that complicated the story of the accident. Fifty-three braceros contracted by the Salinas GFLA had indeed been riding in the bus, but so had one undocumented Mexican worker. Twenty-two-year-old Antonio Gómez Zamora, who died in the crash, had worked as a bracero in Salinas in 1959 but returned to his home in Mexicali after his contract expired. He reentered the United States without papers in 1963 to once again find work in Salinas. His undocumented status made the crew a “mixed” one, revealing that grower David E. Meyers not only transported his workers poorly but violated Public Law 78 by employing an “illegal” Mexican.²⁶ This fact, along with others, would be quickly covered up as the growers association began planning a public funeral for the thirty-two braceros. On September 22, the day after the FBI identified the dead, one more bracero died, making a final total of thirty-two fatalities.

Funeral arrangements soon turned into a public relations fiasco as the City of Salinas and the Mexican consulate clashed over who would handle and memorialize the bodies. Salinas Valley newspapers such as the *Salinas Californian* and the *Watsonville Pajaronian* reported that a “battle over the bodies” and a “macabre funeral hassle” had developed. Mexican consul Francisco Jaime Rivera requested that Fresno’s Sanchez-Hall Mortuary, “the only completely [sic] Mexican mortuary in northern California,” handle the event. Three Salinas mortuaries, along with Salinas GFLA Director Ben López—the only Mexican American in the city to hold a high position in agriculture—pressured Rivera to let the town host the memorial mass.²⁷ In demanding control

²⁴ “Two Kinds of Blame”; Jeff Boehm, “There is Blood On Your Salad!,” *Santa Clara County Union Gazette*, 27 September 1963; James Vizzard quoted in Pitti, “To ‘Hear About God in Spanish,’” 364, 383; and “Salinas Tragedy Spurs Anti-Bracero Efforts,” *Monitor* (San Francisco, CA), 27 September 1963.

²⁵ Eric Brazil, “Manuel Silva Missed Labor Bus—and Missed Death,” *Salinas Californian*, 19 September 1963; “\$750,000 Due Families in Bus Crash,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 September 1963; Galarza, *Tragedy*, 11; and Galarza, Accident Report, 4.

²⁶ Galarza, *Tragedy*, 12 and Galarza, Accident Report, 5, 54.

²⁷ “Macabre Funeral Hassle Develops Over Braceros,” *Salinas Californian*, 20 September 1963; advertisement for Sanchez-Hall Mortuary, *El Malcriado*, 1 August 1968, <http://farmworkermovement.com/archives/#malcriado>, accessed 9 May 2008; “Workers’ Rites Planned Here,” *Salinas*

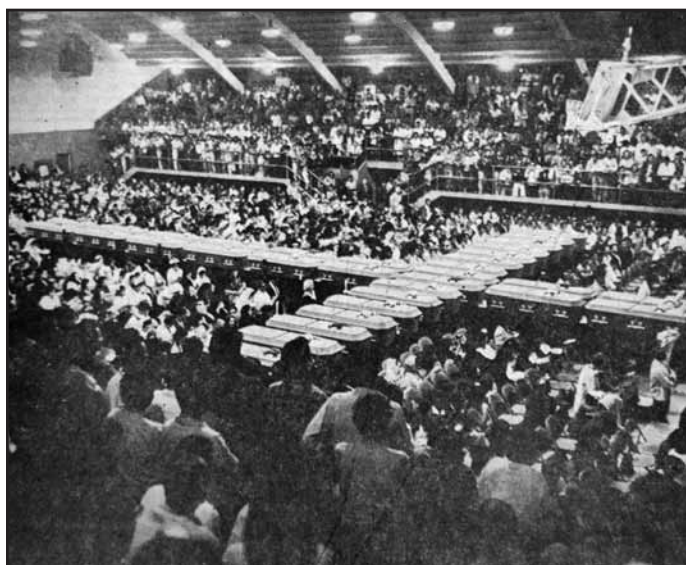


Figure 3. The coffins of the thirty-two victims of the Chualar accident form a cross during a public funeral in the Palma High School gymnasium in Salinas on 25 September 1963. Photo courtesy of the *Salinas Californian*.

over the braceros' bodies and memory, Salinas representatives claimed them as their own in a way they never had when the men were alive. Nameless before their deaths, the victims became mourned members of the Salinas community in a public display designed to position California agribusiness as sorry but not directly accountable for this loss of Mexican lives.

The nine thousand people who attended the funeral in the Palma High School gymnasium on 25 September belied the isolation and invisibility that these men had endured in the region since the beginning of the Bracero Program in 1942. Housed in labor camps far from town centers, braceros were peripheral residents acknowledged by locals as necessary workers but racialized and sexualized as dangerous masses of single Mexican men (though this "single" identity was desired by both growers and the U.S. government, which did not want to provide accommodations for braceros' families). Six thousand braceros from around the region joined three thousand others—of whom, regrettably, nothing is recorded except for the presence of a few growers and politicians—in paying their respects. An American flag at half-mast flanked the gym's entrance while a Mexican flag and a pennant of the Virgin of Guadalupe stood at the head of thirty-two simple gray caskets arranged in the shape of a cross.

Californian, 21 September 1963; Ben López Jr., interview by author, 29 September 2008; and José Rafael Ramos to Ernesto Galarza, 7 November 1963, folder 4, box 16, Galarza Papers.

(See figure 3.) Mourners filled the gym's bleachers to capacity, forcing three thousand people to stand outside the building. Valley clergymen and growers and representatives from the Mexico, U.S., and California governments stood together near the caskets. A local Spanish-speaking priest delivered a sermon, after which the choir of Sacred Heart Catholic Church—a local church that had, ironically, excluded Mexican-origin people from its congregation in the early 1950s—provided the music during the hour-and-a-half-long ceremony. “[V]alued as laboring bodies, mere arms detached from intellect or political will,” braceros lacked a personhood while working in the United States that, in the case of Chualar, they only acquired through death.²⁸ Salinas agribusiness demonstrated through this public spectacle that it could memorialize the dead while still exploiting the living.

The posthumous personhood bestowed upon the Chualar victims did not extend, however, to the accident's lone undocumented victim. Antonio Gómez Zamora was buried separately in a Salinas cemetery; it is not known who paid for his burial or whether his family in Mexico ever tried to claim his body.²⁹ Zamora's exclusion from the braceros' resting place was most likely very intentional on the part of the Salinas GFLA. The Bracero Program had long been touted as the solution to unregulated Mexican immigration to the United States, with its formal recruitment and contracting procedures. Yet Zamora's death illuminated the reality that neither the program nor immigration initiatives like “Operation Wetback” (a quasi-military U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service drive that deported approximately 3.7 million undocumented Mexicans from the country by bus, train, plane, and boat between 1954 and 1957) had solved the problem of undocumented migration. Rather, scholars estimate that at least 5 million undocumented Mexicans crossed into the United States throughout the program's tenure out of economic desperation or impatience with the long bracero contracting process.³⁰ Failing to deliver on its promise of immigration control—and with the Chualar accident revealing even more of the program's flaws—Salinas grower interests rushed to clean up the mess. With the amount of local power they held, agribusiness leaders attempted to impede Ernesto Galarza's investigation of the Chualar victims' deaths while hiding the crash survivors from public attention and the court trial of bus driver Francisco Espinosa.

Appointed by the chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, Adam Clayton Powell, to formally investigate the Chualar incident, Galarza immediately encountered suspicion and hostility. The California Farm Bureau Federation argued that picking Galarza for the job was like “asking

²⁸ “9,000 Attend Mass for 32 Bracero Dead,” *Salinas Californian*, 26 September 1963; “3,000 Mourn Victims of Bus Crash,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 26 September 1963; “Mass for 32 Mexicans Slated at Palma High,” *Salinas Californian*, 24 September 1963; and Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York, 2008), 63.

²⁹ “9,000 Attend Mass” and “28 Braceros Killed,” *Salinas Californian*, 18 September 1963.

³⁰ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors* and García y Griego, “Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers.”

the fox to investigate a raid on a henhouse" while Rep. Charles Gubser (R-Gilroy) spent an hour in front of the House demanding that Galarza be removed from the investigation because he was neither objective nor qualified.³¹ Upon arriving in Salinas, Galarza faced the same obstacles. The firm that had converted the Chualar bus from a flatbed truck denied him access to their blueprints while Salinas GFLA Executive Vice-President Jack Bias and Director Ben López declined to furnish the labor contracts of the workers involved in the accident, most likely to conceal the fact that many of the contracts had expired by the time of the crash (which would have placed the organization in violation of the law and prohibited their further access to bracero labor).³²

Meanwhile, Espinosa's manslaughter trial had begun. A Mexican immigrant who entered the country at Hidalgo, Texas, in 1954, Espinosa made his way to Oxnard, California, where he climbed the agricultural labor ladder from field hand to foreman before moving north to Salinas. As a green-carder, Espinosa's resident status lifted him above the predominantly bracero work crews he supervised in the fields and drove to and from work assignments. At his preliminary hearing on 26 September—coincidentally or not, the day after the braceros' public funeral—the Monterey County Grand Jury recommended leniency, and District Attorney Bertram Young reduced the charges against him to thirty-two counts of misdemeanor manslaughter.³³ Attorney Robert Ames, the first Native American graduate of Stanford Law School and an eight-year resident of Salinas, was appointed to defend Espinosa. Aware of circulating rumors that the dead braceros' relatives in Mexico were plotting to kill his client, Ames believed Espinosa's best strategy was to remain in jail and avoid harm. Moreover, this jail time could count as time already served if he was convicted. Galarza, already suspicious of Ames for being a partner in the same law firm as pro-Bracero Program Congressman Burt Talcott, grew more dubious when Ames refused Galarza's request to interview his client.³⁴ In Galarza's eyes, Ames was encouraging Espinosa to perform penance that could downplay his role as the Chualar villain. In turn, the accident could become just that: an accident rather than the result of shoddy transportation and Espinosa's reckless driving.

Espinosa's trial began in Salinas on 9 December with the prosecution's opening argument simply being that Espinosa should have seen and heard the train. Prosecutors only called eight witnesses, including Espinosa's co-foreman, Arturo Galindo, and Sally Gutierrez (a Mexican American translator who had spoken with braceros at the crash site), but none of the crash survivors. Ames argued that strong Pacific Ocean winds had

³¹ Galarza, *Tragedy*, 2; "Farm Group Deplores Selection of Galarza," *San Jose Mercury News*, 25 October 1963; 109 Cong. Rec. 18,638–9 (1963); and Ernesto Galarza, *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Fields* (Notre Dame, IN, 1970), 164.

³² Galarza, *Tragedy*, 2, 36; Galarza, Accident Report, 10; and "Bracero Train-Truck Crash Toll Reaches 31," *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, 20 September 1963.

³³ Galarza, Accident Report, 26–7 and Galarza, *Tragedy*, 46–8.

³⁴ Robert Ames, interview by author, 30 September 2008 and Ernesto Galarza, "Interview—Robert Ames" and "Selected Notes on Interviews," 2, both in folder 6, box 16, Galarza Papers.

Figure 4. Bus driver Francisco “Pancho” Espinosa sits beside his pregnant wife, Guadalupe, at his court trial in Salinas, 10 December 1963. Photo courtesy of the *Salinas Californian*.



prevented Espinosa from hearing the train and that utility poles, Galindo in the passenger seat, and a diagnosis of poor peripheral vision—perhaps caused by his preexisting diabetes—had prevented him from seeing the train.³⁵ In other words, the failings of Espinosa’s body had caused him to fail to protect the bodies of others. During his four-day trial, Espinosa remained largely silent, flanked by court interpreter Gutierrez and his nine-months-pregnant wife, Guadalupe. (See figure 4.) When Espinosa finally took the stand, Galarza observed:

In his typical posture—large hands clasped in front of him, head slightly bowed—there was a dull quality to his awareness. . . . there was only one moment of sharp alertness, of visible emotion, and that was when he told of his reactions during the seconds following the crash. He described himself, and reenacted with motions and gestures, sitting in the cab, his hands gripping the broken steering wheel, his face jerking right and left as the freight cars flashed past him, hardly six feet away. Espinoza [sic] indicated the extent of his panic and shock when he testified that he could not tell from which direction the cars were coming.³⁶

³⁵ “Prosecution Rests Case in Bus Tragedy Trial,” *Salinas Californian*, 11 December 1963; Ames, interview; Eric Brazil, “Constriction of Vision Claimed,” *Salinas Californian*, 11 December 1963; and Galarza, Accident Report, 1, 29.

³⁶ Galarza, Accident Report, 25–6 and Galarza, *Tragedy*, 45.

Presented as a family man in a profound state of shock, Espinosa emanated a sense of confusion and remorse that clearly affected jury members, who, after less than two hours of deliberation, acquitted him of all charges. Espinosa, his wife, and their newborn child left Salinas soon after. The next year, rumors swirled that Espinosa had been killed in Mexico by relatives of the dead braceros, but these were later discounted. After that, he disappeared from the record.³⁷

Galarza found Espinosa's acquittal disturbing because of the jury's inattention to Espinosa's negligence and, on a larger scale, agribusiness's inattention to bracero safety. "[T]here was no disposition in the community to make a scapegoat of the driver, and this good will was to some degree undoubtedly encouraged by the fact that none of the victims had been local residents," Galarza observed in his report of the trial.³⁸ His question—Would the Salinas jury have reached a different decision if the dead workers had been U.S. citizens instead of Mexican ones?—was valid. Salinas residents did not treat braceros as community members but as temporary inhabitants and social outsiders. The deaths at Chualar had been deemed an unfortunate accident that local agribusiness and Espinosa's jury considered it best to forgive and forget. Although prosecutors could have made Espinosa a scapegoat, they pursued no additional testimonies or tactics to make him so, and growers did not encourage it, perhaps seeking to prevent any further investigation of their hiring and labor practices.

Determined to make safety violations a centerpiece of his own investigation, Galarza sought out the forgotten bracero survivors. He eventually discovered that growers had sequestered twenty-two of them at the Stewart-Hill labor camp, an "almost deserted" and "terribly bleak and depressing" place in Salinas, after their release from various hospitals.³⁹ Arguably, survivors' testimonies would have bolstered prosecutors' case against Espinosa and held tremendous weight in the jury's decision, yet survivors were never called to the stand or even allowed inside the courtroom. In illuminating interviews with eight of the men, Galarza acquired a very different picture of Espinosa. Calling him a "rough" and intimidating foreman who was "quick tempered" and "unresponsive to worker complaints" about wages and contracts, the braceros said that Espinosa often failed to stop at railroad crossings and "only got mad and paid no attention" when braceros complained about his reckless driving. In speaking of the Chualar incident specifically, the interviewees affirmed that Espinosa had "hardly stopped" before driving across the railroad tracks.⁴⁰

³⁷ Galarza, *Tragedy*, 48; "Espinosa Sobs Heavily After Acquittal Verdict," *Salinas Californian*, 13 December 1963; "Bus Driver Cleared in Crash that Killed 32," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 December 1963; Eric Brazil, "Fate of Pancho Espinosa: Is Driver Dead or Alive?," *Salinas Californian*, 15 September 1964; and "Bracero Death Bus Driver Executed?" and "Slaying of Bus Driver in Mexico Discounted," both in *Los Angeles Times*, 16 September 1964.

³⁸ Galarza, *Tragedy*, 48–9 and notes on a research trip to Salinas, 1 and 2 November 1963, 3, folder 7, box 16, Galarza Papers.

³⁹ Notes on a research trip, 2 and Galarza, Accident Report, 28.

⁴⁰ Galarza, Accident Report, 24–5; Galarza, *Tragedy*, 8, 43–4, 49; and memorandums by

Prohibited from returning to work in Salinas or returning home to their families in Mexico, these survivors remained in limbo with no information or visits from representatives of the Mexican Consulate, who were instead spending their time defending the Bracero Program against the protests of Mexican American civil rights groups. Evidently, the U.S. and Mexican governments were equally invested in keeping negative publicity about the program at bay—the former to maintain the flow of labor, the latter to maintain the flow of remittances. “The survivors of the crash have been forgotten. There was an impressive public relations mass for the dead but the living who are hurt or maimed are isolated, disperse [sic] and bewildered,” lamented Galarza in his personal notes.⁴¹ Although survivors stood as important witnesses to the accident and the dangers of the Bracero Program, the Salinas Growers Farm Labor Association—the very agency entrusted with ensuring their well-being—intentionally muted and hid them from public view. These men learned that in Salinas it was easier to care for and mourn dead Mexicans than confront the traumas and exploitation of those still alive.

Salinas agribusiness could not silence the growing vocal opposition to the Bracero Program. Labor union leaders sought to eliminate a nonunionized labor force that undercut and displaced U.S. farmworkers. Religious representatives wanted to improve the economic and spiritual condition of U.S. migrant workers while protecting Mexican lives and cultural values; they claimed the program brutally stretched Mexican families across the border or tore them apart altogether. Meanwhile, Mexican American activists had begun to forge a stronger, more unified civil rights movement in the wake of Chualar. In 1962 the membership and leaders of the CSO, California’s most prominent Mexican American civil rights group, refused to support the call of its rising leader César Chávez to make the needs and rights of farmworkers a priority. The organization quickly changed its tune in 1963, however, by expressing greater anti-Bracero Program sentiment and better incorporating rural Mexican Americans into its previously urban-focused civil rights agenda. The Chualar crash had reenergized conversations about labor, immigration, and the status of Mexican-origin people in the United States. Mexican American civil rights leaders, especially those based in Los Angeles, jumped on the anti-Bracero Program bandwagon because they recognized it could draw more attention to their existence and bolster their organizations’ national profile.

In a way, the death of a group of braceros had helped to birth a new phase of collaboration between California’s Mexican American leaders. In December 1964, for instance, representatives of LULAC, the AGIF, the CSO, MAPA, the Latin American Civic Association, and the Council for Mexican-American Affairs convened in Sacramento to discuss issues including agricultural labor policy, employment, education, poverty, and political appointments. Later, representatives of these groups, including Eduardo

Ernesto Galarza, “Survivors” and “Interview—8 Braceros—Camp Colorado—Oct. 10, 1963,” both in folder 6, box 16, Galarza Papers.

⁴¹ Memorandums by Ernesto Galarza, “S. Brunet—Mx Dept. Labor”; “Selected Notes on Interviews”; and “General Impressions,” all folder 6, box 16, Galarza Papers.

Quevedo, Bert Corona, and Herman Gallegos, appeared at a San Francisco hearing of the U.S. Department of Labor to specifically address the suffering of domestic farmworkers because of the Bracero Program. Then, in 1965, leaders including Galarza, Quevedo, national LULAC Vice-President Jess Vela, and American GI Forum state Chairman Charles Samarron met with California's Governor Brown to discuss topics pertinent to the state's Mexican American population. By 1965 a Mexican American Unity Council had formed to establish better communication and collaboration between these organizations. "We cannot any longer afford to remain away from each other as organizations . . . [doing so] merely guarantees the failure to reach the goals that are common to all of our groups," an April 1965 MAPA resolution read.⁴² Indeed, Mexican American political groups could not afford to act separately, partly because farmworker issues had become hot topics in national discourse, and these groups stood to benefit from this attention. Thus, even before César Chávez and Dolores Huerta gained fame as the leaders of the California farmworker movement through the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) grape strike in Delano in 1965, the Chualar tragedy of 1963 had helped to galvanize activists and pushed them to begin enfolded the concerns of rural Mexican Americans into the agenda of the nascent California Chicano movement.

Despite agribusiness's efforts to persuade Congress to extend the Bracero Program into 1965, the full Congressional vote on 4 December 1963 maintained the program's scheduled end on 31 December 1964. At a time when the United States was preoccupied with its global image and addressing concerns about migrant labor, unemployment, and race relations in the form of War on Poverty initiatives and legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the continuation of the Bracero Program became harder to justify. The Salinas Valley bracero deaths, along with the labor, human, and civil rights-centered rhetoric and protest it evoked from multiple communities, no doubt affirmed the necessity of Congress's decision. As Henry Anderson had predicted in a radio broadcast the day after the accident, "The death of the thirty-one martyrs of the Salinas Valley may also prove to have been the death of the bracero system."⁴³

On paper the program was dead, yet to noticeably "hysterical" California growers, it remained the ideal labor system that needed to be resurrected. State agribusiness soon found a loophole in Public Law 414—the Immigration and Nationalities Act—under which U.S. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz could certify the importation of foreign workers if an insufficient number of U.S. citizens were unavailable at fair rates

⁴² Telegram to Edmund G. Brown, n.d., folder 8, box 3, Eduardo Quevedo Papers, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University (hereafter Quevedo Papers); Mark Brilliant, *"The Color of America Has Changed": How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California* (New York, 2010), 211; roster from governor's meeting with Mexican-American Community, 28 December 1965, folder 8; James Delgadillo to Anthony Barieri, 6 July 1965, folder 10; and MAPA State Executive Board, "Resolution on Statewide Unity of Mexican-American Organization," 25 April 1965, folder 11, all box 3, Quevedo Papers.

⁴³ Anderson, "Blood on the Lettuce," 2.

of pay and adequate working conditions. Although he publicly asserted that he had no intention of approving another large-scale importation of Mexican nationals, Wirtz eventually acceded to California growers' requests for tens of thousands of Mexican workers to work strawberry and tomato harvests from 1965 to 1967.⁴⁴ The official death of the Bracero Program proved to be slow and painful, especially for those Mexican American farmworkers who still found themselves underpaid or unemployed because of the presence of their counterparts from across the border.

With the collision of a train and a bus came a collision of various communities—Bracero Program advocates and opponents, local and federal governments, and Mexican and Mexican American citizens—that proved to be an important moment in 1960s labor, social, and political history. Thrust into the national spotlight as a site of tragedy, the Salinas Valley became a center of debate over the future of the longest-lasting and most controversial guest worker program in the United States. As they lived, braceros stood as some of the least powerful workers in the country. Their dead bodies, on the other hand, held a catalytic power that accelerated both the end of the program and the evolution of a Chicano civil rights movement in California that enveloped the goals of both urban and rural Mexican Americans—two communities that had been quite distant in this state's history. Farmworkers' struggle against California growers' use of braceros in a post-bracero era continued, and Salinas reentered the spotlight in 1967 as some of its Mexican American farmworkers filed landmark lawsuits on the issue. Then, in 1970, these same farmworkers and many more would help César Chávez and the UFWOC carry out one of the largest agricultural strikes in U.S. history.

The Chualar tragedy of 1963 brought to light many injustices that had been kept in the dark. Fifty years later, it continues to illuminate the significance of the Bracero Program to twentieth-century U.S. labor, political, immigration, and ethnic history; the chillingly similar world of guest worker programs and farm labor injustices in which we are currently living; and how relations of power and political discourse can shape how long we remember—or how quickly we forget—tragedies and the people involved in them.

⁴⁴ Eric Brazil, interview by author, 13 September 2009 and Harry Bernstein, "Wirtz Gives No Hope to Growers on Labor," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 1965.