

A Roundtable on Maria L. Quintana, *Contracting Freedom: Race, Empire, and U.S. Guestworker Programs*

Deborah Cohen, Evan Ward, Aileen Teague, Jessica Kim, and Maria L. Quintana

Roundtable Introduction

Deborah Cohen

Maria Quintana's new book, *Contracting Freedom: Race, Empire, and U.S. Guestworker Programs*, is a fascinating, compelling, and disturbing read. Painstakingly researched, it posits a foundational relationship between all the so-called guestworker programs of the World War II era and beyond, whether the workers involved were Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, British colonial subjects or interned Japanese Americans. While the rhetoric and bureaucratic investment in these programs stressed their positives, those were merely "conceptual" (1, my emphasis), for the programs essentially "legitimated and extended U.S. racial and imperial domination abroad" (5).

According to Quintana, this shoring up of U.S. imperialism occurred precisely because the progressive state officials advocating for the programs equated the labor contract with the liberal state's formal extension of rights and freedoms to these migrants. "By delineating a series of legal rights to [temporary migrant] workers through the contract . . . architects of the labor programs hoped to extend the promise of freedom to Mexican and Caribbean migrant farmworkers" (7). That is, the labor contract got its power from its backing by the U.S. state; and in turn, the contract's set of seemingly formal rights and responsibilities gave further credence to the U.S. government as the arbiter of freedoms and protections. The programs, then, became the "paradigm" through which to connect and secure "the value of *formal labor contracts* [my emphasis], bilateral agreements between nation-states, and equal rights" (3).

However, as the book shows, nothing of the sort happened. Instead, as Quintana demonstrates, the processes (and personnel) that made the categorization of workers possible (i.e., enabled society to distinguish between "legal" and "illegal," in addition to other attributes) helped strengthen and extend U.S. empire.

Contracting Freedom draws together several compelling ideas. The first is that the labor contract broadly used in these programs was an outgrowth of and was still embedded in the nineteenth-century slave/free dialectic. The second is that looking to the liberal state for social change and social justice was a mistaken investment. Lastly, the Mexican, Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Japanese American labor contract programs were relationally produced because of their emergence out of the liberal state project and statecraft.

By examining the programs relationally and as emerging from liberalism's internal contradictions, Quintana is then able to show us "how the exploitive realities of the labor program—wage theft, injury, displacement, isolation, and poor living conditions—were not a government failure, but a product of the liberalism by which state power became justified" (11) and people became subject to it.

This subjectification was, she argues, "an inherently racialized and imperial process" (10) in which the liberal state could offer some citizens some benefits and recognize some claims, but temporary, non-national or tenuously national labor migrants were refused the protections of racialized citizenship and remained subject to the state's whims and persecution.

Our three reviewers have high praise for Quintana's historical work. Jessica Kim contends that the book "expands our understanding not only of contract labor systems but also of the logic, projects, and philosophies of twentieth-century liberalism." While she would have preferred a more in-depth analysis of the historiography of U.S. empire and imperialism and where Quintana's work fits into this historiography, she still sees the book's focus on the contract as possibly offering an opening onto the visualization of "older" forms of U.S. imperialism, which other scholars could/should take up.

Allison Teague has a slightly different reading of *Contracting Freedom*. She is focused on the role that "U.S. intellectuals and policymakers played in" the construction and use of the "language of freedom" that undergirded these guestworker programs. As a historian who concentrates on policy and policy implications, she appreciates Quintana's acknowledgment of the "limits" on "state-centered approaches to social justice," but she would have liked further exploration into other options, such as the possibilities for [non-state] political approaches (15). These possibilities, she contends, would speak to the scholarly commitments of those working in the history of U.S. foreign relations, especially in terms of policy. The bottom line for Teague is that "[w]ithout any engagement with suggestions for even the most incremental possibilities for reform, the policy implications of the book are not altogether clear."

The perspective of Evan Ward, the only non-U.S. historian among the reviewers, largely coincides with that of Kim and Teague, but he has his own set of priorities. As a Latin Americanist, he appreciates Quintana's investigation into whether "the new trajectory of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's liberal, reformist order transformed U.S. labor relations and, if it did, whether it moved them away from colonialism and racial exploitation or, conversely, toward them." He points especially to the ways a U.S. official's policy experience in one place would be applied to other places. For example, Rexford Tugwell, who understood Mexico's land distribution policies, applied them to the Caribbean with disastrous long-term consequences (158). The outcome was that the "farm labor importation program became a means by which the U.S. government was able to further its hegemony over the Caribbean [and Mexico], while purportedly working against the 'colonial order of things'" (190).

The reviews do the critical work of highlighting what *Contracting Freedom* provides scholars of America foreign relations and the United States in the world. Below I propose several

questions for consideration, not just in reference to Quintana's book but for the field more generally.

First, like Ward, I have reservations about equating Mexico with Puerto Rico and Caribbean territories in this era. Can historians really treat the U.S. relationship with Mexico as similar to the U.S. relationship with Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, or Mexican labor programs as similar to those in the Caribbean? The political positions of those states *vis-à-vis* the United States were radically different: Puerto Rico was a U.S. colony; the Caribbean territories were then held by Britain; and Mexico was an independent republic. Does Mexico's official national sovereignty not shift the dynamics here, especially since the country had recently taken positions against the United States?

I am thinking here of the revolutionary state's stances against U.S. border incursions and of the positions taken by Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), who, in 1938, not long before the bracero program began, had nationalized the fields that belonged to Standard Oil and other big transnational companies. Cárdenas did propose compensating the companies, but only by using dollar amounts that accorded with their tax declarations, which had undervalued their holdings and brought about the nationalization in the first place. This was part of Mexico's dramatic repositioning *vis-à-vis* the United States. While Mexico did ultimately agree to the bracero program, might these oppositional stances not add nuance to how we understand its relationship with the United States? And what about the occasions during the program when Mexico refused to negotiate? What did Mexico gain, in other words, by being a sovereign nation?

My second question concerns the Mexican Revolution and the reconfigured state projects that emerged from it. By the time of the bracero program, the Mexican state had already invested in rural education programs that taught not just basic curriculum, but what it meant to be Mexican. Would not the actual upheavals of the revolution, the different state actors in place, and the rhetoric of a new state project change Mexican migrants' understanding of the program or their thoughts about who was responsible for their situation, especially at those times and in those places where the Mexican state didn't (successfully) intervene? What about the meanings that labor migrants, both braceros and the unauthorized, attributed to the program? How might Mexico's stances in relation to the United States change how braceros understood the conditions of and rationales for their journeys?

Lastly, and more broadly, is there never a positive role for the liberal state? Does it never foster positive change? Are there always negative consequences to its policies? Or are the results more mixed, especially as those policies respond to social movements and other pressures? After reading *Contracting Freedom*, one might conclude that the former is the case. Quintana sees no upside to these labor programs and no role for the state more generally. The progressive state actors she writes about only fall victim to its tangled web because they saw the state as the locus of change. They can accomplish nothing because its web has already ensnared them and made them subject to its way of thinking.

While I understand this tendency, this comes too close to a judgment about the past. I would urge historians instead to remain open to understanding the past in its context, which, if her work is read against the grain, Quintana already hints at. Though she claims her protagonists' failures are due to an unwavering investment in the state's ability to bring about change, she tells us that some did later regret their positions. We might see her examination of their regrets and of the acts of labor migrants (and, I would suggest, all non-state actors) in mobilizing against state power as providing us a window onto a dynamic relationship through which the state might be pushed and prodded. That is, while the state is not and will never be the *sole* lever of social change, it might still be a critical actor in relationships and policies that could bring about needed change. Quintana's impressive new book gives us a close look into the ways U.S. state officials attempted to bring about progressive shifts and the contradictions of liberalism that forestalled such change.

Review of Maria L. Quintana. *Contracting Freedom: Race, Empire, and U.S. Guestworker Programs*

Evan Ward

In *Contracting Freedom: Race, Empire and U.S. Guestworker Programs*, Maria L. Quintana offers a postcolonial critique of bi-lateral U.S. guest worker programs initiated throughout the hemisphere during World War II. The broad sweep of labor history is presented in the historical context of the New Deal programs, domestically, and the Good Neighbor Policy, hemispherically. Quintana explores whether the new trajectory of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's liberal, reformist order transformed U.S. labor relations, and if it did, whether it moved them away from colonialism and racial exploitation or, conversely, toward them.

Ultimately, she contends, even with the reformist bent of visionary administration officials, labor advocates, and freshly elected post-colonial presidents, including Rexford Tugwell, Ernesto Galarza, Clarence Senior, and Eric Williams, the U.S. government failed to uphold its individual obligations to guestworkers. She argues that guestworker programs perpetuated legacies of colonialism, exploitation, and racism. "The farm labor importation program became a means by which the U.S. government was able to further its hegemony over the Caribbean [and Mexico]," she writes, "while purportedly working against the 'colonial order of things'" (190).

Contracting Freedom is structured around a core argument that guestworker programs in the mid-twentieth century were effectively not much different from slavery. The evidence rests heavily on realities of conditions cited by workers in all of the programs discussed. Contracts, and more precisely their enforcement, lay at the center of whether twentieth-century labor programs would diverge significantly from conditions during slavery, debt peonage, and sharecropping.

Throughout her book, Quintana evaluates government actions on contracts between workers and farm owners, judging whether the United States had shifted towards a truly liberal, democratic nation by elevating the rights of workers (which included unionization), or if it continued to side with farm owners and their legislative advocates. In the context of current politics, Quintana's negative assessment of these issues aligns with the claims of critical race theory, which question the tenets of American liberalism as a basis for expanding freedom.

The book foregrounds bi-national labor programs with an examination of the experience of New Dealers like Rexford Tugwell, an economist who brought to the Brain Trust a knowledge of social land distribution programs in post-revolutionary Mexico. "Taking what he learned in Mexico about revolutionary agrarian reform with him to the United States and Puerto Rico," Quintana argues, "he pioneered a land reform and agricultural diversification program that had an undeniable long-term impact on the Caribbean Basin" (158). His ideals, along with similar visions of ennobling guestworker programs throughout the hemisphere, served as the basis for guest programs that ultimately fell short of contractual obligations in every case study examined.

The author uses a wide variety of sources to showcase the voices of guestworkers in the United States. These sources enumerate the ways in which farm owners did not abide by the provisions of worker contracts. It would be interesting to see the perspectives of farm owners as well. In *Contracting Freedom*, they are convicted of not delivering on their promises to the workers, although Quintana ultimately faults the U.S. government for not enforcing the terms of worker contracts.

Quintana is generally critical of guest worker programs, but she does recognize that some have improved the lives of workers. In the case of the British West Indies, for example, she notes that "the result [of these programs was] economic progress, as guestwork seemed to alleviate unemployment and raise wages" (209). However, she clearly expects much more of government

officials, who fall short of fulfilling their promises to see that the workers were treated as free people who deserved the decent conditions that their contracts guaranteed.

The author is also unsparing in her critique of liberalism elsewhere in the hemisphere. Although the land reforms of the Mexican president, Lazaro Cardenas, provided impetus for the New Deal visions of a more humane guestworker regime, those reforms largely failed, and Quintana lays blame at the feet of Mexican officials who did not enforce contractual obligations. She also censures the administrators of Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico and the newly independent administrations in the British West Indies. As a result of their failures, Quintana writes, “the efforts of liberal New Deal leaders in Puerto Rico in the 1950s to reform colonialism and racism rearticulated a system of racial relations that . . . reinvigorated racial capitalism, resulting in labor coercion” (170).

One of the primary contributions of *Contracting Freedom* is the geographic and comparative scope of the book. As Quintana notes, “Viewing the configuration of these labor programs together provides a more comprehensive understanding of empire and state hegemony as rooted in the political and epistemological project of liberalism and nation” (187). While the Mexico-U.S. bracero program in the United States is front and center (particularly because of the extensive coverage given to the efforts of Galarza to secure additional rights for guestworkers), Quintana also compares those workers’ experiences, spanning the period from 1942 to 1964, with those of British West Indian, Japanese-American, and Puerto Rican laborers during the same era.

One of the critiques that might be offered to Quintana concerns the roles of citizenship and sovereignty, particularly as they applied to Mexican braceros. Quintana rightly points out the different rules that applied to Puerto Rican laborers, for good or ill, in the context of U.S. legal structures, as well as the problematic status of Japanese American interns (many of whom were citizens whose property was coveted, then claimed by neighboring landowners during their guestworker contracts). In the case of the braceros, I fully acknowledge that individual farmers often fell far short of providing the conditions stipulated in contracts, but both Galarza’s pursuit of union rights for guestworkers and the author’s critique of the failed programs ignore the realities of the self-interest of nation states in reserving the benefits of full citizenship for their own citizens, as well as the concept of national sovereignty.

Ultimately, *Contracting Freedom* does a good job of examining the limitations of guestworker rights in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Quintana succeeds in bringing to light greater cross-fertilization among intra-hemispheric attempts to enhance the working conditions and aspirational arc of laborers during World War II. She also provides a comparative basis for assessing the similarities and differences between the outcomes of those programs.

Review of Maria Quintana, *Contracting Freedom*

Aileen Teague

In the first half of the twentieth century, the United States expanded its presence abroad and intervened to mediate conflicts across the globe. On the home front, this expansion led to a need for more labor to build infrastructure and produce food for a growing population. The need was particularly great during the Second World War, when more than six million American men were fighting abroad and required food rations to win the war. To solve its labor dilemma, the country turned to guestworker importation programs.

The implementation of contract labor programs came at a

moral and political cost. Maria L. Quintana’s *Contracting Freedom* examines contract farm labor programs using four unique case studies, which are explored both “relationally and in tandem”: the Bracero Program with Mexico, the mobilization of Japanese American laborers following their internment during the Second World War, the Puerto Rican farm labor program, and the contract labor program established with British West Indian states (1).

Between 1942 and 1964, more than 4.5 million workers from Mexico and hundreds of thousands more from the Caribbean cyclically migrated to communities from California to Connecticut to fill America’s labor void. After the war, however, guestworker programs became unpopular. Social and political concerns eventually led to the phasing out of the programs that Quintana explores, although some continued illegally. But the racist and imperial tendencies that undergirded these programs would shape new forms of contract labor plans that still exist today.

The author’s analysis is grounded in the role the U.S. government played in designing a flexible set of practices around guestworkers’ labor contracts, practices that protected government actors or agricultural employers from critiques of racism or imperial overstep. Yet according to Quintana, the supposedly race-neutral, anti-imperial import labor programs were not only “racial projects” subjecting ethnic minorities and immigrants to harsh living and working conditions; they were also a “sanitized means to expand the U.S. government’s power to manage, control, import, and deport laborers in a theoretically postimperial, post-slavery context” (9).

Quintana’s argument hinges on the role U.S. intellectuals and policymakers played in using the language of freedom to legitimize guestworker programs. New Deal progressives believed state-managed labor mobility and the voluntary or “free” nature of the guestworker programs obscured their similarities to institutions such as slavery or indentured servitude. Quintana contends that the “slave versus free” dialectic was not only misleading, but it also left space for racist, imperial actions executed through state authority. The language of freedom also manifested itself in the ways guestworker programs were advertised. To potential contract workers in Mexico, Jamaica, or Puerto Rico, the programs were presented as opportunities for migrant workers to “fight for democracy.” They were not simply an economic opportunity, the advertisements said, but a chance for migrants to do their share in the war effort (1).

In inaugurating contract labor programs, New Deal officials promoted the United States as a welcoming place for Mexican or Caribbean workers and advertised the labor contract as a protective mechanism against racial discrimination or ill treatment. But while these officials believed guestworker programs were fundamentally innovative in their approach to social justice and in their desire to improve societies throughout the Western Hemisphere, Quintana argues that the programs were deeply rooted in U.S. histories of colonialism and slavery (10). What is more, guestworker programs also advanced U.S. racial and imperial domination in the postwar period and have played a prominent role in shaping U.S. immigration policies ever since.

One innovative aspect of Quintana’s study is how it treats the relationship between liberalism and empire. Some U.S. policymakers genuinely believed they could use the guestworker programs to improve the lives of migrant farm laborers by ensuring that their civil rights were recognized (4). The problem was that the expansion of state power necessary to execute the programs justly also occurred along racial lines, which prevented the state from ensuring that migrant labor force received equitable treatment. For Quintana, liberalism—the idea that the state exists to protect and guarantee individual rights and to ensure equality—was an important rationale for the expansion of state power during the 1930s and 1940s. But *Contracting Freedom* demonstrates that in the case of labor programs involving ethnic

“others,” the government’s desire to police and expand its power in other areas made it fundamentally unable to protect migrant workers from both exploitative employers and the system itself.

Thousands of migrant workers—especially those who came from Mexico with the Bracero Program—chose to avoid labor contracts altogether by moving to less exploitative employers or traveling to the United States illegally. With the rise in illegal migrant workers in the years following the Bracero Program, the government doubled down on creating agencies to survey, interrogate, and deport illegal workers. It did so without a comprehensive understanding of how it had ultimately failed contract laborers from the outset. Instead of working to improve the Bracero Program, New Dealers placed unprotected workers into the category of “illegal” migrant, which subjected them to state control in other ways (11).

Another intriguing aspect of this book is the author’s effort to tie the story of contract labor programs into the broader history of civil rights and freedom. The book raises provocative questions about the “limitations and contradictions of state-sponsored approaches to social justice,” and it suggests possibilities for “other [non-state] political approaches”—approaches that might be of great interest to those working in the history of U.S. foreign relations (15). Given Americans’ continued dependence on migrant labor and the book’s criticism of the state as a guarantor of equal rights, it would have been fascinating if the author had further developed these other “political possibilities.” What could government or nongovernment actors have done to improve or replace contract labor programs? Without any engagement with suggestions for even the most incremental of reforms, the policy implications of the book are not altogether clear.

Outside of fervent critiques of a pernicious U.S. imperial system, Quintana mentions few concrete historical actors who can be held accountable for the ill-advised political projects they designed, which for readers of this platform, at least, portends the absence of realistic, policy-relevant insights. Though the lead character in this study seems to be the New Deal-era labor contract itself, more attention could have been paid to the specific ways historical actors and personalities effected the contracts (outside of Ernesto Galarza, discussed below). How much intentionality was involved in their actions? Did their actions produce unintended consequences? Who were the legal actors involved and how did they help construct the labor contract program?

The principal contribution of *Contracting Freedom* is certainly the comparative framework Quintana employs. It links distinct labor programs from the U.S. West to those from the Caribbean—normally examined separately—and incorporates them into a comprehensive exploration of how a variegated labor force subtly critiqued the guestworker programs of which they were a part. The study highlights how workers of different ethnicities, cultures, and geopolitical circumstances became subjects of U.S. state power.

The story unfolds across six chapters. Chapter 1 examines the genealogy of the labor contract and illustrates how the dialectic between slavery and freedom has framed U.S. policymakers’ commodification of migrant labor. The impacts of New Deal-era contract labor programs have been far-reaching. They left an indelible mark on subsequent federal immigration policies, which expanded in the mid-twentieth century to draw stark distinctions between laborers: foreign versus domestic, legal versus illegal, white versus nonwhite, etc.

Chapter 2 introduces one of Quintana’s protagonists, Mexican American labor and civil rights activist Ernesto Galarza, an official of the Pan-American Union and one of the chief architects of the Bracero Program. Though an advocate for Mexican workers, Galarza believed in the liberal politics of the era, and the author uses him as a lens to examine the social and political currents surrounding New Deal labor contracts. On one level, the

author seems to have a great deal of empathy for Galarza. She applauds his dream of improving Mexican Americans’ lives. But Galarza’s benevolent mission ultimately failed because he played a part, unknowingly, in promoting the efforts behind the coercive system that worked to the detriment of Mexican workers.

Chapter 3 shifts to the U.S. West to explore the deep interconnectedness of the Bracero Program and the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the war. Some readers will be surprised to learn that early in the war, incarcerated Japanese Americans helped to meet the country’s farm labor demands. At the same time, their incarceration would eventually contribute to the perceived labor shortage that validated the Bracero Program (85). Implicit in the rationale for both the Bracero Program and the internee work programs was the way federal power was used to develop what were supposed to be race-neutral contract labor programs for historically racialized populations. Legacies of white supremacy and imperial concerns undermined the stated intent of the programs.

Feeling abandoned by the state after beginning work in harsh labor conditions, many braceros abandoned their contracts, which, as chapter 4 explains, made their legal status ambiguous. The author argues that for braceros, going “illegal” was a way to exercise personal freedom. But the same government that was charged with protecting braceros inaugurated Operation Wetback in 1954 to intercept and deport illegal migrants. Galarza and others were convinced that the government was capable of distinguishing between legal and illegal workers delineated by the stipulations in the labor contract, but this was not the case.

Chapter 5 details the Puerto Rican labor importation program, which the author believes was a “postcolonial” model of governance in which Americans promised Puerto Ricans the right to freedom and citizenship but also continued to maintain hegemony over them. Finally, chapter 6 explores British West Indian contract laborers. With its promise of liberal protections, the United States was supposed to be different from the countries’ former British colonizers, but Quintana argues that the system of labor contracts served only to increase U.S. influence throughout the Caribbean.

Many of the conclusions generated by *Contracting Freedom* resonate with present tensions between America’s desire for cheap labor and its inability to ensure that the rights of this labor force are not violated. The study describes one of several historical instances in which the U.S. government brought migrant laborers to the United States and soon after turned them into “illegals” the state could then deport. It has happened before, and if major changes are not made to the system or the way U.S. citizens see the system, it will happen again.

One subject not adequately covered in Quintana’s study is the complicated history of backlash against immigrant labor within U.S. society. Organizations such as the American Federation of Labor often united against immigrant labor and argued furiously about the impacts on U.S. labor that bilateral agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement would have. Social justice was not at the root of their worries; they were afraid immigrants would take American jobs. An examination of the ways in which the ideas of upper-echelon New Deal politicians connected or clashed with those of the average white worker would have made a welcome contribution to *Contracting Freedom*.

Another subject I found myself wanting to know more about is how these varied labor contract narratives were resolved. As someone who writes about U.S.-Mexico relations, I understand the legacies of the Bracero Program—perhaps the most widely known of Quintana’s case studies—but I found myself wanting to know more about what happened to the Boricua Braceros and the British West Indian laborers in the aftermath of the contract labor programs and what impacts U.S. guestworker programs had on these unique locales.

Feeling abandoned by the state after beginning work in harsh labor conditions, many braceros abandoned their contracts, which, as chapter 4 explains, made their legal status ambiguous. The author argues that for braceros, going “illegal” was a way to exercise personal freedom. But the same government that was charged with protecting braceros inaugurated Operation Wetback in 1954 to intercept and deport illegal migrants.

In sum, Quintana's comparative framework for U.S. guestworker programs at a critical point in their history suggests that scholars are only scratching the surface when it comes to the role of labor in U.S. imperial history. That Contracting Freedom raises such far-reaching questions about labor and migration in the context of race and imperial concerns is a testament to its richness.

Review of *Contracting Freedom*

Jessica M. Kim

Maria L. Quintana's *Contracting Freedom: Race, Empire, and U.S. Guestworker Programs* is a powerful piece of scholarship that sits at the intersection of studies on immigration, labor, civil rights, citizenship, and twentieth-century liberalism. Building on the recent work of scholars such as Deborah Cohen and Mireya Loza, Quintana broadens our understanding of contract labor both geographically and politically, arguing that policymakers in the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean championed a variety of guestworker programs as "fairer" alternatives to the brutal earlier labor practices generated under systems of colonialism and slavery.

There are a number of significant studies of contract and guestworker programs in the twentieth-century United States, but Quintana's is the first to bring together a geographically expansive and comparative history of guestworker programs in one book and to discuss their histories relationally. The political philosophy of liberalism is the umbrella under which they all fall.

Indeed, New Deal liberalism is the fulcrum of Quintana's book and her argument about contract labor and empire in the United States during WWII and in the postwar Western Hemisphere. She contends that New Deal policymakers, their political successors, labor activists, and some civil rights leaders believed that the contracts governing guestworkers' entry into and labor within the United States epitomized the individual rights and freedoms espoused by New Deal liberalism and racial liberalism. And she successfully makes this argument across the book, tracing the various decisions that U.S. policymakers made in constructing labor programs from Mexico to the Caribbean.

In fact, the overlap between policymakers and activists across the various contractual labor programs of the mid-twentieth century is one of the most compelling parts of this book. Quintana follows a number of key individuals to demonstrate how their thinking and their roles in the U.S. government undergirded the logic of the various labor programs. These policymakers included Roosevelt's New Deal adviser on the Caribbean, Charles Taussig, and the U.S. governor of Puerto Rico, Rexford Tugwell.

Labor and civil rights activists, including Eric Williams and Ernesto Galarza, also overlapped and sometimes shaped policy. These policymakers and advocates crisscrossed the hemisphere in the mid-twentieth century, borrowing heavily from each other as they conceived the idea of contracted labor and structured and justified it within the political framework of liberalism. Galarza, for example, played a central role in the Bracero Program and then also influenced the program for Puerto Rican agricultural workers.

Quintana situates these actors and the contract labor systems they championed within a long history of free and unfree labor in the first chapter, with a particular focus on how liberalism, as it evolved in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, served to buttress the labor contract as a form of individual "freedom." Under this logic, the state ensured individual freedom through the enforcement of labor contracts. Through state-sponsored programs, a laborer could weigh the pros and cons of a labor contract, become a signatory "voluntarily," and have faith that the state would enforce the "fair" components of that contract. As Quintana writes, "With the goal of state-mandated rights in mind, progressive politicians and leaders invented the figure of the mid-twentieth century contract laborer as one who entered into a contract with one nation-state to legitimately travel

to another nation-state . . . [I]mported contract labor became a renewed symbol of freedom rather than slavery by 1942" (41–42). Proponents of these programs argued that contractual labor was the antithesis of enslavement, not its successor, and that free will, choice, and consent made freedom a central pillar of contract labor.

Contracting Freedom also dissects how the leaders and the rhetoric of mid-century civil rights championed "the contract" as the conveyor of individual rights, thereby creating a labor and civil rights movement that divorced the interests of a transnational working class from the rights of domestic workers. Focusing on the labor movement on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as bi-national policymakers, Quintana argues that Mexican American labor activists in particular created a divide between domestic civil rights for those in the country "legally" or under state-sanctioned contracts and those who crossed into the country "illegally" or without the sometimes dubious benefit of a labor contract.

Put more concisely, the right to rights under mid-century liberalism rested on the "freedom" and protections enshrined in a labor contract. Basing their efforts on that logic, civil rights and labor leaders crafted campaigns for worker rights aligned with the domestic interests of the AFL-CIO, the ACLU, and African American civil rights organizations that advanced the rights of workers "legally" present in the country while discriminating against those who entered "illegally."

In a further innovation, Quintana also brings the history of Asian labor migrations and the WWII internment of Japanese Americans into conversation with Latin American and Caribbean guestworker programs. Her sweeping first chapter outlines how free and unfree labor were reconstituted in post-Civil War America in part around debates over the relative freedom of Asian immigrant workers. Those opposed to immigration from China, for example, argued that contracted "coolies" were inherently unfree.

Even more innovative is Quintana's third chapter, which explores the "co-constitution" of the Bracero Program and Japanese American incarceration. She argues that the hiring of thousands of incarcerated Japanese Americans into contract agricultural work at the very same moment that the federal government was negotiating the terms of the Bracero Program demonstrates how "Mexican labor importation and state-mandated incarceration were . . . remarkably similar projects" (84). In her assessment, the federal government believed that both programs had liberal democratic ends, even though they relied on racism, coercion and even violence to staff American agriculture.

In another key chapter of the book, "Boricua Braceros," Quintana moves her discussion of contract labor in a relational direction, showing how policymakers in the United States, Mexico, and Puerto Rico shared a perspective on labor programs as a pathway to "freedom" under New Deal liberalism. Growers on the U.S. East Coast, cognizant of the Bracero Program in the West and Southwest, called for a Puerto Rican farm labor program to ease labor shortages. New Deal policymakers and their Puerto Rican counterparts envisioned a program that would satisfy demands for labor while also ensuring individual worker freedom and moving the territory from colonial governance to self-rule. But as Quintana points out, "the ideological bedrock of New Deal liberalism and racial liberalism justified the expansion of Puerto Rican state power over contract workers as an anti-imperial and benevolent measure, obscuring the processes by which Puerto Rican workers became racialized subjects of the Puerto Rican and U.S. governments" (157). In other words, the language of liberalism concealed both labor exploitation and racial inequality.

Final portions of the book foreground Quintana's argument regarding empire and contract labor programs with a focus on labor programs brokered between the United States and the British West Indies. New Deal policymakers instrumental in brokering contract labor agreements with Mexico and Puerto Rico resurfaced in negotiations about facilitating the movement of workers from the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica and the

Bahamas. As in the case of Mexican and Puerto Rican contract laborers, U.S. policymakers presented the labor program as a plan that would advance and protect individual rights and freedoms through a state-backed labor contract. New Deal policymakers also fashioned Caribbean labor programs as anti-imperial, in that they would support national independence for British colonial territories and advance the economic development of those regions.

One of the particular strengths of this discussion in *Contracting Freedom* is Quintana's ability to show how workers themselves recognized and contested the limitations of liberalism for laborers in an international context. Workers and labor advocates both understood that state officials were using "liberal devices like the labor contract to describe what was once colonial labor exploitation as anticolonial, cleansing the contract of its colonial origins and perpetuating imperialism into the twentieth-first century" (216).

Ultimately, *Contracting Freedom* is a forceful piece of scholarship that, for the first time, shows the interconnectedness of various forms of state-run labor programs and the power of liberalism to justify them. That said, Quintana's argument concerning postwar liberalism and its intersection with U.S. empire could be brought into sharper relief with further evidence and discussion.

Quintana maintains in her introduction that "liberalism, as a normative political idea and practice in the modern world, cannot be divorced from empire" (5). While this might be intrinsically true, the body of *Contracting Freedom* could do more to demonstrate how. For example, in setting up her argument, Quintana writes that "rather than focusing on how empire should be defined or whether the nation-state should be defined as distinct from empire, this book unveils the processes by which people become subject to state power(s)—an inherently racialized and imperial process" (10). While empire is indeed a slippery term that is hotly debated and difficult to define, I would have welcomed a deeper engagement in *Contracting Freedom* with the historiography of American empire in the Western Hemisphere.

Quintana's work has a lot to offer scholars of American empire as well as U.S. diplomatic historians. But she leaves it up to the reader to infer much of the book's contributions to these fields, particularly in the later parts of the book that deal with the postwar era. I am left with the sense that contract labor programs and the ideology of liberalism that buttressed them could tell us much more about the role the United States played in the hemisphere after the Second World War and into the period that Greg Grandin terms "the third conquest of Latin America"—a role that was rooted in multiple older forms of imperialism.

I am also curious about how Quintana thinks mid-century liberalism (as manifest in guestworker programs) shaped not only U.S. immigration policy, a process she explores in the epilogue, but also postwar U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, which was often disastrous. After all, it was U.S. imperial interventions, often couched in anticommunist rhetoric, that led to social and economic displacement and subsequent influxes of migration to the United States, both "legal" and "illegal."

Of course, no book can do all things, and this modest critique simply raises a few questions and presents suggestions for future exploration. It does not diminish the tremendous accomplishments of *Contracting Freedom*, which significantly expands our understanding not only of contract labor systems but also of the logic, projects, and philosophies of twentieth-century liberalism. More importantly, Quintana's book unflinchingly reveals liberalism's limitations in creating true freedom and the state coercion and violence inherent in the framework of liberal policies.

Roundtable Response to Reviews of *Contracting Freedom: Race, Empire and U.S. Guestworker Programs*

Maria L. Quintana

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) for including my book as part of this roundtable series in *Passport*. Many thanks also go to Aileen Teague, Jessica M. Kim, and Evan Ward for their encouraging and thoughtful evaluations of my book.

Contracting Freedom takes for granted that the U.S. nation-state is an empire rooted in white supremacy from its founding until today. Its laws have been fundamental to empire, such that guestworker programs can only be understood as an ongoing instrument of U.S. sovereignty and dominion. The book is an attempt to embed the U.S.-Mexico bracero program within the history of slavery in the United States as well as within the history of global capitalism and U.S. imperialism. In the book, I emphasize the importance of viewing the contemporaneous U.S.-Mexico and Caribbean guestworker programs relationally to unearth the role of state power and empire in recreating colonial social-structural racial inequities that remain with us today, in part through the continuation of state programs to manage labor migrations. While the U.S.-Mexico program was based on an agreement between nation-states, the Caribbean labor programs were originally based on agreements between the U.S. and the

British colonial government in Jamaica, Barbados, and the Bahamas, and with the colonial island possession of Puerto Rico. Placing the Bracero Program alongside the Caribbean labor programs thus exposes the ruse of national "agreement," reciprocity, and anti-imperialism that structured the guestworker programs.

In positioning the World War II guestworker programs relationally, *Contracting Freedom* also reveals how progressive officials and labor advocates engaged in debates over worker freedom that legitimized U.S. state power over racialized migrant

farm workers, masking but also extending colonial domination into the post-World War II era. I argue that New Deal progressives saw the farm labor programs as policy solutions that could ensure worker freedom, and as a result, unwittingly elided the history of slavery that informed the formation of contract labor importation programs in the first place. The language of liberal freedom they embraced, as embodied by the labor contract, thus reinforced and masked colonial state violence and coercion over workers, a violence which I render visible by focusing on the use of incarcerated Japanese Americans as contract farm labor alongside Mexican braceros during Japanese American "internment."

While these "guestworker" programs emerged contemporaneously, they have rarely been positioned alongside each other in the historiography. Those scholars critical of the farm labor programs as separate entities have often pointed out their congruencies with slave labor. I found this criticism of the labor programs deeply problematic, as it contributes to a historical genealogy in which workers have been marked as either "free" or "slave" as a means to expand state power over workers' lives. In chapter 1, I show how designating contract workers as "free" or "slave" resulted in the U.S. government either excluding or including people along racial lines in the expansion of immigration restriction policies from the 1860s to the 1920, resulting in the prohibition of contract labor programs. By the 1940s, contract labor programs came to be seen as vehicles of worker freedom yet again, resulting in the World War II guestworker programs.

In chapters 2 and 4, I show how after defending a Mexican contract labor program as a benevolent social measure of labor freedom in 1941, farm labor activist Ernesto Galarza spent the next twenty years of his life trying to combat the labor contract as a form of "slavery," to ensure that the braceros were not "slaves"

and that their rights were observed. In the end, he unwittingly reinforced the slave/free paradigm that has historically resulted in the expansion of state power and empire over migrant workers. I show how the transmutability of slavery and freedom for labor and civil rights advocates delimited an extended critique of the state and of capitalist labor relations in the United States and, in fact, aided in the expansion of U.S. state power over workers. Hence the title of the book, *Contracting Freedom*, which refers to the process in which the state provided a contract that offered migrant workers rights but also constricted or contracted workers' rights and freedoms.

If slavery and freedom each reproduce the other, then it makes little sense for us to refer to a neatly packaged and simplified progression from slavery to freedom in U.S. history, which reinforces U.S. exceptionalism. Instead, as I show, colonial violence continued to be reproduced in liberal institutions, discourses, and practices that embraced the logic of "freedom." In Kim's engaging analysis of the book, she asks for a precise portrait of how liberalism cannot be divorced from empire. While liberalism as an ideology requires a moral foundation upon which to thrive, based on universal freedom and equality, it also automatically implies the need for state power to support these ideals and ensure individual "rights" for those who are in need of state intervention. Therefore, it was precisely the extension of rights and freedoms to migrant farm workers that led to the expansion of state power over their lives, as the state became both manager and policeman of migrant labor. In the case of Mexican migrant workers in particular, it was the expansion of *legal* rights through the contract that produced migrant worker *illegality*, leading to the exponential growth of the U.S. Border Patrol and engendering racial state violence through the criminalization of migrant workers, worker policing, and deportation.

As I detail in the epilogue, the principal problem of guestworker programs is the centrality of worker legality, which grants authority to state governments to manage, control, and coerce workers into exploitative labor contracts that force them to go "illegal" as one of the few ways to resist exploitation and abuse. Legality thus produces illegality, in a circular logic that results in the need for the expansion of state authority to maintain a semblance of benevolence and protection through "legality." It also culminates in a system in which growers maintain ultimate control over the cost of labor, as workers have hardly any power to argue for improved conditions or wages, lest they risk deportation. In making this point, I argue for the abolition of guestworker programs, as the "self-interest" of nation-states preserves the capitalist interest of employers, authorizing worker exploitation and abuse.

The book fits squarely within a range of scholarship that excavates the role of liberalism in the maintenance of empire, including the "postcolonial" thought of Uday Singh Mehta, Lisa Lowe, Nikhil Pal Singh, Moon-Ho Jung, Julian Go, Takashi Fujitani, and others who analyze differently how liberalism reproduces empire and racial capitalism, while also revealing the exclusionary logic contained within liberalism. It takes seriously an Ethnic Studies perspective that champions the standpoint of colonized people as manifested in Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961). It also advances historian Cedric Robinson's views in *Black Marxism* (1974), where he argues for the development of a notion of justice rooted in the history of imperialist expansion and the structural legacies of slavery, a conceptualization that American slavery historian Walter Johnson argues exceeds and surpasses a liberal definition of "rights." Lastly, while the field of Latinx Studies tends to be dominated by more localized and regional histories, the book contributes to the call for a transnational and cross-racial Latinx studies that decenters the nationalisms that still dominate the field and puts comparison and critique of empire at the center.¹

Most scholarly examinations of American empire and U.S.

diplomatic history tend to take liberalism for granted and also therefore assume that rights and freedoms for workers through diplomacy and national policy are something worth striving for. They thus fall back on the impetus of state power, reinforcing U.S. imperialism because of their assumption that the government is capable of progressively ensuring workers' rights, even though government management of guestworker programs has rarely achieved that aim. As other scholars of the Bracero Program have pointed out, the program made the U.S. government the contractor and broker of workers in the service of agribusiness—not necessarily in the service of workers.²

The classic logic of guestworker programs—that they fill labor shortages and give workers jobs—is problematic. Although Teague mentions a labor shortage, there was no evidence of a real labor shortage during the World War II labor programs. Instead, historians have shown that farmers lobbied for labor importation programs to fulfill a perceived need for farm labor during the war and also to ensure a cheap and affordable labor surplus that they could underpay so as to achieve higher profits. Once the labor programs began, growers found that if they lowered wages sufficiently, domestic labor would not be willing to work. They thus created a superficial labor shortage that resulted in the U.S. Department of Labor's certification of more contract workers.³ The temporary status of guest workers also served the dual purpose of ensuring employers that their labor force would be docile and assuring white supremacists that foreign workers would not establish settled immigrant communities.

Ward suggests that the book omits the perspective of farm owners in the labor programs, but chapter 3 in particular emphasizes how growers participated in public hearings to lobby for the removal of Japanese American growers during World War II, lobbied to replace expelled Japanese Americans with Mexican imported labor, and then pressured officials to allow them to employ incarcerated Japanese Americans as migrant contract farm workers in the fields like Mexican braceros. As I show, U.S. growers did not always plan to deliver on the contract, and many growers sought to put non-white workers back in their proper place as racialized "stoop" labor. The United States, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and British colonial governments did very little to prevent this from happening or to protect workers from exploitative growers. And, as other scholars have shown, the U.S. government worked in collusion with growers to ensure their access to a racialized caste of labor. *Contracting Freedom* thus carries forth the methodological aims of historians of the U.S. empire, like Jason Colby and Manu Karuka, whose books have examined the role of corporate power, capitalism, and violence in perpetuating U.S. imperialism.⁴

Contracting Freedom is also situated among efforts to elucidate the cross-fertilization of the U.S. empire with other imperialisms. The study of connections and exchanges between the United States and other governments is becoming more popular. We can see that with Paul A. Kramer, "Empires, Exceptions and Anglo Saxons," Harvey Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees*, and Julian Go, *The Patterns of Empire*.⁵ Instead of comparing and contrasting competing imperial interests in a specific time and space, I show how the labor programs resulted in a system of overlapping imperialisms in which officials from each state attempted to fashion a liberal model of governance over workers that was rationalized by a language of democracy, rights, and freedom, and also supported capitalist production.

As I illustrate, political officials like President Ávila Camacho of Mexico and Governor Luis Muñoz Marín of Puerto Rico sought to accomplish their own political and economic ends and to fulfill their own visions of state benevolence through the creation of guestworker programs in the 1940s. Viewing the labor programs together unveils the complicated ways in which each state was implicated in reproducing imperial processes. By "over-

lapping imperialism," I do not mean to suggest that these imperial projects were the same, as Mexican officials often rejected the coercion of the U.S. empire through expressions of Mexico's sovereignty. However, the United States influenced the shape and form of liberalism that unfolded across the hemisphere from the 1940s through the 1960s in favor of U.S.-led capitalism, such that each labor importation project was shaped by similar ideas regarding rights and freedoms that then expanded the power each state had to manage and coerce workers.

Put another way, *Contract Freedom* shows how nations across the hemisphere participated in liberal projects that were informed by but not always determined by U.S. imperial governance. They were thus able to fashion their own imperial projects and practices. The autonomous choices they made led me again to critique the tendency in the historiography to paint the U.S. empire as exceptional, as the only empire in the hemisphere, or at least the most "powerful." To ensure the rights of workers, each government recruited, processed, and secured laborers from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the British West Indies for placement in the agricultural fields of the United States and it was the "freedom" implied in the voluntary signing of each labor contract that permitted workers to be coerced, exploited, and abused.

It was not that the reforms of New Deal progressives like Rexford Tugwell, Ernesto Galarza, Clarence Senior, and Eric Williams failed to fulfill their aims. Rather, their goals of democracy and freedom through the labor contract had consequences that they could not foresee. In each case, it was their optimism about the possibilities of liberalism and faith in the benevolence of New Deal state power, that afforded each state the legitimacy to expand its authority over farm workers. Although Teague would like to know how much intentionality was involved, holding these historical actors accountable for participating in processes that they were not cognizant of was not my goal. I did not set out to pass judgment upon the architects of the programs, but to unmask the hidden epistemologies that have historically reinforced colonial processes.

One common reaction to exposing and critiquing the history of guestworker programs in this way is to try to ascertain what policy changes would ameliorate or correct the errors of the past. In other words, is it possible to change the racist social structures and institutions that keep guestworkers entrenched in second-class citizenship? My aim in writing the book was not to prescribe policy, which would be an ambition far beyond the limits of my analysis. Instead, I aim to show that empire and race remain fundamental to the function and formation of guestworker programs, a function erased by the assumption that guestworker programs are an ameliorative policy capable of resolving the perceived "immigration crisis" in the United States.

Contracting Freedom demonstrates that guestworker programs are not a solution to the problem of restrictive anti-immigration policies, but the necessary condition upon which those

racial policies reside. Teague asks, "What could government or non-government actors have done to displace or improve contract labor programs?" This is the same question that civil and labor rights advocates asked themselves in this era, as they demanded that the state fulfill the rights written into the labor contracts. Their assumption that the state could and should ensure the rights of the contract permitted the state to expand its authority over workers, to decide along racial lines who was deserving of rights and who was not. Given the example 1950s bracero unionization efforts I provide in Chapter 4, the rights-based system of labor contracting must be eliminated, and migrant workers' voices and concerns must determine the administration and shape of the program.

We are again living in a time of flourishing temporary labor migration programs. The legacy of these programs is that guestworkers remain a "free market" solution to resolve the continued problem of unemployment resulting from imperial interventions throughout the hemisphere. In the postwar period, the United States established colonial dependency through foreign investment, U.S. military bases, and foreign aid resources like International Monetary Funds (IMF) loans. Today, expanded H2-A guestworker programs remain hegemonic political tools in the pacification of workers across the hemisphere, especially in countries where political leaders benefit from the unequal redistribution of wealth fostered by multinational corporations and the government-led privatization of public services under neo-liberalism. These programs continue to exist as deceptive "aid programs," with the labor contracts today not differing much from the contracts established in the 1940s. Given these realities, it is crucial that we shift the axis upon which these programs have historically been debated and arranged.

Notes:

1. Walter Johnson, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice," *Boston Review* (October 2016); María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "From the Borderlands to the Transnational? Critiquing Empire in the 21st Century," in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, ed. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).
2. Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
3. Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens, GA, 2012), 194; Jason M. Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America* (Ithaca, NY, 2011); Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley, CA, 2019).
4. Ronald L. Mize, "Power (In)-Action: State and Agribusiness in the Making of the Bracero Total Institution," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 50 (2006): 76–119; Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*.
5. See Paul A. Kramer, "Empires, Exceptions and Anglo Saxons," *Journal of American History* 88 (March 2002): 1315–53; Harvey Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); and Julian Go, *The Patterns of Empire* (Cambridge, UK, 2011).