

# 1 Criminalization and Militarization: Civic World Making in Arizona's Agricultural Borderlands

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## Introduction

The agricultural borderlands of Yuma, Arizona, produce 90% of the winter greens consumed in the United States, through the labor of 40,000–50,000 field workers, the majority of whom cross the border daily from Mexico. Rising between midnight and 1 a.m., they dress, prepare lunch, look in on sleeping children, and then make their way to the port of entry. There they wait along with tens of thousands of other field workers for two to three hours, show their papers, and arrive in the fields between 6:30 and 7:00 a.m., when the wage clock begins.

It takes workers between five and a half and six hours just to get to the fields. The return home is another two to three hours. This means seven and a half to nine hours of waiting, of suspended and colonized life, for thousands and thousands of people—mothers, aunts, grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, and teenagers. There is no real term in our labor lexicon to refer to this time. It doesn't count as wage theft (the denial of wages or benefits rightly owed) or as compensable travel time (which, under the Fair Labor Standards Act, only applies once the workday has begun). It is just the reality of agricultural labor in the borderlands.

In this ethnographic study, I examine the impact of national border security and immigration policies on farmworker communities in the Yuma borderlands. My concerns are with capacities fundamental to community life: mobility and the capacity to maintain familial and social ties, provision, and participate as members in shaping the civic world. There is a stark clarity in the way global dynamics and national policies come to the ground in borderland communities that promises illumination of the troubled nexus of immigration and agriculture.

## On Walls and Workers

Border walls work. Yuma Sector proves it.

—Elaine Duke, acting secretary of homeland security

The relationship between immigration and large-scale agriculture in the United States has long been fraught. President Donald Trump's 2017 visit to the Yuma borderlands illustrates dimensions of the trouble. On August 22, 2017, just days before announcing the pardon of former Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio, the president visited the Marine Corps air station in Yuma. He spoke with Customs and Border Protection agents, greeted marines, and looked at a Predator drone (newly retired from active combat in Iraq and Afghanistan) in the steeply up-armored Yuma Sector. All the while, the tightly scripted performance completely eclipsed the region's dependence on immigrant labor.

The following morning, the mainstream media reported the administration's story line: before the Secure Fence Act of 2006, with just 5.2 miles of fencing along the sector's 126 miles, the border "was besieged." Today, the narrative continued, apprehensions of illegal border crossers are one-tenth their 2006 levels, thanks to 63 miles of fencing, the tripling in the number of Border Patrol agents, massive increases in roads, electronic mobile surveillance, military hardware, and the construction of second and third layers of walls in urban areas (Carranza 2017; Duke 2017). According to then acting secretary of homeland security Elaine Duke, the Yuma Sector proves that the full border wall proposed by Trump will "turn the tide against the flood of illegal aliens and secure our homeland" (Duke 2017).

The assessment of whether walling works is never as simple as apprehension counts, as scholars have persuasively demonstrated by documenting the dramatic rise in the dangerous criminal economies of drug and human smuggling that *enforcement itself generates* (Andreas 2009). The 6,000 grisly deaths documented by human rights organizations in the first 15 years after border enforcement operations began pushing migrants into ever more dangerous terrain is another case in point (Jimenez 2009). Moreover, the question of where walling might end is chillingly raised by Todd Miller's account of "the 21st century border" in his book on homeland security and migration induced by climate change. In Central America's "northern triangle"—ground zero for climate change in the Americas, drought

is heaping unprecedented suffering on already suffering people, pushing farmers into the northward migrant stream (Miller 2017, 71–105). As Homeland Security’s quadrennial reports show, the US security apparatus is acutely aware of these climate-induced dynamics. To head off the flow of climate refugees, the United States is funding border enforcement hardware for Mexico and training Mexican immigration agents, police, and the military in border policing, and US Customs and Border Protection agents are physically working in detention centers along the Mexico-Guatemala border. Where does walling end, and who or what does it serve?

Political theorist Wendy Brown convincingly argues that the function of the recent surge of wall building across the world is to stage political sovereignty at a time when globalization has significantly attenuated it. Walls are “theater pieces for national populations specifically unsettled by global forces threatening sovereignty and identity” (Brown 2010, 9). They generate “an imaginary of stable and homogeneous (and sometimes white supremacist) nationhood” (9).

Trump’s visit to Yuma and his subsequent pardon of Joe Arpaio, the nation’s most visibly racist anti-immigrant sheriff, are performances in this costly nativist theater of state sovereignty. Simultaneously, they participate in a drama long constitutive of an agricultural regime that depends on the “persistent devaluation” of agricultural labor (Brown and Getz 2011). Shifting forms of invisibility and racialized visibility of agricultural communities keep labor costs low and workers cowed, ensuring agrarian accumulation and cheap food. Thus, on the one hand, an acute civic invisibility characterizes their lives; their needs, contributions, and voices are rarely part of public discussion. On the other hand, politicians, bureaucrats, and the media create periods of racialized hypervisibility in the form of “Latino threat narratives” (Chavez 2013) that have laid the groundwork for spasms of deportations (in the 1930s and 1950s) of the majority immigrant, majority Mexican agricultural labor force.

Today we are in the midst of another such spasm—with its own malevolent twist. A kaleidoscope of immigration and security policies have, with growing intensity over the last 30 years, illegalized and criminalized the US agricultural labor force (along with other immigrants), which is 75% foreign born, 68% Mexican, and 50% unauthorized (Martin 2017). The stock character of the “alien invader” overrunning our borders saturates the media (Chavez 2013), and US immigration enforcement increasingly uses

the figure of the “criminal alien” to justify expansion of a virulent immigration regime (Cházaro 2016). Thus, as globalization economically displaces and psychologically unsettles populations inside the nation, creating politically exploitable vulnerabilities, the hypervisibility of the racialized criminal invader and the invisibility of farmworker communities dangerously reinvigorate the old drama of “persistent devaluation” of agricultural labor.

## Methods

Scholars have argued that borderlands should be studied as sites of struggle within the frame of *fabrica mundi*—world making. In *Border as Method* (2013), Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson suggest we pursue the processes by which the objects of knowledge—borders in both the empirical and cognitive-emotional senses—are constituted. To take the border as method is to adopt an epistemological viewpoint that fosters critical understanding of dispossession, exploitation, and domination *and* attends to the multiple ways that political subjectivity and community are being constructed through struggle. These scholars are (and I am) interested in “the ontological moment”—what kinds of civic worlds are being made as border militarization and immigrant criminalization intensify?

For this study, I conducted 16 open-ended, in-depth interviews with leaders from educational, faith-based, and nonprofit organizations on the US side of the border (see the appendix). All participants are at least loosely connected to Yuma Interfaith, a local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation’s oldest grassroots organizing network. An organization of organizations, IAF intentionally bridges social divides, bringing people together across races, classes, and ethnicities to work on shared concerns. Having become familiar with IAF as a participant in another local affiliate, I recruited participants through Yuma Interfaith’s lead organizer. Informal interviews with growers, field workers, farmworker advocates, and Border Patrol agents, conducted on extended research trips with students to the Yuma borderlands, also inform this study.

In what follows, I contextualize the history of immigration and border security policy significant for agricultural workers and their communities. Then, after an introduction to the study site (see figure 1.1), I discuss my findings regarding the civic worlds emerging in the Yuma borderlands.

## Border Security and Immigration Policies

In the following sections, I trace broad historical periods, tending to patterns of invisibility and racialized hypervisibility that have persistently devalued agricultural workers. I draw attention to a “disconcerting history” in which border security and immigration policies have been unrooted in reality (Massey and Pren 2012), shaping an increasingly fascist fictional counterworld (Snyder 2017). Throughout, I illuminate the changing legal logic within which farmworker communities struggle to make a home.

### Pre-1965—Circular Migration

Until 1965, US law considered Mexicans to be migrants, expected to follow the labor trail but not to settle. Thus, a circular migration pattern was established, in which agricultural workers came for the season and returned to Mexico when the work ended. The border itself was virtually unpoliced by the state until 1924, when the US Border Patrol was created. While there were periodic mass deportations of these racialized and expendable workers, they were not subject to federal immigration laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act, and this contributed to the early dependence of border state agriculture on seasonal migration from Mexico.

This circular pattern continued in altered form with the Bracero Program. Between 1942 and 1964, 4.6 million Mexicans received guest-worker visas for temporary employment in the border state fields. Equal numbers crossed illegally, a group often preferred by growers because they had absolutely no legal protections. State responses to the presence of these unauthorized workers, based on concerns about lawlessness, veered erratically from waves of legalizations to the deportation of 1.1 million Mexican farmworkers in 1954.

### 1965–1993—Birth of the Framework of Illegality

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 marked an important shift in US immigration policy. For the first time, Mexicans were considered immigrants, and Mexico received a fixed immigration quota. Yet the quota was far below the number of Mexican field workers that large-scale agriculture had come to depend on. With the United States having simply expelled “the Braceros” the year before, there was no legal way for Mexican field workers

to work. Therefore, with border enforcement lax, these long-established migratory flows simply continued, with nearly all workers now without authorization. The number of potentially deportable, largely invisible workers rose to unprecedented levels. The framework of illegality was born.

Although unauthorized immigration leveled out by 1977, the year workers reestablished their Bracero-era levels, a dangerous politics of racialized hyper-visibility had been brewing. A “threat narrative” of a “border under siege” emerged in the 1970s with growing ferocity, exploited by politicians and bureaucrats at a time of deepening income inequality and insecurity (Massey and Pren 2012). Studies of national magazine covers and major newspapers from 1965 to 1995 show immigrants depicted as “a tidal wave” poised to “inundate” the United States and “drown” its culture or as an “invasion” against which “outgunned” Border Patrol agents try in vain to “hold the line” (Massey and Pren 2012, 6). A fictional counterworld was in the making.

Enforcement operations and immigration policies appeared at an accelerating rate and with increasing scope. As Massey and Pren show, an “enforcement loop” takes hold, in which enterprising politicians stoke public fear, lawmakers pass increasingly draconian legislation, and border enforcement launches operations. This results in a rise in boots on the ground and other interdiction capabilities, which enables more apprehensions, which provokes more fear, and so on. From 1977 to 1995, the number of Border Patrol agents increased by 2.5 times, the number of linewatch hours doubled, and the Border Patrol budget went up by a whopping factor of 6.5 *despite the lack of any real increase in illegal immigration* (Massey and Pren 2012, 8–14). Thus, Massey and Pren conclude, “a largely invisible circulation of innocuous workers” was transformed into “a highly visible violation of American sovereignty by hostile aliens” that propelled increasingly draconian enforcement operations (Massey and Pren 2012, 8). This treacherous political dynamic, in which policy is unhinged from facts, lays the groundwork for increasingly fascist policies.

Also during this period, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) created a path to citizenship and made the employment of undocumented workers a crime. Although employer sanctions had almost no teeth, growers preferred to avoid the risk, which fueled the rise of the labor contractor system, in which contractors (usually former field workers) procure and manage labor crews and are the first line of legal culpability for workplace violations. The IRCA also stimulated the underground economy

in forged documents, as millions of illegalized workers needed at least the appearance of legal papers. The law propelled already illegalized workers into further illegal acts.

### **1993–Present: The Criminal Alien**

The terrorist attacks that began in the 1990s prompted a series of massive border enforcement operations. Starting in 1993 with Operation Hold the Line, these operations aimed to “seal” urban areas along the border through huge boosts in military equipment, boots on the ground, and budgets. This militarization marks the start of what Aviva Chomsky (2014) calls “an obsession with the border,” so evident today.

These militarized operations pushed migrants into longer, more dangerous crossings in remote areas, which in turn increased the need for and the cost of smugglers, making human trafficking more attractive to drug rings (Andreas 2009). They also were responsible for a more than doubling of unauthorized Mexicans in the 1990s and the early part of the following decade. By dramatically raising the costs for migrant workers to return home (including potential death), they encouraged millions to settle, radically reducing circular migration (Massey and Pren 2012).

A long list of reductions in the rights of these hypervisible unauthorized immigrants and increasing criminalization followed. The 2001 PATRIOT Act allowed indefinite detention for noncitizens, while in 2005 Operation Streamline changed unauthorized entry and reentry into the United States from a civil offense to a criminal one, the latter punishable by two years in federal prison. Using the new 1996 powers of “expedited removal” of any noncitizen who crossed the border without documents, Operation Streamline has processed hundreds of thousands of these “criminal aliens” have been processed en masse in special courts, bound together in chains. Critics charge that the proceedings violate their due process right to adequate counsel (Rickerd, n.d.).

Immigrant-only detention centers—a full half of which are private—house those awaiting court proceedings. A growing for-profit economy around criminalized immigrants has raised human rights concerns that also extend to government facilities. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals recently rejected the Border Patrol’s argument that being required to provide mats and blankets to detainees in Arizona, some of whom are held for 72 hours, constitutes “a hardship” for the agency (Fischer 2017a).

Since the War on Terror, deportations of unauthorized immigrants have skyrocketed, rising from a pre-1995 level of 50,000 annually, where it had been for decades, to a peak of 409,000 in 2012 (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2016). Although no terrorists have entered the United States through the southern border, no terrorists have been Mexican, and all terrorists entering had legal visas, Mexicans have been disproportionately targeted for deportation by these antiterrorism campaigns, *comprising a shocking 72% of those removed in 2009* (Massey and Pren 2012, 16). In this paroxysm of nativism, policy is unhinged from factual reality.

Under the legalistic guise of opposition to (a manufactured) criminality, racial discrimination against immigrants in the post-civil rights era continues (Chomsky 2014, 14–20). President Trump's January 2017 executive order that makes not only immigrants *convicted* of a crime but also those *charged* with a crime priorities for deportation is a fascist escalation of this logic. It is within this escalating fascism that we should situate the president's sending of thousands of active-duty military and National Guard troops to the border and his 2019 declaration of a state of emergency *at a time when apprehensions at the border were at a 40-year low* (Robinson 2018; US Customs and Border Protection 2019).

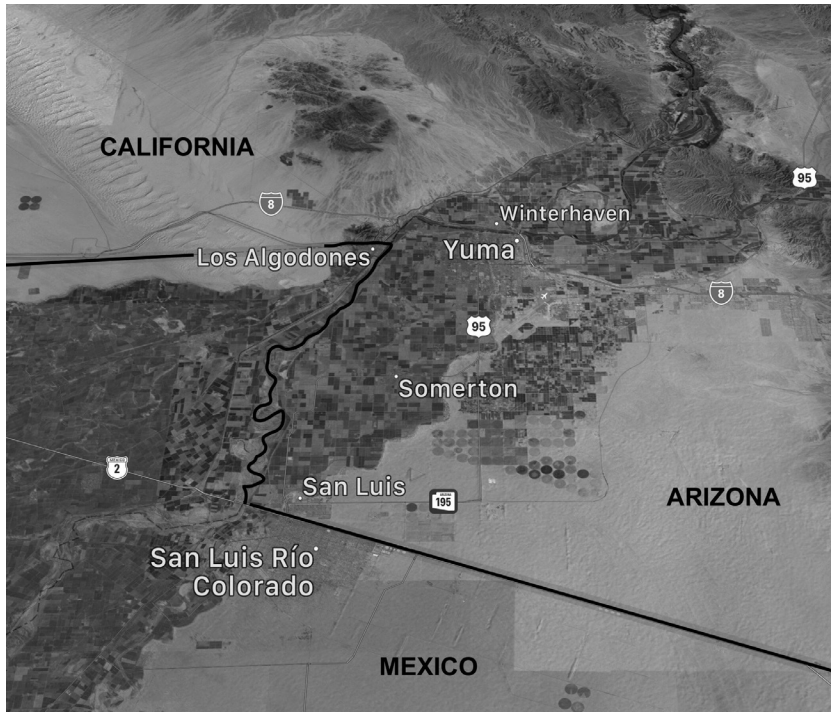
### Yuma Agricultural Borderlands

Since the mid-twentieth century, extensive agricultural complexes straddling the US-Mexico border have appeared, taking advantage of the steep economic gradient between the two countries. Changes along the border have been swift, with older communities vastly transformed by new members and new towns and cities emerging. Both old and new communities are transnational in character, linked intimately by migratory flows.

Since 1938, the Imperial Dam has diverted 90% of the Colorado River's flow to the desert borderlands. Yuma growers cultivate 230,000 acres. The largest crop is lettuce. Melons, alfalfa, cotton, lemons, seeds, and other labor-intensive crops are also grown. Labor costs as a percentage of total production expenses are high—24% compared to the US average of 10% (Frisvold 2015).

Farmworkers on both sides of the border have close sociocultural and familial ties. Indeed, some 30,000 US residents who work in the Yuma fields live in Mexico because, although wages are 10 times higher in the United





**Figure 1.1**

Study site.

*Source:* Apple Maps.

States, housing costs are prohibitive. Moreover, policies barring family members with even minor offenses from living in the United States mean that living in Mexico, despite the life-draining hours spent getting to the fields, is the only way families can stay together (according to a study participant). Along with 2,200 H-2A guest workers, these groups are the backs and arms of a \$3.2 billion agricultural industry.

Communities on the US side have developed complex patterns of racial and ethnic enclaving, crosscut by differences in legal status, nativity, and class. The border towns of San Luis and Somerton are farmworker towns (97% Hispanic). Yuma is the county seat, and while 59% Hispanic, it is the heart of Anglo culture and power. White working-class and middle-class retirees flock to Yuma's warmth in the winter months, increasing the population by 50%. Retired military personnel are a large percentage of these migrants. They come to a county where the business of security runs deep:

**Table 1.1**

Select Demographic Data—Study Site

	Median Household Income (\$)	Per Capita Income (\$)	Foreign Born (%)	Off Season Unemployment (%)	Poverty (%)
Yuma	46,151	26,000	21.5	21.4*	16.9
Somerton	37,252	13,977	39.9	***	29.2
San Luis	33,767	11,435	49.1	48.0*	27.5

Source: US Census Bureau, *Quick Facts*.

\* YCharts, 2018–2019.

two military bases (one of them among the largest in the world), a state prison for felons, a private detention center for immigrants, and 859 border agents. Unemployment in San Luis in the off-season is 48%. Poverty rates in both San Luis and Somerton are close to 30%. In Yuma, by comparison, off season unemployment is 21.4% and the poverty rate is 16.9% (US Census Bureau, n.d.; YCharts, 2018–2019). See table 1.1.

The relationship between Yuma and the farmworker communities to the south is asymmetrical. Unless tied into farm work, residents of Yuma—Anglo and Hispanic alike—have little reason to engage with these communities. Even the Yuma-based growers have insulated themselves from them, relying since the late 1980s on farm labor contractors to organize and oversee farmworker crews. Social distancing from these farmworker communities by second- and third-generation Hispanics in Yuma and even by some Yuma pastors is not uncommon (according to a study participant).

Two annual festivals crystallize this landscape of power, devaluation, and need. “Yuma Lettuce Days,” put on since 1998 by the Yuma Tourist Bureau to promote agriculture, had, until 2016 *no recognition of farmworkers*. By contrast, “El Día del Campesino,” held since 1997 at 3 a.m. directly on the border and organized by community advocates, celebrates farmworkers and provides essential health and educational services for some 5,000 workers before they head to the fields.

I now turn to a discussion of my interviews with leaders from educational, faith-based, and nonprofit organizations to understand the impacts of border security and immigration policies on these farmworker communities. I find two contrasting civic worlds, treating each in turn.

### *Fabrica Mundi I—Nativist Security Regime*

Study participants report that control over cross-border mobility has increased. Those in their seventies remember that crossing the border used to be easy, enabling communities to sustain relations. One recalled that what the family used to worry about were the avocados her grandmother was smuggling in from Mexico. Another recalled losing his green card and talking to the border agent, who let him pass through. Today it is all about control and surveillance. The man who lost his green card explained, “Everything is worse. Oh, yeah, everything is worse. Behind the wall, they still have fields. They are watching for some traffickers. They watch the people in the fields too, soldiers watching.”

Changes in identity cards have made it impossible to use borrowed documents and more difficult to get forged documents to cross into the United States for work. Now, as one participant said, it has to be an inside job—someone within Customs and Border Enforcement does the forgery.

Internal enforcement operations designed to empty the Yuma Sector of unauthorized immigrants have been quite successful. Study participants say that there are few community members on the US side living without documents, most people having moved on if they could, uprooting family and fracturing the community. Others have been arrested, held in detention, and deported. As one organizer in the study explains, “The reason [so few people live without documents in the region] is we are less than 100 miles from the border. There’s Border Patrol everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. . . . You have to be really invisible without documents along the border.”

Nonetheless, participants estimate that some 10% of people in the area have become “spatially incarcerated” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), meaning that because they have no documentation, and because there are Border Patrol checkpoints manned 24/7 and roving patrols carrying out enforcement operations 100 miles into US territory, they literally cannot move about. An immigration services provider in the study shared the story of a 29-year-old woman. Her daughter has a life-threatening medical condition and is on the Make a Wish List, but the woman is unable to accompany her to the hospital in Phoenix. Getting jobs is difficult, and her ex-husband has been threatening her. Police operations designed to clear the land of “criminal aliens” create particular kinds of prisons, leaving people exceedingly

vulnerable, creating the conditions for further violation and violence, and fracturing social ties.

Many of the most vulnerable are parents, especially women, who crossed without authorization years ago, when it was easy, and stayed. “Now,” as another immigration services provider explained, “the child is 21 and a citizen and wants to petition for her mom to get residency. She can file, but her mom will have to be in Mexico for ten years before she can return.” Such a law is aimed directly at families, profoundly disregarding social relationships fundamental to flourishing personhood. Most choose to stay. The immigration services provider explained, “When families hear this, they are so demoralized, and the parent, she is not going to leave. I mean she’s been here 15–20 years. And so the family just digs in lower and lower into society and they are very anxious.”

In her 2000 ethnographic study of El Salvadoran immigrants, Susan Coutin describes the world inhabited by those denied membership as “spaces of nonexistence.” The undocumented exist in a “nondomain,” a territory that, like its residents, is and is not there (Coutin 2000, 29). This can produce a radical sense of loneliness and a corrosive feeling that one does not fully exist. As one immigrant advocate in my study put it, “They are invisible people. Do you understand me? They are invisible people. They suffer much humiliation.”

Advocates report a new ruthlessness toward those arrested because their papers are not in order. It used to be that the immigration judge would grant them a green card if they had been here a number of years, could establish good character, and show that they had equity in the system such as children born in the United States who rely on them. Today, these things mean little on the border. Instead, detention and deportation are almost certain, along with family separation and loss of social ties. Studies show that 91% of those in the Yuma Hold Room in ICE detention were deported, compared to the national rate of 56% (Transactional Record Access Clearinghouse 2015).

For domestic farmworkers living on the US side, this new ruthlessness is increasing fear and humiliation. Although difficult to gauge, one Yuma grower estimated that 30% of farmworkers use borrowed or forged documents (informal interview), despite the 2008 Arizona law requiring all employers to use E-Verify to confirm their legal status. For these workers, traveling is nightmarish. Farmworker advocates report that at internal

checkpoints through which crew buses must pass to get to fields to the north and west, workers (and other travelers) are being hassled more often. A 2015 American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report offers corroboration. Based on Department of Homeland Security documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, the ACLU says that abuse at checkpoints in the Yuma and Tucson sectors is at “epidemic levels.” Among their findings are that agents are threatening motorists with assault rifles, electroshock weapons, and knives; destroying and confiscating personal property; and interfering with efforts by community members to videorecord the abuses (Fischer 2017b).

Even permanent legal residents feel threatened. As one immigrant advocate put it, “Before, with a green card, you walked around pretty sure of yourself.” Today, rumors circulate that the permanent residency program will be canceled or that residency can be terminated if residents have ever committed a crime. Immigrant advocates report that it is taking longer to renew green cards and that more and more US residents are refusing to leave their houses, drive, or sometimes even go to work when their green card has expired and they’ve reapplied but have not yet received renewal—a situation that previously would not have caused apprehension. Advocates themselves are not sure that they can be reassuring. An immigration services provider stated, “We do not know what to expect. One day a program is here, the next it is not (TPP, DACA). People are vulnerable. So I too share in the fear that people in the community are experiencing. I fear something very drastic will happen and I won’t be in a position to help our community.”

Everyone in these farmworker communities knows multiple people caught in some gradation of legal nonexistence, people whose basis for membership in family, community, or nation—blood ties, labor, presence, humanity—has been denied or threatened. This kind of devaluation in farmworker communities is not new. What is new is the terror that is spreading, insinuating itself into the lived experience of all members of these communities, documented or not, creating increasing immobility and a hunkering down into deep inconspicuousness by a widening portion of the community.

As material borders become ever sharper and more extensive, and the consequences of transgressing them more certain and severe, cognitive-emotional worlds shrink, lives become constricted, and people become more

alone. The fabric of the civic world depends on trust, abiding relationships, family ties, and the ability to participate, move, dream, grow, care for others, have needs met, take risks, and encounter others. In these farmworker communities, that fabric grows more tenuous as a nativist security regime increasingly bent on clearing the land of immigrants tightens its hold.

In a different way, the fabric of the civic world for everyone else in these borderlands is diminished, for insofar as they normalize the invisibility of their fellows, blocking out the radical reduction of existence taking place around them, the growing terror, they diminish their own ability to grasp the reality of changes in the political order. Informal interviews with growers evince little knowledge of or interest in the labor crews who work their fields. Their practice of not seeing what is in plain sight is a precondition for the violations, chronicled here, of an increasingly fascistic world.

Around such a world, a security economy grows. The Border Patrol actively recruits at community events in these farmworker towns, setting up alongside immigrant rights groups. Immigration advocates in the study report that young people are enamored of the high starting salary and by job descriptions that emphasize being in a position of authority, calling the shots. One stated, “These young people are vulnerable; they buy that.” Indeed, half the Border Patrol agents on the southern border are Hispanic. Tragically, they join a security economy that serves the agricultural regime’s “persistent devaluation” of the very communities from which most of them come.

The nativist security regime described here contrasts sharply with another civic world emerging in response to militarization and criminalization. I now turn to this counterhegemonic world.

### ***Fabrica Mundi II—Hospitable Community***

We have a lot of poverty, a lot of people barely surviving, but having said that we are an extremely resilient community.

—Study participant

In the wake of mid-twentieth-century totalitarian states that used techniques of terror to destroy the space between people that gathers and relates them, Hannah Arendt theorized the public world as spaces of appearance (Arendt 1958). Such spaces—civil associations of all kinds—pull those frozen in fear,

isolated, and with an attenuated sense of existence or those divided by deep social cleavages *into relationships* where they can shape the civic world.

Increasing control, devaluation, and terror in the borderlands is prompting community leaders in these farmworker communities to create such spaces. In their own relationships, they form a densely networked web; they know each other's stories, collaborate on numerous projects, share an intimate knowledge of the communities they serve, and frequently meet face to face.

These relationships enable critical work: tending to the vulnerable. One participant summarized this work metaphorically by saying, "I take care of lawns... the best way of dealing with a hostile community is, strengthen those who are vulnerable and leave the hostile groups alone. I take care of lawns; I don't kill weeds."

For example, leaders go to the spatially incarcerated. Sometimes traveling 40–50 miles, they bring necessary papers, services, and care. These insistent acts affirm the very existence of the most vulnerable community members, and as their stories are shared within activist groups, they become part of the fabric of the larger world, shaping understandings and informing action. Thus, the cramped material and cognitive borders that so diminish the existence of the most vulnerable are attenuated.

Leaders also tend another vulnerable group. Families have made it clear to educators on the border that they do not want their children to become farmworkers. In response, educational leaders from kindergarten to college have developed a coordinated strategy of high expectations, practical support, and public affirmation to open doors to these children. College administrators and community advocates attend award nights and parent–teacher organization (PTO) meetings and talk at community events. Speaking at an outdoor celebration of Mexican Independence Day, a college representative asks the community, "Are you independent? Are you economically independent? Are you socially independent? I work at the college, and I am waiting for you. I am waiting for your children." Tired farmworker parents respond. PTO meetings in the Gadsden school district (K–8) on the border are standing room only, with 350 attending at a time.

The result has been astounding. Gadsden is the top school district *in the country* for the number of middle school students who qualify for Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth Program. Year after year, more than 150 kids take the ACT and collectively earn \$600,000–\$700,000

in scholarships for summer residential academic programs with Johns Hopkins. And waiting for those kids at 7 a.m., when they get to school to take the ACT, are the school honor guard and the marching band.

These educational leaders are creating spaces of appearance where solidarity and possibility emerge. They are undoing the material and cognitive borders that hold farmworker families in a reproductive cycle in which children follow their parents into the fields.

Leaders are also rejecting a rigidly bounded nationalist community. Central American refugees have been crossing the Yuma border in large numbers and turning themselves in, seeking asylum. Yuma Interfaith became involved when parishioners noticed ICE agents dropping off refugees with children and little means of support at the Wal-Mart parking lot.

A pastor explains the community's response: "That led us to officially seek contact [with ICE] to provide a better system than dropping people off at Wal-Mart. It was our way of letting them know we wanted to be in partnership; that these were people who were seeking their way into the US. And let us be hospitable."

Churches held clothing drives; found mattresses, food, and health care; built showers in their churches; and mobilized volunteers. Facing a hostile anti-immigrant public, they kept their work secret for four years. Even within their own communities, parishioners question the work, asking their pastors questions like: "Are they legal? Why should my dollars be used for this purpose? I want our work to benefit the USA. We have enough people that already we can't take care of. How could we possibly take care of more?"

Perhaps the real work is building capacities for hospitable answers. Here again, the pastor quoted earlier explains: "We have to remind them of the ways of Jesus, that he too was an immigrant. And remind them of who puts food on their table. And sometimes they need to hear the stories of everyday fear of being killed, of abuse, slavery. They have to be reminded that life should be an abundant life and you can have that. And to seek that in America should be something anybody can seek."

Capacity building of this kind goes on in another way as well. Yuma Interfaith brings church members—farmworker families, conservative retirees, and Trump supporters—together. Meeting in their churches, they learn to talk with one another about immigration and to find common concerns for civic action. This is hard, slow work, where people who normally don't



*exist* for one another except as media caricatures listen to each other's stories and begin to stitch together a different, more realistic sense of their world. Here is how one study participant described it: "What's interesting is that the retirees, many of them are from the great generation of WWII, and they understand what it is to give. You know, you just do it because it's what you are supposed to do; it's the American way. The other population that thinks the same way is immigrant families. So they get each other."

A counterhegemonic civic world is emerging in the borderlands. As community members tend the most vulnerable, support children, welcome the stranger, and work across deep social cleavages, they resist the civic invisibility and racialized hypervisibility that devalue farmworker communities.

## Conclusion

The impulse to wall off, scapegoat, devalue, and control immigrants in this country is old, though perhaps never more acute than in this political moment. This study of the Yuma Sector, the country's extreme laboratory for the development of a nativist security regime, suggests that agricultural borderlands are potent sites for understanding the impact of increasingly fascist policies of border militarization and immigrant criminalization on the fabric of our world.

Civic worlds are always in the making and, in its extremity, this local border world speaks to the national one in prophetic tones, foretelling possible futures and illuminating dynamics whose endpoints are as yet unknown. On the one hand is a civic world increasingly constructed through terror and police operations designed to clear the land of long-term immigrants and to stanch the flow of desperate new migrants. For those subject to this new ruthlessness, an ever more reduced social existence, enhanced vulnerability to abuse, social isolation, and civic invisibility follow. Social distancing and acute forms of looking away on the part of US citizens normalize this civic invisibility and, in so doing, disable their ability to grasp the reality of ominous changes taking place in the political order.

On the other hand, border militarization and immigrant criminalization is generating a contrasting thick relational civic world. Characterized by hospitality, reaching across social chasms, tending the vulnerable, and creating spaces where people can be seen and heard, these embattled

communities are seedbeds for the regeneration of democratic practices, energies, values, and visions. And it is perhaps in such locations that the social webs critical to farmworker demands for justice are being woven.

Agricultural borderlands, these front lines of practices of terror and oblivion and of unsung and underanalyzed resistance to them, are rich areas for further study. Students of food systems, racial justice, grassroots democracy, immigration, and fascism who seek to understand the dynamics of the present and the contours of possible futures will have much to offer by conducting deep ethnographic work in these frontline communities.

## Appendix

### Organizations Involved in Study

#### *Faith Based:*

**Pastoral Campesina**—Catholic ministry serving spiritual, social, and educational needs of farmworkers.

**Yuma Interfaith**—Network of organizations devoted to building power across diverse groups to support public goods.

#### *Education:*

**Arizona Western College**—Junior college, San Luis, Arizona.

**Gadsden School District**—K–8 district in Arizona on the US-Mexico border.

**Migrant Education Program**—Federal program.

#### *Nonprofit Service:*

**Campesinos Sin Fronteras**—Integrated service organization for farmworkers.

**Chicanos Por la Causa**—Community development corporation devoted to family reunification and immigration services.

**Comité de Bien Estar**—Builds assets and strengthens community, San Luis, Arizona.

**Community Legal Services**—Provides legal assistance to low-income residents, San Luis, Arizona.

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