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A man walks past a line of deserted storefronts. McFarland, California.



MATT BLACK

Cal-20

California's interior colony

I spent the months leading up to last year's midterm elections in California's twentieth congressional district, a sprawling, dusty territory hugging Interstate 5 along the southwestern edge of the San Joaquin Valley. With a US Census map on the dashboard, I repeatedly drove the length of a region recently named the poorest congressional district in the nation.

Using measures of health, education, and income—the Human Development Index—this dusty stretch of agricultural land and small farmworker towns ranks dead last among the nation's 435 congressional districts. This hidden pocket of poverty is so deep that it surpasses even the Mississippi Delta and the hills of Appalachia in terms of pure human suffering: about 640,000 of the most desperate lives in America, just a few hundred miles up the highway from the opulent Hollywood Hills.

Although the average farmworker in Cal-20 makes just \$10,000 per year, the district's approximately 5,000 square miles encompass some of the richest farmland in the world. This is far from an impoverished land despite the intense poverty of its residents: its fields produce everything from tomatoes and cotton to lettuce and pistachios, fueling the engine of California's \$38.4 billion agricultural industry and lining the pockets of some of the state's largest and richest landowners.

During my drives, I would occasionally pull over and study the map, trying to imagine the mapmaker who, knowingly or not, had taken a highlighter to California's hidden underbelly—corralling some of the poorest towns in the state, like Mendota, Huron, and Lamont, along with slices of West Fresno's and South Bakersfield's hardest neighborhoods; shaping his gerrymandered amalgam of poverty with surgical precision; slicing streets down the middle and cutting towns in half. In another time, such a skilled cartographer would have given his map a name—*California Profunda*, say—and decorated the margins with sketches of vast ranches and humble settlements.

On Election Day, as incumbent Democrat Jim Costa faced off against an (ultimately unsuccessful) Republican challenger, I went to Lost Hills, a town of about 2,000 a few miles off Interstate 5. After half an hour searching for a polling station, I stopped for

Boom: The Journal of California, Vol. 1, Numbers 3, pps 88–101. ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2011 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: boom.2011.1.388





A labor camp resident at her home. Huron, California.

directions at the double-wide trailer that serves as the town's post office. "I don't live in this town, so I can't help you," the postmaster said, seemingly eager to put some distance between himself and his dusty surroundings. Ana Lomeli, twenty-three, walked by me in the parking lot. She told me the polling place was in Wasco, twenty miles away. "They probably don't bother to put one here because no one votes in this town anyway," she said.

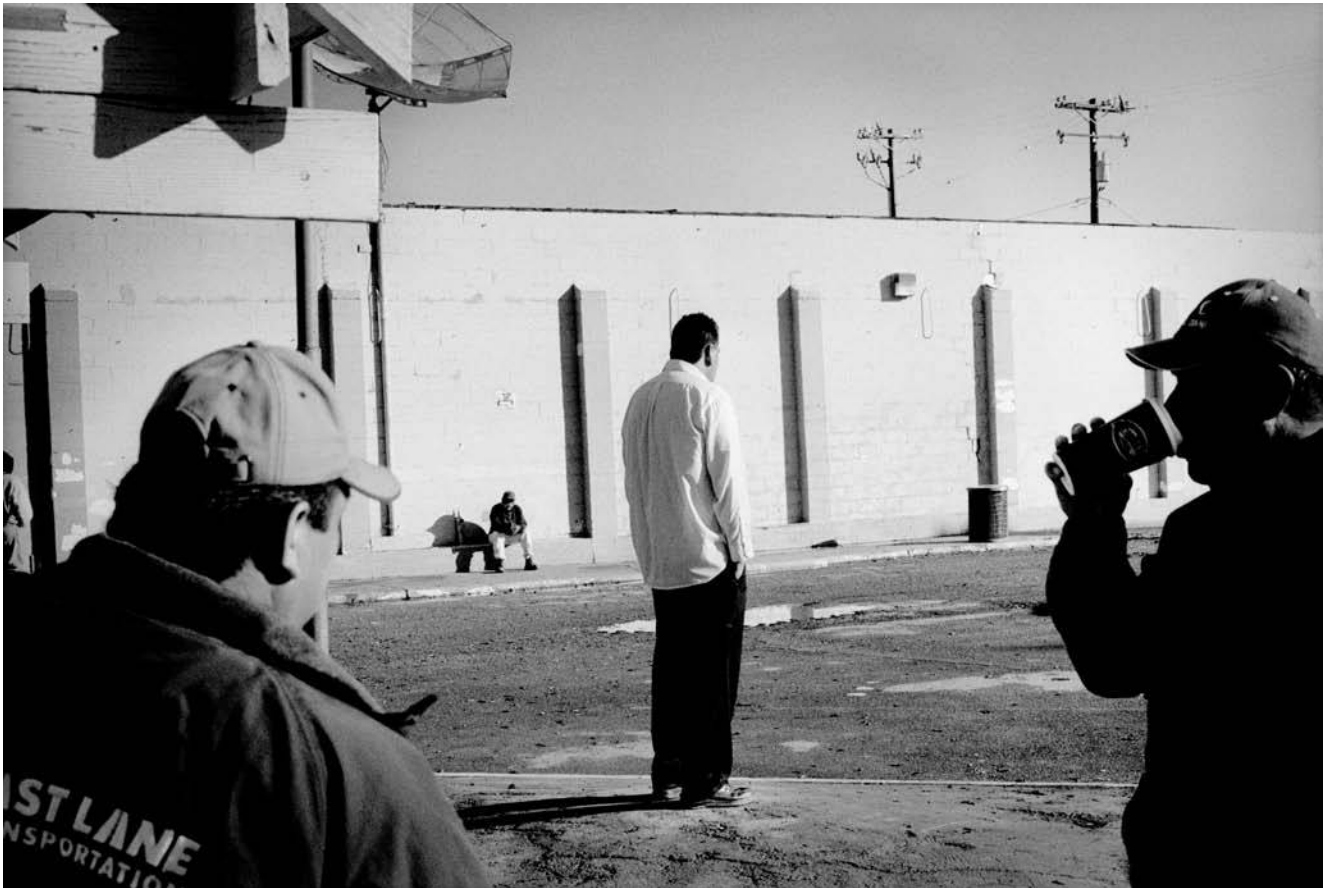
As I traced the contours of Cal-20, the car's radio reception would often wane, and my dial would inevitably shift downward to the self-proclaimed "50,000 watt blowtorch" of the San Joaquin Valley, Fresno's KMJ, a conservative talk station with a typical right-wing lineup. As I passed through the streets of Lost Hills and saw a Oaxacan immigrant mother lug a five-gallon jug of drinking water home in a shopping cart, the disconnect between what I was seeing and the bombast I was hearing was profound, the overheated voices less abrasive than just utterly irrelevant to the surroundings: a fuzzy dispatch from some rich and distant country.

What initially in my journey had felt like an exploration of a strange anomaly started to feel like something deeper, the discovery of a hidden country, California's own interior colony, a dominion exploited for its natural wealth but ignored and neglected by its overlords. Passing by the fields of Cal-20, one could easily see residents paying their tributes one underpaid man-hour at a time, but their suzerain, lounging fat and content in some far distant place, could only be imagined. **B**





A homeless farmworker cooks his breakfast. Mendota, California.



Men in a parking lot wait for work. Huron, California.



A shepherd corrals his sheep. Lemoore, California.





A man closes his roadside stand. Huron, California.



Unemployed men gather in an alley. Mendota, California.



A shepherd opens his pasture's gate. Coalinga, California.





A farmworker clears tumbleweeds. Lamont, California.