Criminalization and Militarization: Farmworker Communities in Arizona’s Agricultural Borderlands

**Introduction**

The agricultural borderlands of Yuma, Arizona produce 90% of the winter greens consumed in the United States with the labor of 40,000-50,000 field workers, the majority of whom cross the border daily from Mexico. Arising between 12-1 am, they dress, prepare lunch, look in on sleeping children, then make their way to the Port of Entry. There they wait along with tens of thousands of field workers for 2-3 hours, show their papers, and arrive in the fields between 6:30-7:00am, when the wage clock begins.

It takes workers 5 ½ - 6 hours just to get to the fields. The return home is another 2-3 hours. This is 7 1/2 - 9 hours of waiting, of suspended and colonized life for thousands and thousands of people – mothers, aunts, grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, 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, capacity to maintain familial and social ties, to provision, and to 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 Trump’s 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. The tightly scripted performance completely eclipsed the region’s dependence on immigrant labor.

The following morning the mainstream media reported the story the administration had orchestrated: 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 story continued, apprehensions of illegal border crossers are a tenth of their 2006 levels thanks to 63 miles of fencing, the tripling of Border Patrol agents, massive increases in roads, electronic mobile surveillance, military hardware, and the mounting of second and third layers of walls in urban areas (Carranza 2017; Duke 2017). The Yuma Sector proves we must complete the wall to “turn the tide against the flood of illegal aliens and secure our homeland,” as the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security put it (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 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 last 15 years as border enforcement pushes 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 Miller’s account of “the 21st century border” in his book on homeland security and climate change-induced migration. In Central America’s “northern triangle” - ground zero for climate change in the Americas, drought is heaping unprecedented suffering on an already suffering people, pushing farmers into the northward migrant stream (Miller 2017, 71-105). As Homeland Security’s Quadrennial Reports show, the U.S. security apparatus is acutely aware of these climate-induced dynamics. To head off the surge of these climate refugees, the U.S. 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 today 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 persuasively argues that the function of the recent rush 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” (*Ibid.*).

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 an older drama key to an agricultural regime that depends on the “persistent devaluation” of agricultural labor (Brown and Getz 2011). Shifting forms of invisibility and visibility of agricultural workers and their 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, their contributions and their voices rarely part of public discussion. On the other hand, politicians, bureaucrats and the media create moments of racialized hyper-visibility 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 increasingly 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), a labor force which is 75% foreign born, 68% Mexican, and 50% unauthorized (Martin 2017). Indeed, so entwined has immigration and criminal law become that legal scholars now refer to immigration law as crimmigration (Hernández and Cuahtémoc 2013). The stock character of the “alien invader” overrunning our borders saturates the media (Chavez 2001), and US immigration enforcement increasingly uses the figure of the “criminal alien” to justify expansion of a harmful 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. The President played a star role in that drama last August.

**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) Mezzadra and Nielson suggest we pursue the processes by which the objects of knowledge – borders in both empirical and cognitive-emotional senses, are constituted. To take the border as method is to adopt an epistemological viewpoint that fosters both critical understanding of dispossession, exploitation and domination, *and* that attends to the multiple ways that political subjectivity and community are being constructed through struggle. They are (and I am) interested in “the ontological moment” - what kinds of civic worlds are being born 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 Appendix A). All participants are at least loosely connected to Yuma Interfaith, a local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation’s oldest grassroots network. An organization of organizations, IAF intentionally bridges social divides, bringing organized people across race, class and ethnicity to work on shared concerns. Familiar with IAF as a participant in a different 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 field research trips with students to the Yuma borderlands also inform this study.

In what follows, I begin by contextualizing the history of immigration and border security policy significant for agricultural workers and their communities. Then, after an introduction to the study site, I discuss my findings regarding the civic worlds emerging in the Yuma borderlands as nativist and fascist policies and dynamics grow.

**Border Security and Immigration Policies**

Below, I trace broad historical policies, 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 policy have been unrooted in reality (Massey and Pren 2012), contributing to a fictional counterworld conducive to fascism (Snyder, 2017). Throughout, I illuminate the changing legal framework and logics within which farmworker communities struggle to make a home.

*Pre-1965 – Circular Migration*

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

This circular pattern continued in altered form with the Bracero Program. Between 1946-1964, 4.6 million Mexicans received guestworker visas for temporary employment in the border state fields. Nearly equal numbers crossed illegally, a group often preferred by growers because they had absolutely no legal protections. Concerned with lawlessness, state responses to these unauthorized workers 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. Having simply expelled “the Braceros” the year before, there was no legal way for workers to work. And so, with border enforcement lax, these long established migratory flows simply continued with nearly all workers now without authorization. The numbers 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 hypervisibility had been brewing. A “threat narrative” of “border under siege” emerged in the 1970’s with growing ferocity, exploited by politicians and bureaucrats at a time of increasing income inequality and insecurity (Massey and Pren 2012). Studies of national magazine covers and major newspapers from 1965-1995 document a dramatic rise of negative portrayals of unauthorized immigrants. Immigrants are depicted as “a tidal wave” poised to “inundate” the US and “drown” its culture, or as an “invasion” against which “outgunned” border patrol agents try in vain to “hold the line” (*Ibid. 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, all of which result in a rise in boots on the ground and other interdiction capabilities, which enables more apprehensions, which provokes more fear, and so on. From 1977-1995 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* (2012, 8-14)*.* Thus, they 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 (*Ibid*). 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 created a path to citizenship for some, and made the employment of undocumented workers a crime. Although employer sanctions had almost no teeth, growers preferred to avoid the risk, fueling 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 the1990s prompted a series of massive border enforcement operations. Starting in 1993 with Operation Hold the Line, they 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 2012). But they also were responsible for a more than doubling of unauthorized Mexicans in the 1990s and early 2000s. By dramatically raising the costs for migrant workers to return home, 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 re-entry into the U.S. from a civil to a criminal offence, the later punishable by two years in federal prison. It also created new powers of “expedited exclusion” of any noncitizen who had ever crossed the border without documents. Hundreds of thousands of these “criminal aliens” have been processed *en masse* in special courts, bound together in chains. Critics charge the proceedings violate their due process right to adequate counsel (Rickerd).

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 they had been for decades, and peaking in 2012 at 409,000 (Fiscal Year 2016). Although no terrorists have entered through the southern border, none have been Mexican and all have 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, 16). In this paroxysm of nativism, policy is unhinged from factual reality.

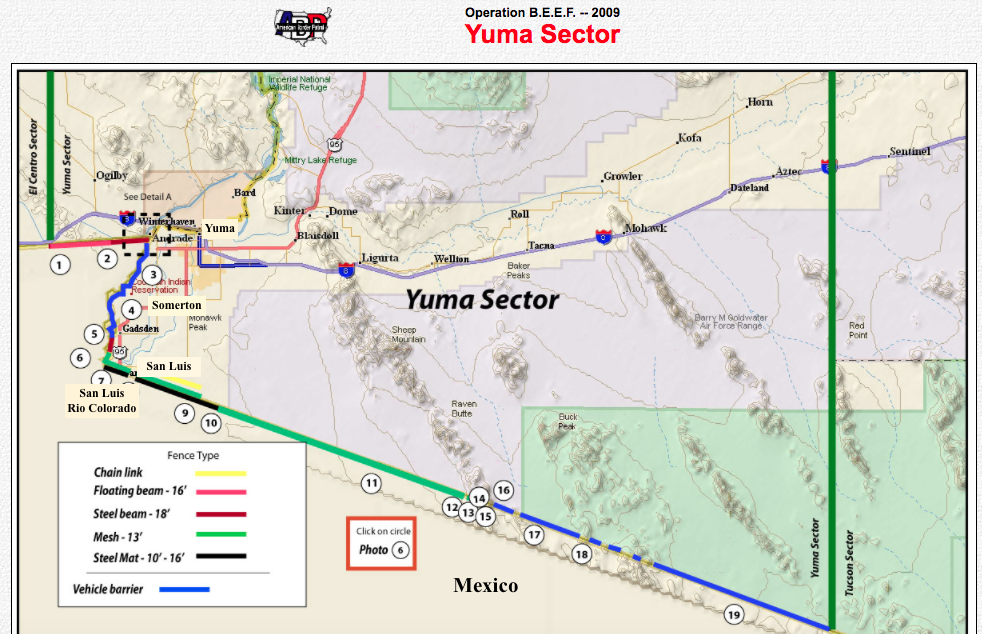
Under the legalistic guise of opposition to a manufactured criminality, racial discrimination against immigrants in a post civil rights era continues (Chomsky 2014, 14-20). Executive orders issued by President Trump in January 2017 that, among other things, make immigrants not only *convicted* of a crime but those *charged* with a crime priorities for deportation are fascist escalations of this logic.

**Yuma Agricultural Borderlands**

Since the mid 20th century, extensive agricultural complexes straddling the US-Mexico border have appeared, taking advantage of the steep economic gradient between the two countries. Changes on both sides of the border have been swift, with older communities vastly transformed by new members, and the emergence of new towns and cities. 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 to the desert borderlands. Yuma growers cultivate 230,000 acres. The largest crop is lettuce, but melons, alfalfa, cotton, lemons, seeds, and other labor-intensive crops are 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 socio-cultural 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 US, housing costs are prohibitive. Moreover, policies barring family members with even minor offences from living in the U.S. means that living in Mexico, despite the life draining hours spent getting to the fields, is the only way families can stay together (study participant). Along with 2,200 H2A guest workers, these groups on either side of the border 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, cross-cut by differences in legal status, nativity and class. The border towns of San Luis and Somerton are farmworker towns (99% Hispanic). Yuma City is the county seat, and while 54% Hispanic, it is the heart of Anglo culture and power. White working and middle class retirees flock to Yuma City’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: two military bases (one of which is 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 and Somerton in the off- season is 60%; annual averages are 49% and 30% respectively. Poverty rates in both communities hover around 30%. In Yuma City, by comparison, annual unemployment is 15.4% and the poverty rate is 18.4% (U.S Census Bureau).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Median Household Income | Per Capita Income | Without Health Insurance | Unemployment | Poverty |
| Yuma | 44,216 | 21,468 | 18.8% | 15.4% | 18.4% |
| Somerton | 34,318 | 13,511 | 23.4% | 30.1% | 29.2% |
| San Luis | 31,743 | 10,693 | 30% | 49% | 28.2% |

Source: US Census Bureau Quick Facts

The relationship between Yuma City 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 on the part of 2nd and 3rd generation Hispanics in Yuma City and even on the part of some of the Yuma pastors is not uncommon (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 last year, *no recognition of farmworkers*. By contrast, “El Dia del Campesino” held since 1997 at 3am directly on the border and organized by community advocates, celebrates farmworkers and provides essential health and educational services for some 5,000 workers who attend before heading to the fields.

I turn next 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, and treat each in turn.

***Fabrica Mundi I* – Nativist Security Regime**

Study participants report that control of cross border mobility has increased. Some in their 70s, 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: *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 from Mexico into the U.S. to work. Now, as one participant said, it has to be an inside job - someone within Customs and Border Enforcement that 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 community. Others have been arrested, held in detention, and deported. As one participant explains, *the reason 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. A participant shared the story of a 29 year-old woman in this situation. Her daughter has a life-threatening medical condition and is on the Make a Wish List, but she is unable to accompany her to the hospital in Phoenix. Getting jobs is difficult, and her ex-husband has been threatening her. Police operations such as these 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; fracturing social ties.

Many of the most vulnerable are parents, especially women, who crossed without authorization years ago when it was easy. And they stayed.  *Now*, as one participant 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 aims directly at families, profoundly disregarding social relationships fundamental to flourishing personhood. Most choose to stay: *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 1997 ethnographic study of El Salvadoran immigrants, Susan Coutin describes the world inhabited by those denied membership as “spaces of nonexistence”. The undocumented exist, she says, in a “nondomain”, a territory that, like its residents, is and is not there (29). This can produce a radical sense of loneliness and a corrosive feeling that one does not fully exist. As one participant in my study put it,

*They are invisible people. Do you understand me?   
 They are invisible people. They suffer much humiliation.*

Participants 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 U.S. 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 91% of those in the Yuma Hold Room in ICE detention were deported compared to the national rate of 56% (Detainees Leaving 2015).

For some 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 legal status. For these workers, travelling is nightmarish. Study participants 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 ACLU report offers corroboration: based on documents provided by the Department of Homeland Security in response to a Freedom of Information lawsuit, the ACLU says that abuse at checkpoints in the Yuma and Tucson Sectors is at “epidemic levels”. Among their findings: agents are threatening motorists with assault rifles, electroshock weapons and knives; destroying and confiscating personal property; and interfering with efforts by community members to video record Border Patrol activities (Fischer 2017b).

Even permanent legal residents feel threatened. As one participant put it, *before, with a green card, you walked around pretty sure of yourself.* Today, rumors circulate that the permanent residency program will be cancelled or that residency can be terminated if they have ever committed a crime*.* Study participants report it is taking longer to renew green cards, and that more and more US residents are refusing to leave their houses, refusing to drive, sometimes even refusing to 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 been cause for apprehension. And advocates themselves are not sure they can be reassuring: *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 extensive, and the consequences of transgressing them more certain and severe, cognitive-emotional worlds shrink, lives become constricted; people more alone. The fabric of the civic world depends on trust, abiding relationships, family ties, ability to participate, move, dream, grow, care for others, have needs met, take risks, 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 practices of not seeing what is in plain sight are preconditions for the violations, chronicled above, of an increasingly fascistic world.

Around such a world grows a security economy that in the absence of economic opportunity is especially alluring for young people. The Border Patrol does active outreach at community events in these farmworker towns, setting up alongside immigrant rights groups. Participants 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: *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 many come.

The nativist security regime described here contrasts sharply with another civic world emerging in resistance to militarization and criminalization. I turn next 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 20th century totalitarian states that succeeded through techniques of terror in destroying the space between people that gathers and relates them, Arendt theorized the public world as spaces of appearance (Arendt, 1958). Such spaces – civil association of all kinds - pull those frozen in fear, isolated and with an attenuated sense of existence or those divided by deep socially constructed cleavages *into relationship* where they can shape the civic world.

Leaders interviewed in these farmworker communities are creating such spaces. In their own relationships, they form a densely networked web: they know each others’ 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. Through these insistent acts, the lives of these community members are seen, their very existence is affirmed. And as their stories are shared by leaders within activist groups, these most vulnerable members become part of the fabric of the larger world, shaping understandings, 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 theirchildren to become farmworkers. In response, educational leaders from kindergarten to college have developed a coordinated strategy of high expectations, practical support, and publicaffirmation. College administrators, community leaders and organizers attend award nights, talk at PTO meetings and community events, relentlessly showing up to open doors to children of farmworkers. Speaking at an outdoor celebration of Mexican Independence Day, a representative from the College 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.*

PTO meetings in the Gadsden school district (K-8) on the border are standing room only. It is difficult for farmworker parents to come out at night, yet meetings are packed – 350 at a time.

Their success has been astounding. The Gadsden school district is the top 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 150+ kids take the ACT and earn $600,000-$700,000 in scholarships for summer residential academic programs with Johns Hopkins. And waiting for those kids, at 7 am when they get to school to take the ACT, are the school honor guard and the marching band.

Here, leaders are creating spaces of appearance where a sense of solidarity and possibility emerge, and where the material and cognitive borders that hold farmworker families in a reproductive cycle in which children follow parents into the fields are undone.

Increasing control, devaluation and terror in the borderlands is also prompting community advocates to step up their efforts to build civic power by encouraging naturalization. Historically the nationality least likely to naturalize, study participants estimate that 60% of Mexican nationals in Yuma County with US residency have never applied for citizenship. Today a change is afoot: *Before, folks didn’t think much about it but now they are thinking, “I have to naturalize”.* Where once being part of two national societies but having little civic power in either was tolerated, today communities are ending one aspect of disenfranchisement that has long served growers.

Simultaneously, leaders are rejecting a rigidly bounded nationalist community. Displaced by climate change, violence, and neoliberal policies, 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 the Border Patrol was dropping off refugees with children and little means of support at the Wal Mart parking lot.

A pastor explains the community response: *That led us to officially seek contact with Border Patrol 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 did 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 five years. Even within their own communities, parishioners have questioned the work, asking their pastors*:*  *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 is the pastor: *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 from 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 each other except as media caricatures, listen to each other’s stories and begin to stitch together a different, more realistic sense of each other. 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 its 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.*

In the Yuma Sector, the country’s extreme laboratory for the development of a nativist security regime, there is a more hospitable world in the making. The work to build it is imbued with a sense of abundance that tends the most vulnerable, supports children, helps communities build their civic power, welcomes the stranger and works across deep social cleavages to counter the civic invisibility and racialized hypervisibility that devalues farmworker communities.

**Conclusion**

The impulse to wall off, scapegoat immigrants, devalue and control is old in America, though perhaps never more potent than in this political moment. This study suggests that agricultural borderlands are potent sites for understanding the effects of increasingly fascist policies and dynamics and the fictional counterworld they create. And although it does not answer them, it raises questions regarding the kinds of community practices most effective in resisting it.

**Appendix A**

Organizations Involved in Study

Faith Based

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

**Pastorale Campesina** – Catholic ministry serving spiritual, social and educational needs of farmworkers

Education

**Gadsden School District** – K-8 district directly on the border

**Migrant Education Program** – Federal program

**Arizona Western College** – Jr. College, San Luis

Non Profit Service

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

**Campesinos Sin Fronteras** – Integrated service organization for farmworkers

**Comite de Bien Estar** – Builds assets and strengthens community, San Luis

**Community Legal Services** - Provides legal advice and assistance to low-income residents, San Luis

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