



Human Rights Zone: Building an antiracist city in Tucson, Arizona

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Abstract: Tucson, Arizona is on the front lines of border militarization and the criminalization of migration. Residents there are crafting creative responses to the state and federal government’s increasingly punitive treatment of migration. This critical intervention piece focuses on the We Reject Racism campaign as an effort to build an antiracist city in conditions of steady police and military presence. It situates this campaign in a historical lineage of building open and sanctuary cities, and suggests that demilitarization and decriminalization should be recognized as central aspects of antiracist Right to the City organizing.

I arrived in Tucson, Arizona on the afternoon of July 28, 2010. Immediately, I spotted signs that read “We Reject Racism: Human Rights Respected Here” dotting modest front yards and lining storefronts of businesses near downtown. Soon these same signs, and many others, would fill the city’s streets. The immediate issue was Senate Bill 1070, a state law that would require police officers engaged in a legal stop to question people about their migration status and to arrest them if they could not produce paperwork verifying the legality of their presence. The bill received national and international criticism for enshrining a ‘Papers, please’ policy, and promising a future of racial profiling and civil rights abuses.

The stated goal of SB 1070 is “attrition through enforcement,” and includes provisions for policing daily mobility and work that would make everyday life for undocumented migrants so difficult, legally and economically, that they would



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have no choice but to leave the state (or ‘self-deport’). Organizers in Arizona mobilized quickly to repeal the bill, which was set to go into effect on July 29, 2010. Several legal challenges to the legislation were brought by private individuals, civil rights organizations, and the Department of Justice, which resulted in a temporary injunction on its most egregious aspects (Immigration Policy Center, 2011). Provisions of the law, which criminalize the activities of day laborers, went into and remain in effect (the Ninth Circuit upheld the injunction in April 2011). Thus, it was still important to turn out in protest because the injunction against SB 1070 was partial and temporary, and the bill was only the latest in a string of exclusionary and punitive policies already in place at the state and federal levels.

This critical intervention piece tries to capture a vibrant moment of political organizing in a border region that is used as a geopolitical pawn in national struggles over security and belonging.² Arizona is a front line, but organizers in the state and elsewhere have repeatedly made clear that Arizona is not entirely unique; interior policing and border security experiments disrupt the lives of communities across the country (Shahani, 2010). This piece is a snapshot of a political moment shaped by three significant forces: (1) significant federal resources that are being poured into deadly deterrence strategies (at the border and through detention policy); (2) a battle over citizenship in the form of criminalization and felon disenfranchisement and Right mobilizations to reverse the Reconstruction-era Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing birthright citizenship, and (3) a global economic crisis that is being used to dismantle ethnic studies and public education, and to polarize life chances for Arizona residents.

I focus on Tucson, a city on the front lines of border militarization and the criminalization of migration. It is an important city to watch, not only because people living outside of Arizona can expect to struggle over similar legislation (Wessler, 2010). It is also a place where resistance to harmful border and migration policies has deep roots. Tucson residents are crafting creative responses to the state and federal government’s increasingly punitive migration policies that aim to regulate human migration and inhabitation. This is where I wanted to be on July 29, 2010, a nationwide day of non-compliance with SB 1070.

A notable part of this effort is the We Reject Racism non-compliance campaign, which was launched in spring 2010 as a collaboration between Tucson-based organizations No More Deaths and Tierra y Libertad Organization. The immediate reason for uniting was to repeal SB 1070, but the everyday economic

² Arizona’s status as a front line in these struggles is highlighted by the much-publicized example of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, whose immigrant-baiting politics, brutality as a jailer, and refusal to cooperate with federal investigations drew tremendous media attention in 2009 (see Finnegan, 2009). Arpaio loudly defended his immigrant policing efforts (including neighbourhood sweeps) as legitimate responses to failed federal policies, and his harsh treatment of prisoners (such as their confinement in tents) as just desserts. His actions indict a broader political terrain and federal policies that rely on collaboration between local police and federal migration authorities.

and legal insecurity for Tucson residents – particularly people with Mexican, Latino, and indigenous heritage – is heightened by high levels of police scrutiny and the pervasive presence of federal Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. SB 1070 would further entrench and legally codify the formal and informal collaboration that already takes place here, as in many other parts of the country.

Reframing ‘We’re Not Criminals’ to ‘No One Is Illegal’

My comments follow upon observations that Andrew Burridge and I made in *ACME* about the vibrant immigrant justice mobilizing that took place in 2006 to oppose the Sensenbrenner Bill, a piece of federal legislation that would have criminalized the presence of undocumented people in the United States (Loyd and Burridge, 2007). In cities large and small from Los Angeles to Asheville, NC, the scale of those immigrant rights demonstrations surpassed even the historic antiwar demonstrations of 2003. In that piece, Andrew and I were critical about a dominant frame in the immigrant rights movement, which was to claim innocence or denial: ‘we’re not criminals,’ or ‘we’re hard workers.’ This frame is a losing proposition because it reproduces racialized ideas of who is a criminal, implicitly or explicitly supporting anti-Black racism, and thereby strengthening the ideological premises of law-and-order governance and punishment. Moreover, the frame takes the discourse of criminality for granted and fails to challenge criminalization as a political and legislative process in which categories of acts and people become liable for state sanction. “Governing through crime” works to separate ‘good’ citizens from those who do not deserve to be part of the polity (Simon, 1998, 2007). Claiming citizenship through innocence accepts this frame and merely shifts the line of disenfranchisement onto someone else.

Indeed, federal legislators have not moved to regularize undocumented migrants’ status. Instead Congress, President Bush, and President Obama have ramped up border fortification, securitization of movement, and interior policing, claiming that the American people want to secure the borders before adjusting the legal status of people who are here. Deportations have reached record levels in the Obama administration.

Given this gloomy political landscape, there has been increasing attention among organizers, policy analysts, and critics to the intersection between the penal and migration systems, sometimes called “crimmigration” (Stumpf, 2006). It has become increasingly clear how the criminalization of migration builds on and is sustained by law-and-order discourses and the resources devoted to policing and prisons (see Tadiar, 2008; Lawston and Escobar, 2009; Loyd, Mitchelson and Burridge, under review).

Hegemonic ideas of crime (as violent, immoral) and punishment (retributive and restoring the rule of law) make challenges to processes of categorical disenfranchisement, exile, and unfreedom slow-going efforts. Opposition to SB 1070, I believe, marked a significant departure from the dead end frame of ‘we’re

not criminals.’ Organizers instead began to challenge the process of criminalization of survival and presence itself. Because the whole world was watching, this was also an important moment in which to build movement against criminalization (see *Fault Lines*, 2010, for a 22 minute news segment on Arizona at the time I was there).

Beginning from grassroots efforts in Tucson, I aim here to situate demilitarization and decriminalization as central to the project of building an anti-racist city, specifically by sketching out answers to the following questions: How do these efforts challenge the racial and class inequalities that are built into the city’s neighborhoods, public infrastructures, and life chances for Tucson’s residents? How can organizing for self defense and humanitarian aid work simultaneously grow the sort of power necessary to prevent the systemic use of police and military force? What other kinds of lives do people want to live, and what sort of neighbors do they want to be? These questions frame the context of organizing in Tucson and offer important movement-building possibilities for Right to the City efforts elsewhere.

The We Reject Racism Campaign

The We Reject Racism campaign collaboration between No More Deaths and Tierra y Libertad Organization was launched in the midst of other anti-SB 1070 activities being organizing by the Ya Basta! Coalition, which includes a number of other Tucson organizations. Repealing SB1070 was the immediate impetus for the We Reject Racism campaign, but in the long term, organizers want to strengthen autonomous community networks and build new ones where they don’t exist. They also want to strengthen ties across different Tucson communities. That is, they are engaged in the work of creating a city where citizenship status and ethnicity are not lines of difference that adversely shape daily life.

The We Reject Racism Campaign has taken two main tacks to build the grassroots strength to repeal SB 1070: neighborhood outreach and business outreach. The first prong of the campaign was meant to gauge where people in the city stood politically, create spaces for dialogue across different parts of the city, develop neighborhood networks, and link people to ongoing political and humanitarian work by local organizations. These grassroots efforts paralleled the resolutions that the city governments of Tucson and Flagstaff passed vowing to sue the state (Flagstaff has since rescinded this decision). Further, this part of the campaign builds on the community organizing that Tierra y Libertad has been doing in south Tucson’s predominantly Chicano, Mexicano, Latino and Native Wakefield neighborhood for several years. Their projects include youth organizing, sustainable agriculture, and creating protection networks. I discuss these in more detail below.

The second prong of the We Reject Racism campaign was developed in the context of economic boycott and divestment campaigns that were being launched nationwide. Total withdrawal from the economy is clearly not possible for residents

of Arizona, so the campaign focused on how economic power could be focused. Organizers asked businesses that signed on to the campaign to hang a sign on their windows declaring their support for human rights. To date, over 150 businesses have joined the campaign, including restaurants, personal services, and automotive services. Organizers gathered signatures from businesses for a letter to Governor Jan Brewer that expressed their opposition to SB 1070 and the economic impacts it has had on them. Signs provide a visual indication of opposition to racist policies. These are not static symbols, but create daily ways to refuse to comply with laws that police migrant status. The other dimension of the campaign takes advantage of the property rights of business owners to create spaces where entry is refused to “to police for the purpose of checking immigration status” (No More Deaths, 2010). By committing to this concrete action, these businesses potentially create safer spaces for migrants. In their daily economic exchanges, people can choose to support institutions that have pledged support for antiracism and avoid those that do not make this pledge.

From Secure Communities to Community Safety Networks

Casual observers of the controversy over SB 1070 could mistakenly infer from mainstream media coverage that the bill was an exceptional departure from otherwise liberal laws and that the court injunction would again tie the hands of the police. Rather, Secure Communities is a federal-local law enforcement program that builds on the discredited 287g deputization program (which Phoenix-based Sheriff Joe Arpaio made infamous) and lesser known Criminal Alien Program, which together form a suite of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) ACCESS programs for interior policing of migration (NILC, 2009; Guttin, 2010; Uncover the Truth, 2011). Secure Communities is a data-sharing program being rolled out across the country in which identification information from book-ins to local jails is transmitted to the feds. ICE can then decide whether to issue a retainer requesting that the jail retain custody of an individual. The program turns the nation’s network of jails into a federal dragnet; encounters with law enforcement, regardless of charge or conviction, become a prelude to removal from the US.

ICE’s version of Secure Communities amounts to communities living everyday with constrained mobility, family separation, and pervasive fear. Meanwhile, residents of Tucson, Phoenix, and San Diego have been organizing community safety networks to build the power necessary to prevent such policing, and to alleviate the legal, family, and financial difficulties that arrest and deportation cause. The reality that SB 1070 added another layer of crimes to an already highly criminalized and policed population was underscored by a neighborhood sweep one Friday evening only one week after the bill’s implementation. Over 50 Tucson Police Department officers occupied a predominantly Latino south Tucson neighborhood, pulling over drivers and checking migration status. Residents told observers that their neighborhood felt like a “police state.” The police indicated that they had plans for more sweeps that summer.

CopWatch-Migra Patrol also captured on video a routine scene of collaboration between local law enforcement and Border Patrol (Pan Left, 2010). It shows a Tucson police officer dispatching Border Patrol to verify the identification of a woman stopped for a minor traffic violation. Border Patrol put her into the back of one of its human transport trucks, commonly seen in the border region. The online video quickly went ‘viral,’ and illustrates the routine migration checks that people moving through the city by car or bus face on a daily basis.

CopWatch-Migra Patrol is a rapid response network that works with the abuse documentation project that *Coalición de Derechos Humanos* runs with support from Tucson’s video cooperative, Pan Left. When a participant in the network learns about a police sweep, stop, or raid, they alert a network of witnesses who arrive on scene with eyes, video cameras, and cell phones. The documentation produced by *Derechos* and *No More Deaths* (<http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net/>; <http://www.nomoredeaths.org>) has revealed systemic police and Border Patrol abuses. This information can be used to pressure agencies that claim racial profiling and abuses are inadvertent, the work of ‘bad apples.’ These acts of witnessing are important for breaking the silence, and provide an opportunity for people to demand that police agencies stop such activity.

Tierra y Libertad is trying to create community safety by organizing protection networks among people who may be subject to deportation. *Tierra y Libertad*’s protection network has several components, including Know Your Rights training and the development of mutual aid networks that pool resources for bail or a rapid response to detention or deportation. Further, a network of attorneys work with migrants to fill out legal documents, such as the Homeland Security G28 form (which indicates that one has legal representation), or in the case of detention or deportation, powers of attorney that authorize other people to collect one’s pay checks, private property, and become children’s legal guardians. These are all important ways of preventing the loss of hard-earned personal property, and keeping children from ending up in the custody of Social Services.

Residents in some parts of Tucson often do not even know that migration sweeps occur in the city, nor how a simple traffic stop can lead to deportation. This low grade state terrorism fosters silence and is fostered by racial and class divisions. In this way, categorical policing thrives on and entrenches social and geographic segregation. Documentation of police practices and broadcasting abuses through rapid response networks, social media, and YouTube are important ways of making visible the mundane realities of law enforcement presence in people’s lives. *Tierra y Libertad* and *No More Death* are working to bring the latter’s aid in the desert home to the city where so many of its volunteers live. People who are not targets of migration enforcement can build the protection networks through witnessing and providing material and emotional support.

Sanctuary Cities and Human Rights Zones

At the 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit, there were many discussions about how people in their own communities could support Arizonans' opposition to SB1070. These discussions elicited another set of political responses that differed from the boycott, which, however important, relies on public ridicule and withdrawal of economic support. Pledging to build human rights zones in their own locales, through community building projects like arts and music festivals, generated a lot of excitement. The idea requires theoretical and practical work of making connections among apparently different places and circumstances. Answering how bordering practices play out to shape the daily lives of different residents in New York or North Carolina is part of creating shared understandings that can resonate with local realities.

Building solidaristic human rights zones seeks to put dreams of freedom, connection, respect, and human value to work on the ground in resonant ways in specific places. Human rights zones are not a territorial project where boundaries mark the extent of freedom; rather the zone represents a commitment to beginning from and building the concrete sorts of mutual, neighborly relationships one wants in the places where one lives. This contrasts sharply with the territorial, neo-colonial dimension of US policy that is particularly apparent in the Tucson border region.

Tucson is not alone in its effort to build an anti-racist city, and organizers build on historical experiments to create safety and freedom (Ridgley, 2008). Tucson was an important sanctuary city during the 1980s when efforts focused on trying to keep Central American refugees, who were fleeing from US-backed terror, from being deported to war zones. Meeting immediate needs while also pushing for changes in state policies that fuel war and displacement remain focal points for groups such as No More Deaths, Humane Borders, and Samaritan Patrols. Sanctuary city ordinances and resolutions that are now in place in over 200 cities across the country are one of the products of this era of organizing. Anti-immigrant groups claim that such policies promote lawlessness, but the nationwide battle over sanctuary reveals migration policies for what they are: a struggle over who may move and who may remain to build places in which to live their lives (Varsanyi, 2010).

The We Reject Racism campaign is one of the most compelling parts of the fight against SB 1070 because it consciously seeks to articulate the broad scale harms of migrant policing and to build the community institutions and relationships that create thriving, mutual cities. This campaign complements the self-defense or community safety networks that are being built to prevent immigration policing and deportations in the long-term and mitigate these harms in the short-term. This is where the battle over the meaning of community safety is at its sharpest and where demonstrating the harms of such wide scale policing for targeted communities and other Tucson residents is imperative.

Protection networks are grim reminders of the deadly scope and consequences of migration policing. Defense also contains the seeds of resistance to efforts to criminalize the presence and daily activities of already highly policed communities. One of the biggest questions facing Tucson organizers is how this information can be used to make solidaristic connections across ethnic and class lines. How does systematic criminalization contribute to oppressive inequalities within the city, and how are even the apparently privileged harmed by these forms of violence?

Where to Next? Building the Open City

Tucson is a paradoxical place. Although 60 miles from the international boundary, it is a militarized border city. The infrastructures of war-making are prominent in the landscape and jets and police helicopters circulate in the desert skies above. It is a place living through an undeclared war that is invisible to many and applauded by some. It is a college town proud of its progressive commitments in a state whose politics are dominated by the right. It is also home to a wide range of organized opposition to government experiments in border security and migration regulation, many of which are implemented elsewhere. Tucson is not exceptional, but it does foster unique and enduring organizing that can inform political efforts elsewhere.

While in Tucson, I joined with community members there and DREAM activists from across the country to prevent the deportation of Marlen Moreno, a Tucson mother and hopeful future teacher (Dream Activist, 2010). This apparently solitary victory – wrought from countless phone calls and a pointed media campaign – points to the cumulative stakes of over 380,000 individuals who were deported last year alone. Cutting against this small win, President Obama began to deploy National Guard troops to the border region, and it took Chuck Schumer (my senator in New York) only one week to pass a \$600 million border militarization bill that Obama then signed. Throwing more guns and fences at a place is sure to create more deaths (and anger allies such as India because it will be financed through raising fees on H1B guest worker visas), leaving the question of how to break the spectacle of total security and territorial control as daunting as ever.

Organizers in Tucson are walking a fine line between defense and possibility. Preparing for separation, or exile, from one's family and community is not the sort of life planning many people ever imagine. Yet these preparations carry the seeds of building what nineteenth century slavery abolitionist Jermaine Loguen called an Open City in Syracuse, NY, an openly abolitionist city that was part of the Underground Railroad network that enabled enslaved people to free themselves to Canada (Spectres of Liberty, 2010). Loguen's challenge to Syracuse to be an Open City was meant to develop the collective capacity and will to defy slavery and unjust laws like the Fugitive Slave Act. It took time to build a shared oppositional ethic, and people who would act on those commitments, but it was such defiance in the goal of freedom that made safety possible. The Underground Railroad, like the

1980s' sanctuary cities, was made possible by thousands of people organized to create routes to freedom. Creating an open city in one place relies on the work of creating an open city in other places.

Where to next? Building a community network that values antiracism is an intriguing example of ethical economies. It echoes E. P. Thompson's (1971) idea of moral economies or Gibson-Graham's (2006) work on creating non-capitalist futures. The question facing these efforts in Tucson and elsewhere is how to scale them up, how to make often very localized efforts more widely shared and connected. This is a daunting question when the US unemployment rate remains high, and the wealthy and corporations receive tax breaks, while people in this country and elsewhere continue to be displaced and abandoned. The United Workers' Human Rights Zone economic justice project in Baltimore offers an example of grassroots organizing that seeks to pressure real estate developers and chain stores to provide living wages and services necessary for a livable city. This group may focus on Baltimore, but the corporations shaping life there also operate in places far from that city, which enables organizers to link with other places and oppose their policies in many cities at once. Creating a right to the city in one place relies on building that capacity in other places.

In this way, the twin strands of defensive and creative, future-oriented (or prefigurative) organizing in Tucson represent an important example of contemporary Right to the City organizing. United Workers is part of the Right to the City Alliance (<http://www.righttothecity.org/>), a diverse national coalition of grassroots, movement-building organizations, which formed out of the first US Social Forum, held in Atlanta in 2007. Groups that are part of this alliance have used creative media and direct action campaigns to organize for housing and economic justice.³ Movement and capacity building among the most disenfranchised and heavily policed communities is a priority. These groups have demonstrated how so-called 'quality of life' policing criminalizes survival and amounts to a class project of who will profit from urban real estate, who will be exploited, and who will be excluded. Further, these groups make clear how policing of heteronormative gender and sexual relations entrenches sexual violence and economic marginalization.

In the year since Arizona's SB 1070 was passed, copycat bills have failed in Minnesota and Utah, while Georgia's legislature passed a similar law in spring 2011. Young people organizing for the DREAM Act continued to inspire others in taking the risk of publicly discussing their undocumented status as part of pushing for legislative reform. The fact that even this highly problematic bill – which creates the possibility of citizenship for a small sector of young people who complete two years of college or military service – was filibustered in Senate

³ Among the relevant groups are Picture the Homeless (<http://www.picturethehomeless.org/>), FIERCE (<http://www.fiercencyc.org/>), Queens for Economic Justice (<http://q4ej.org/>), and Safe Streets – Strong Communities (<http://www.safestreetsnola.org/>).

illustrates the further polarization of migration politics. People in detention in Louisiana and Texas have resorted to hunger strikes to protest their detention and resumption of deportations to Haiti. And in New Orleans, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network has been organizing among workers for the right to remain in that city. These all spell a decided shift away from the 2006 focus on Comprehensive Immigration Reform as the be all and end all of immigrant organizing. Back in Arizona, this shift is registered in Repeal Coalition's organizing imperative to "fight for the freedom to live, love, and work anywhere you please!" (<http://www.repealcoalition.org/>). This imperative places inhabitation, livelihood, and radical relationship at the center of organizing in ways that cut against capitalist terms of human value and nationalist, heteronormative terms of belonging.

The efforts in Tucson (and Phoenix, New Orleans, Los Angeles, New York, Baltimore) place antiracism and anti-state violence at the center of right to the city organizing. Tucson further places disarmament (demilitarization) squarely on the agenda of what it means to create an Open City, a demand that links the future of Tucson's residents to residents of Oakland, many of whom called for disarmament of the BART transportation police following the killing of Oscar Grant by a BART officer in 2009. Repealing laws that police status and criminalize survival, and shrinking enforcement and detention/prison capacities are two important strands for decolonizing our cities. Demilitarization is not an abstraction, a demand for building peace somewhere else, but it's about how freedom of movement is tied up with radical inhabitation and the possibilities of making vibrant places where we live.

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