

**Making Invisible Carceral Spaces Visible:  
Immigration, Detention, and Activism inside the El Centro INS Service Processing Center**  
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On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents gave me a tour of the El Centro Service Processing Center (SPC), a detention facility in southern California that houses undocumented men awaiting their deportation hearings. ICE agents showed me the center, including the sleeping barracks that can hold up to five hundred and twenty people. They repeatedly stated that the detained men are not treated like criminals because the processing center functions as a non-punitive, administrative institution.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there are guards at every door and the detained men are required to wear color-coded uniforms based on their criminal records. Speaking with ICE agents, I learned that the history of immigrant detention centers is still ambiguous. The agents who gave me the tour could not identify the exact date when the facility first opened and they referred to this historical information as mysterious, since the very people that work inside of the facility are left with many unanswered questions. Once I started investigating the past experiences of the detained men at El Centro, I quickly realized that their existence inside detention had been one of marginalization and political action.

Immigrant detention facilities are intended to be spaces of invisibility, attempting to hide human rights violations from the public while still functioning as punitive spaces to deter illegal immigration. When detainees challenge their incarceration they make the invisible visible because, as Alison Mountz writes, “To be located, even as a dot on a map or as a participant in map making where detention is hidden, is to call out the secrets barely whispered by state authorities. Once revealed, this information offers political potential if it is taken up, publicized, and used as a catalyst for change.”<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the little information that ICE agents have to share about the El Centro SPC, this facility has a profound history that reveals larger patterns

leading up to today's contemporary immigrant detention center boom. This paper explores a hunger strike that took place inside of the El Centro SPC in 1985. Using the hunger strike as a case study allowed me to start charting how undocumented detainees have historically made claims on the state within a transnational context. My interest in investigating the demands made by undocumented immigrants is rooted in the work of Evelyn Nakano Glenn. She explores the way citizenship is both constituted and challenged. Glenn explains, "Challenges to exclusion have not only been made through formal legislative and legal channels...because excluded groups by definition have often lacked resources and access to courts... to mount such challenges, much of their opposition has taken place in informal or "disguised" ways and in informal sites."<sup>3</sup> The protest of the men held at the El Centro SPC suggests that immigrant detention centers are both punitive places and spaces where people without citizenship rights organize across national ties to challenge their incarceration

### ***The Origins & Functions of the El Centro SPC***

El Centro, California is a vital place for understanding the history of immigration enforcement. This border city in Imperial County is a prime location between San Diego, California and Yuma, Arizona, two central entry points for undocumented migrants.<sup>4</sup> Authorities selected this region as "the best and most practical point" from where the Border Patrol could conduct its operations, because it was one of the cheapest places at the time and because it already had a county jail and courthouse.<sup>5</sup> Government authorities have regulated the influx of undocumented migrants at El Centro since 1947.<sup>6</sup> INS officials simply transplanted a building from Desert Center, California and used it to hold detained immigrants. The facility consisted of eight buildings that originally functioned as a desert warfare-training center for the US Army during WWII. In the 1970s, immigration officials worried that the space was getting too small. In

1972 for example, 92,451 people passed through the detention facility.<sup>7</sup> INS officials argued that there was a growing need for a larger center and a year later an entirely new and much larger building replaced the former structure.<sup>8</sup>

INS officials have framed the function and conditions of immigration detention centers contrary to the experiences of those detained. The multiple perspectives indicate that overtime immigrants created a counter-narrative around incarceration. According to William A. Thompson, Assistant Regional Deportation Officer of San Pedro, California, the detention center was intended to be a place where detainees awaited their deportation hearings and not intended for the purpose of punishment.<sup>9</sup> INS officials asserted that their role was to secure a safe place and to provide detainees with care and custody, including access to food, housing, emergency medical and dental care, clothing, and recreational facilities. This representation suggests that detainment was an administrative necessity and not a punitive measure. INS records frame the quality of life they provided detainees inside facilities as ideal. Thompson's description makes conditions sound favorable yet examining the actual conditions and operations inside of detention centers explains the discrepancy between the specified function of the center and the actual lived experiences of the incarcerated.

### ***Reagan and the Push to Curtail Illegal Immigration***

Public awareness about El Centro increased during the 1980s due to a unique context that provided the conditions and space for detained immigrants to make claims on the state. The rise of immigrant detention paralleled the rise of mass incarceration throughout the United States. Starting in the 1970s and further consolidated by the 1980s, the U.S. became the country that imprisoned the most people across the world. As scholar Heather Ann Thompson suggests, "at no other point in its past had the nation's economic, social, and political institutions become so

bound up with the practice of punishment.”<sup>10</sup> At the same moment that the carceral system was expanding, the INS increasingly turned to policing migration with punitive measures. INS officials used the Mariel Cuban boatlift which brought 125,000 people from Cuba to Miami and the increase in Haitian refugees in 1980 as examples in advocating for stricter immigration policies and border enforcement.<sup>11</sup> The Reagan administration increased border security and strategized how to control the influx of illegal immigration. The Reagan administration granted the INS the power to increase the detainment and deportation of undocumented immigrants and the INS started increasingly detaining undocumented immigrants as an intentional form of discouraging illegal immigration.<sup>12</sup> This policy change altered conditions at the El Centro SPC because increased detainment resulted in increased encounters with, as categorized by the INS, “Other Than Mexicans” (OTM’s), detainees who required extended detention.

Mexican nationals made up the majority of detainees at El Centro throughout the 1970s. INS statistics reveal that only 2% of detainees were OTM’s but by the 1980s the demographics of the people detained drastically shifted. Displacement caused by civil war throughout Latin America increased the number of people migrating to the United States and altered the composition of the places people were migrating from.<sup>13</sup> Central Americans fled decades of violence, brutal militaries, systematic assassinations, disappearances, and torture that resulted from decades of U.S. intervention and right-wing governments. Such violence forced people to leave their home countries and seek refuge in the United States. The INS could no longer simply bus people across the US-Mexico border since these new migrants were coming from countries farther away. The INS lacked the space to hold people for such lengthy periods and as a result the El Centro SPC became overcrowded.<sup>14</sup> The following numbers provide a snapshot of such changes. On October 14, 1983, 401 people were detained at El Centro; 159 Salvadorans, 96

Mexicans, 39 Hondurans, 29 Guatemalans, 18 Nicaraguans, and 60 people from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> As incarceration demographics shifted from Mexican nationals to Central American refugees, the amount of time a detainee was held at El Centro increased and INS officials had a difficult time adjusting to such changes.

### ***The 1985 Hunger Strike at El Centro***

Examining the protest of the incarcerated men provides a window into life inside of this immigrant detention facility, a distinct narrative that challenges the one provided by the INS. The mobilization of the undocumented and incarcerated men at El Centro can be viewed as migrant counter-conducts, scholar Jonathan X. Indas's interpretation of a Foucauldian concept. He defines this as "acts that contest the criminalization and exclusion of undocumented migrants and struggles against the punitive practices employed to direct the conduct of migrants."<sup>16</sup> Incarcerated immigrants held a series of hunger strikes at El Centro starting in the 1980s. Salvadoran detainees led the first strike in 1981, protesting their deportation to their home country. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s detainees have organized multiple hunger strikes denouncing the conditions inside the facility, but no demonstration has matched the level of participation or media coverage as the events that transpired in 1985.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of May, Graciela Zavala, an attorney working with *Centro de Asuntos Migratorios* (CAM), an immigration service program in El Centro, received a letter from several of her clients who had been held at the detention facility. They wrote to notify her that they had tried to report the mistreatments they endured while incarcerated, that INS officials had dismissed their complaints, and that they were going on strike. The letter states,

"We had previously protested and appealed up to and including the Office of Robert C. Rolls, Acting Supervisor. But the authorities thus far seemed preoccupied with the mechanics to deprive, violate, conspire, circumvent any aliens rights under the immigration and nationality acts by means of physical

abuses, psychological intimidation, punishment of solitary confinement for non-infraction without hearings, use of threats, misrepresentation, or other forms of coercion (sitting out from 6:30am to 8:30pm, in the cold (winter) and hot (100 degree weather to obtain aliens signature or waiver rights to the particular of rules and regulations.”<sup>18</sup>

Eighty-four detainees from countries from around the world signed the letter. After deciding they had had enough, they went on strike. At six in the morning, on May 27, 1985, between 175 and 300 detainees commenced a hunger strike at the facility. The majority of the demonstrators were Central American refugees who were held waiting for their political asylum applications to be processed but strikers also included people from Mexico, Suriname, China, Iran, India, Tahiti and other Asian and European countries.<sup>19</sup> The conditions that brought the men to El Centro are exemplified by Noe Arnaldo Celaya’s story, one of the main organizers of the strike. At thirty-two years of age, Celaya was a primary school teacher in El Salvador. He was involved with an organization that promoted human rights but death squads frequently murdered its members. Celaya was notified that his name was on a list to be tracked down and killed so he fled to the United States. He was apprehended by the border patrol, detained, and waiting for his political asylum application to be processed. Celaya waited for several months and while in detention suffered from heat, malnutrition, and verbal and physical harassment. On one occasion, an INS official told him, “Why don’t you go back where you came from. You’re not wanted here. Why don’t you go to a country where they speak Spanish?”<sup>20</sup> Celaya helped organize the strike because the mistreatment they experienced was very cruel. The men that participated in the hunger strike believed that the abuse they encountered functioned to encourage detainees to voluntarily deport or give up on their asylum cases.

At the start of the protest, detainees refused to eat or do their chores until the INS met thirteen demands related to the harsh conditions they faced inside detention.<sup>21</sup> They demanded

that authorities pay attention to the harsh conditions they endured. Guards inflicted flagrant physical and psychological abuse, such as forcing detainees to remain outdoors in 120-degree weather, the regular use of solitary confinement, overcrowding, and poor sanitation.<sup>22</sup> Conditions were so poor that detainees and local residents referred to the processing center as *el corralón* (the big corral), to equate their experience with the treatment of animals.<sup>23</sup> Heat was one of the men's major concerns. Immigrants slept inside the air-conditioned barracks but they were not allowed indoors until nightfall, forcing them to spend most of the day outside.<sup>24</sup> INS officials landscaped the facility with small pebbles intended to keep the detainees from running fast if they attempted to escape. Rather than plant trees to provide natural shade, the outdoors included a pavilion area as the only type of protection from the heat. However, the roof was made out of metal and made this area the hottest place in the facility.<sup>25</sup> Detainees received poor medical treatment by the only doctor on staff who prescribed Aspirin as a cure for all ailments.<sup>26</sup> Michelle Crawford, staff attorney for California Rural Legal Assistance told reporters, "These people are not even getting the level of treatment that is required of criminals, once they have been convicted in prison."<sup>27</sup>

Detained immigrants from various nationalities came together and organized the strike. This interethnic mobilization can also be seen as a type of transnational solidarity network, as the detainees were motivated to organize beyond national ties. They negotiated with INS officers to get what they needed for subsistence.<sup>28</sup> For example, detainees agreed to line up for the daily head count in exchange for bed sheets. They used the sheets to sleep outdoors and to make banners listing their home countries. The hunger strikers occupied the outdoors near the facility fence and activists gathered on the opposite side to protest in solidarity with the hunger strikers and the demands made by the detainees. For example, the United Farm Workers sent a collective

of people supporting the strike.<sup>29</sup> Activists from the outside talked to the hunger strikers through the fence and at one point one of the activists showed one of the hunger strikers newspaper coverage of the strike to keep them motivated.<sup>30</sup>

On Thursday, May 30, opposition to the strike turned violent. Twenty-five border patrol officers and INS agents entered the demonstration site at six in the morning with riot gear and batons and violently forced the fifty-six remaining protestors to relocate indoors. During the removal, detainees were hit over the head and ribs, handcuffed, kicked, and forcibly dragged inside the building by their heads and feet.<sup>31</sup> Immigrant detainees suffered bruises and injuries to their wrists and backs.<sup>32</sup> At this point in the strike they were very weak from lack of food and from being outdoors for so many days. Some of the protestors were taken to the infirmary, tied up with plastic wires, and placed faced down on the floor for five and a half hours before being placed in solitary confinement.<sup>33</sup> During the removal, Jose Israel Gomez Murillo, a 27-year old Salvadoran detainee was dragged throughout the center as an example to other demonstrators. He experienced so much pain that he shouted “just kill me, just kill me” as he was dragged throughout the center.<sup>34</sup> Reverend Alex William Koski, Lutheran clergyman and retired priest involved with the Imperial Valley Immigration Project, paid a \$1,500 bond to free Gomez Murillo.<sup>35</sup> Immigrant rights organizations held a press conference in Los Angeles on Friday, May 31<sup>st</sup> discussing the hunger strike at El Centro. The event was organized by El Rescate and served as a space for Gomez Murillo to share his experiences. He showed journalists his wounds and said, “They knew I was one of the leaders, so five of them approached me and started kicking me with clubs over the head and body, covering my mouth so I couldn’t shout to the other strikers not to give up.”<sup>36</sup>



The repression crushed the strike. On June 1, the number of strikers dwindled to eight, including Oscar Hernandez from Cuba, Walter Chu from China, Emiliano Javier Flores from Honduras, Antonio Caraza from Peru, Rex Singh from Guyana, Noe Arnoldo Zelaya, Jose Hilario Martinez, and Jose Alberto Ramirez Flores from El Salvador.<sup>37</sup> The strikers told the Imperial Valley Immigration Project that they had abandoned the hunger strike because INS officials frightened them by insisting that their protest would ruin their case.<sup>38</sup> Intimidation and retaliation was common at the facility. The strike officially ended on Monday, June 3, 1985 when the remaining demonstrators were released on bail. Reverend Alex Koski used his life savings to bail out the remaining strikers, a bill totaling \$26,750. He claimed that he used his personal savings to pay for the release of the detainees because they were beaten and treated so harshly that they should not remain incarcerated.<sup>39</sup>

The 1985 hunger strike suggests that the history of immigrant detention is fraught with human rights abuse and contestation. The actions of the detainees were not the first time that incarcerated migrants have called attention to their poor living conditions, but this hunger strike was the first protest of its scale at El Centro. The media covered this demonstration because immigrant rights activism came together with the protest of incarcerated detainees at a moment when the immigration system was expanding. The strike did not end violence inside immigrant detention facilities or at El Centro but the actions of the detainees made their conditions visible to a public that previously did not have this region on its radar. Immigrant detention centers are punitive spaces intended to push out excluded populations but they can also be seen as sites of political action and local spaces where activism has been possible. Although the 1985 hunger strike did not radically alter conditions inside the facility, this case study suggests that it is essential to investigate how undocumented immigrants make claims on the state, it centers

undocumented immigrants in making invisible carceral spaces visible, and frames spaces of detention as locations where marginalized populations without citizenship rights organize across national ties to challenge their incarceration. However, it is important to note that conditions inside of detention did not change because they function, not only as an administrative matter, but also as punitive spaces that are intended to encourage voluntary deportation and deter future illegal immigration. The living conditions inside of immigrant detention facilities are still grim today and it is due to this reality that makes historicizing such developments so pressing.

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<sup>1</sup> ICE guide, Guided Tour. El Centro Service Processing Center. El Centro, CA. April 2, 2014. I have excluded the name of the INS official to keep her identity private.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Mountz, "Mapping Remote Detention: Dis/location through Isolation," in *Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis*, ed. Jenna M. Loyd, Matt Mitchelson, and Andrew Burrige (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Gandelman, "Many Dreams Shattered at Detention Site," *The San Diego Union*, March 21, 1988, Local, B-1.

<sup>5</sup> "El Centro Chamber of Commerce Letter to George J. Harris, Director of Border Patrol Gulf and Florida district (May 22, 1933)," page 1-2, Folder 13, Box 4, Kelly Lytle-Hernandez Collection of Border Patrol Research Papers, Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>6</sup> The United States Department of Justice, *A New Alien Detention Facility At El Centro*. By William A. Thompson. The Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Fall 1973. (*I and N Reporter* vol. 22, no. 2), 25. Otey Scruggs suggests that immigrants were detained at El Centro after 1947. Prior to this date the INS held immigrants in county jails but this became increasingly challenging due to the lack of space; Otey M. Scruggs, "The United States, Mexico, and the Wetbacks, 1942-1947," *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 30, no. 2 (May 1961): 154.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *The Journal of American History* (December 2010): 703.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas R. Maddux, "Ronald Reagan and the Task Force on Immigration," *Pacific Historical Review* (May 2005): 197; Timothy J. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1996), 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur C. Helton, "The Imprisonment of Refugees in the United States," *In Defense of the Alien*, vol. 9 (1986), 133-134.

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of Justice, *A New Alien Detention Facility At El Centro*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> "Immigration and Naturalization Service FY 1985 Congressional Inquiries," page 3.

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<sup>15</sup> “Conditions and Needs in Detention Facilities: A Report by Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program (November 1983),” page 7, Folder 12, Box 360, National Council of La Raza Records, Special Collections, Stanford University.

<sup>16</sup> Julie A. Dowling and Jonathan Xavier Inda, *Governing Immigration Through Crime: A Reader* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Searching the *Los Angeles Times*, I found coverage on hunger strikes at El Centro for the years 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1989, 1990, and 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Graciela Zavala, Re: Formal Complaint Against the I.N.S., Graciela Zavala Private Collection.

<sup>19</sup> HG Reza, “Aliens Planning Hunger Strike at Detention Center,” *The San Diego Union*, May 27, 1985, Local, B3; HG Reza, “300 Aliens on Hunger Strike at El Centro INS Detention Center,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1985, A8.

<sup>20</sup> San Diego Newslite, “Refugee hunger strikers confront INS,” vol. 8. Issue 34, June 11, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Golden, “Attorneys Blamed for Alien Strike,” *The San Diego Union*, May 29, 1985, Local, B1.

<sup>22</sup> The exact number of strikers varies based on the newspaper narrating the story. The Los Angeles Times estimates around 300 strikers and the San Diego Union claims the number is closer to 175. The figures Graciela Zavala reports are also a lot higher than the demographics provided by the INS; Reza, “300 Aliens on Hunger Strike at El Centro INS Detention Center,”

A8; Gina Lubrano and Michael Abrams, “Detention Center Hunger Strike Dwindles 8 Hold Out,” *The San Diego Union*, May, 31, 1985, Local, B3: 5.

<sup>23</sup> ICE guide, April 2, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> This policy changed after 1985; Human Rights Watch/Americas, “Brutality Unchecked: Human Rights Abuses Along the U.S.-Border with Mexico,” May 1992, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Graciela Zavala, Interview with author. Personal interview. Phone interview, April 16, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Reza, “300 Aliens on Hunger Strike at El Centro INS Detention Center,” A8; Zavala, Interview with author, April 16, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Reza, “Aliens planning hunger strike at detention center,” B3.

<sup>28</sup> Zavala, Interview with author, April 16, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> William Polk, “INS Accuses Imperial Valley Attorney of Instigating Strike,” *The San Diego Evening Tribune*, May 31, 1985, A-12; “Hunger Strikers Claim INS Guards Beat Them in Center,” *San Jose Mercury News*, June 1, 1985, Local, 7B.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Golden, “Candy Wrappers Hint Hunger Strikers Didn’t Starve,” *The San Diego Union*, June 1, 1985, Local, B3.

<sup>33</sup> Zavala, Interview with author, April 16, 2014; Edward J. Boyer, “3 Congressmen Seek Investigation of INS,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1985.

<sup>34</sup> Zavala, Interview with author, April 16, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Goldman, “Candy Wrappers Hint Hunger Strikers Didn’t Starve,” B3; Zavala, Interview with author, April 16, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Leonard Greenwood and Bill Farr, “Immigrants on Hunger Strike Drop to 7—Hearing Set on Tactics of INS,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1985, OC26.

<sup>37</sup> Golden, “Candy Wrappers Hint Hunger Strikers Didn’t Starve,” B3; Jaime Olivares, “Liberan a 8 Huelguistas de Hambre de Centro de Detencion del INS,” Newspaper source unknown, Graciela Zavala private collection.

<sup>38</sup> “Hunger Strikers Claim INS Guards Beat Them in Center,” *San Jose Mercury News*, June 1, 1985, local, 7b.

<sup>39</sup> “Hunger Strike Ended by El Centro Aliens,” *The San Diego Evening Tribune*, June 4, 1985, A-16.