In 1987 Gloria Anzaldúa wrote of the US-Mexico border, “This is my home / this thin edge of / barbwire.” Indeed, when I was young, the border in much of Arizona’s Sonoran Desert where I grew up consisted of a spiked metal string limply tied between rotting wooden posts. In a few places, it still is. For the most part, however, the barrier along the nearly two-thousand-mile scar has become increasingly formidable. Over the years, hunks of metal have been hauled in. Motion sensors have been implanted in the ground. Cholla cactus drop fat yellow fruit under infrared, watchtowers, choppers, drones, and semiautomatics. And now, as construction proceeds on a reinforced border wall, the barrier is set for another, more expansive iteration.

Surrounding the brutality is a beauty of shattering clarity. Land so beautiful, it calls people from all directions. There are people who arrive on Sonoran land through Arizona’s northern border,
from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Ohio. Sometimes these northern border crossers buy houses on this land. Sometimes the people from the northern border pay the people who live in the southern borderlands to tend to the ocotillo, aloe vera, and ancient creosote bushes in their front yards. Here, the two groups of people who move across the desert—one authorized, the other unauthorized—meet.

I used to sit in the cab of a white Chevy truck, the old kind with the gear shift on the steering wheel, watching my father dig his hands under the root ball, trying to extract a plant intact. Over sixty miles away from the nearest international boundary, Border Patrol would interrupt groups of laborers at work, walking down the line of hunched backs to ask, “Where are you from?” It strikes me many years later that it is the same question police officers on the streets of Los Angeles ask youth of color they stop for questioning as a coded gang interrogation. Where are you from? Are you a transgressor of one border or another? Are you entitled to mobility? African American studies scholar Hazel Carby writes that this question—Where are you from?—is not primarily about geographic origin as much as it is an interrogation of racial belonging. You cannot look this way, cannot talk this way, and be one of us.

The materiality of the border, then, is both formidable and deceiving. The centrality of The Wall to public discourse in recent years and its uncontroersial materiality has obscured a more expansive and ubiquitous borderland made up of surveillance circuits, which has grown and become a routine way to detect supposed transgressors of myriad borders. As the physical wall has become more formidable, so has the digital surveillance infrastructure. This digital surveillance borderland is mighty, but its materiality is less clear than that of The Wall; it is often only evident to racialized and criminalized subjects, making its range and reach largely imperceptible for those exempted from its grasp.

This book addresses this gap by deconstructing the technological circuitry of immigration, domestic, and international law enforcement, studying how it targets immigrants deemed “criminal”—a
category that applies to progressively broader groups of migrants—and exploring the precarization effects the borderland circuitry has on people subjected to it. In my approach, I follow the lead of criminologists Nancy Wonders and Lynn Jones, who urge scholars to conceptualize bordering as a process, as something that continually requires doing and undoing, rather than as solely a physical place or static thing. 

Here I trace new surveillance trends—many of which have been explored by surveillance scholars in the context of local police and federal intelligence agencies—in the less-examined immigration system. I contribute a novel empirical mapping of surveillance circuits and border building at, within, and beyond US borders. While my inquiry is geographically far-reaching, I use the US-Mexico border as an anchoring point, to which I return again and again. I examine empirical changes in the form and consequence of borders in tandem with my own experiences as a person who is from, and continues to be deeply shaped by, the borderlands.

**Coded Borders**

The invisible circuitry of the borderlands loomed large in the background of the most recent hardening of The Wall. In the hopes of further limiting mobility for some people in the borderlands, in 2017 the US government began to search for contractors to construct a border wall from San Diego, California, to Brownsville, Texas. In the call for proposals to build a prototype, the US government defined wall as “an 18–30ft. tall barrier designed to prevent illegal entry and drug[.]” The definition ends with the word drug and without punctuation. It is curious that the definition is unfinished, though perhaps appropriate, as the construction of both the border and its people is an ongoing political project.

The buildup of the border barrier has happened before. In 1945, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) removed wire
fencing from a Japanese internment camp and reinstalled it along six miles of the California-Mexico border. More fencing appeared in the San Diego sector in 1990, followed by new stretches in 1994 in Naco, El Paso, and San Diego. In the case of Naco, the barrier consisted of landing strips the military had left unused in the deserts of the first Gulf War—symbolism for which a novelist would kill. The Army Corps of Engineers installed more barriers in Tucson, McAllen, and Laredo in 1997. The border received an infusion of surveillance technology, towers, drones, sensors, and night vision cameras with the 2005 Secure Border Initiative, and the 2006 Secure Fence Act promised 850 miles of double-layered fencing. In some places, World War II–style Normandy fencing has been installed. Right now, much of the border fencing looks like bars on a jail cell.

As the 2017 solicitations for border wall construction rolled out, the federal government released another call, to less fanfare, for contractors to develop a “continuous monitoring and alert system to track 500,000 identities per month” and amass information on “criminal aliens,” including “FBI numbers; State Identification Numbers; real time jail booking data; credit history; insurance claims; phone number account information; wireless phone accounts; wire transfer data; driver’s license information; Vehicle Registration Information; property information; pay day loan information; public court records; incarceration data; employment address data; Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) data; and employer records.” My borderland home is made not only of concrete and steel, but of code as well, and it goes well beyond the demarcated international boundary.

Thus, the imposing and immediate physicality of The Wall is not its only imposition. Rather, The Wall is significant because of the diffusion of its function and its violence—sensual, symbolic, and, as I show throughout this book, technological—through time, space, and myriad institutions. While the spectacular physicality of the
border wall dominates the landscape, more practically relevant to
daily mass enforcement may be the construction of interoperable
digital infrastructure to classify and surveil immigrants and other
groups at the border as well as far away from the border.

Immigration enforcement agencies are building mass surveil-
lance systems. Drawing from the work of surveillance scholars David
Lyon, John Gilliom, Torin Monahan, Simone Browne, and Saher
Selod, I define *surveillance* as the monitoring of people based on
racialization and the gathering and analysis of their information in
order to make decisions about them, sort them into categories, con-
trol them, and reify borders.¹⁴ Surveillance is an old practice and an
inherently racialized one; slaves in the United States were subjected
to an extensive surveillance apparatus that included written iden-
tification manifests and lantern laws.¹⁵ The practice of surveillance
is thus rooted in paradigms of racial control and continues to be
deployed to disproportionately target racially subjugated groups.¹⁶
The specific practices and technologies of surveillance change over
time and space but most often sustain the racial ordering established
by European colonization and transatlantic slavery.¹⁷ The slave ship,
the plantation, the encomienda, the Spanish mission, and the reser-
vation birthed surveillance in the Americas.

Late twenty-first-century technological developments have en-
abled a set of “new surveillance” practices in which surveilling
agents deploy advanced technology in order to extract or create in-
formation.¹⁸ This book asks how the development and deployment
of new surveillance infrastructure since the 1980s has shaped US
law enforcement practices and discourses. I answer this question by
focusing on a multifaceted development that I call *borderland cir-
cuitry*. I argue that US law enforcement agencies deploy surveillance
and information-sharing programs along particular geographic cir-
cuits and as a result construct punitive digital borderland spaces
that enable detention, deportation, brutality, and precarity against
an expanding group of criminalized immigrants.
Consider two presences on the US-Mexico border. One is a barrier whose purpose is largely one of iconography, a way to loudly communicate a dividing line that differentiates two political jurisdictions from one another. It is made to be seen and feared. The other is a network of surveillance technology that is largely invisible, by design unseen, omnipresent, almost mystical. The physical barrier is immovable and no more than inches or at most, feet, thick. The network of surveillance technology, on the other hand, flows far and wide in all directions, linking up to an extensive network of data repositories accessed by diverse law enforcement organizations.

Seminal immigration surveillance scholar Anil Kalhan has argued that as a result of digital surveillance technology, the function of the border— to screen individuals, prevent entry, or authorize entry— has been decoupled from the territorial boundary. Automated and interoperable technology has made immigration status immediately accessible in multiple domains such that in a sense, the border is now “everywhere.” As theorized by Étienne Balibar, the border is no longer a singular place but rather a diffuse legal construct that migrants encounter in the form of checkpoints and screenings in multiple locations.

The Border Patrol has been explicit about this change, describing the purpose of its land, air, and sea forces as doing border control work within and outside of US territory, stating: “The border is not merely a physical frontier. Effectively securing it requires attention to processes that begin outside U.S. borders, occur at the border and continue to all interior regions of the U.S.” Similarly, during a 2011 lecture at Brooklyn Law School, Alan Bersin, the commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) under President Barack Obama, characterized the outward surge of the border as central to homeland security: “The earlier that we can identify, intercept, and neutralize threats to the homeland, the safer our people will be.
The further away geographically from the physical line that we can achieve these ends, the safer our country will be.’

The movement of the border outward beyond US territory is empirically apparent, for example, in an information-sharing program I review in chapter 7 that enables US immigration authorities to share criminal history information on deported people with the government of their home countries, one of which is Guatemala. Research demonstrates that Guatemalan police have attempted to incarcerate and even assault people who return from the United States with criminal records and gang allegations against them. When US immigration authorities share information and cooperate with foreign partners to incapacitate migrants in their home countries such that they are prevented from migrating back to the United States, then US immigration authorities have pushed the function of American borders into another country. Through information sharing, the border stretches out to impede people before they reach the physical border, even before they leave their home countries.

Similarly, when migrants do cross into US territory, federal and local law enforcement continue to subject them to border-like surveillance and control deep in the country’s interior via interconnected databases and information-sharing programs. For example, legal scholar Ayelet Shachar notes that unauthorized immigrants can be subjected to expedited removal within one hundred miles of the border fourteen days after they have physically crossed, effectively treating immigrants within US borders as if they had been stopped at the border. Shachar explains, “The border has been detached from its traditional location at the perimeter of the country’s edges—it has now ‘moved’ 100 miles into the interior.”

While it is true, to some degree, that bordering and surveillance are omnipresent, in practice, certain people and places are surveilled more than others. Thus, I find widespread claims that the border is everywhere and that surveillance and state violence “is aimed at all of us” difficult to truly grasp and make real. Rather, as border studies
scholar Mark B. Salter argues, “the border is not everywhere for everyone” in the same way. Therefore I set out to uncover and concretely map some of these new borderlands, to identify the state agents who are central to their construction, illuminate the most frequent targets of new surveillance and policing, and identify the specific mechanisms that have enabled the slow expansion of enforcement.

To accomplish this I draw from a trove of never before seen documents accessed through years of lawsuits against law enforcement organizations, supplemented by interviews and ethnographic observations. Borderland circuitry refers to the particular geographic patterns or circuits along which authorities deploy surveillance and information-sharing programs and as a result enable enforcement against an expanding group of criminalized immigrants. Specifically, I explicate three components.

First I deconstruct the technological circuitry of immigration enforcement—the guts of the data systems themselves—which allows me to map information exchange, a form of digital border construction between local law enforcement agencies primarily in the Western and Southwestern United States; federal law enforcement agencies in the United States; and law enforcement agencies in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Borderland circuitry thus describes cross-jurisdictional surveillance crystallizing along particular routes as a result of information-sharing partnerships. In the process, border control functions are externalized beyond US territory and internalized into the country’s interior.

My second task is to examine how authorities use borderland circuitry to target people—both US citizens and noncitizens—who have criminal records or are otherwise deemed to be dangerous, particularly alleged gang members, and exclude them from full membership in the polity. The border is a moving target, and so are categorical boundaries. Throughout American history, territory and substantive citizenship have not cleanly aligned. Instead, legal scholar Kunal Parker argues, “Designation as foreign is not a function of coming from the territorial outside. It is a political strategy.” Groups of
people are made foreign in order to do something to them that could otherwise not be done: detain, punish, control, or forcibly move.

It has long been so. Before the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 enabled the creation of a federal bureaucracy to oversee forced movement, immigration control occurred at the local level with states and towns instituting their own exclusion and deportation laws targeting unwanted entrants, most often free Black people and the poor. After the abolition of slavery, legislators openly debated whether African Americans were citizens or mere “inhabitants,” an illustration of how people born geographically within the US can be rendered foreign by virtue of their race. Slave states punished Black people who allegedly broke laws with state-level deportation, frequently after the completion of a prison sentence, a model that resembles the current practice of deporting “criminal aliens” after the completion of criminal punishment.

Where the US government has not been able to physically expel subjugated groups from national territory, it has instituted spatial restrictions by building internal borders. The US government legally constructed Indigenous people as foreigners within US territory, thus enabling the forced removal of Native Americans from their land and confinement to reservations. Connections survive in official nomenclature; Native Americans were “removed” to reservations, and removal is still the term used when deporting immigrants to other countries.

As such, models of social control initially deployed against non-citizens become models to be used against groups of targeted citizens who are rendered foreign. The forced internment of people of Japanese descent in the 1940s exemplifies both how noncitizens are subjected to extreme treatment as well as how citizens may be transformed into foreigners in order to be detained. Similarly, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, approximately one million people of Mexican descent living in the United States were deported to Mexico, including a large proportion of American citizens. When, as a child, I used to watch Border Patrol agents interrogate
laborers in Tucson, they harassed US citizen, undocumented, and lawful permanent resident workers alike. Their Latino ethnicity marked them with a foreignness that no birthright or naturalized citizenship could counteract.

In this book I illustrate that it is through racialized classifications, specifically by being classified as an alleged criminal alien or gang member, that people are currently rendered foreign and violable, and understanding the relatively new technology that facilitates these old processes is critical. Through a deconstruction of data systems, I demonstrate that the pool of “criminal” or “dangerous” immigrants is expanding, not because immigrants are committing more crimes or joining gangs in greater numbers, but because policies enable the application of criminalizing categories to progressively broader groups of immigrants. Borderland circuitry thus both targets purportedly dangerous immigrants as well as US citizens and in a circular manner, actively constructs them as such.

Importantly, the information on which authorities rely in order to label people dangerous or criminal is questionable. For example, gang labeling practices, detailed in chapters 3 and 4, are based on subjective assessments by frontline officers. Those officers then enter their racialized, often unjustifiable, sometimes fabricated, gang labels into data systems, where the information is transformed into hard data. Unreliable information becomes authoritative fact by virtue of its presence in a database.  

Negative categorizations are important because they allow law enforcement agencies to do something with a given individual that they otherwise could not. Criminologists Travis Linnemann and Bill McClanahan contend that “the continuum of police power starts with classification [. . .] making classification the initial and therefore an essential police power.” The initial categorization of a person as a criminal alien or alleged gang member triggers and justifies—legally, morally, and politically—subsequent actions, including extended detention, prioritized deportation, horrific brutality, and information sharing with other law enforcement organizations.