

Collaborative Community

Every day, around sixty asylum seekers who have made it through the Nogales, Arizona Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facility arrive at Casa Alitas Reception Center. The mother-daughter duo that runs Casa Alitas and volunteers, like us BCA interns, provide them with food and resources before sending them to a shelter where they can figure out their next steps. A big part of volunteering at Casa Alitas is sitting just outside the door to the CBP facility in the blazing heat, waiting to walk those who have made it through CBP to Casa Alitas. This past week, CBP's computer system was down and I sat outside the office for over two hours waiting for them to release people. My memories of these hours are defined by the interactions I had with the various CBP employees coming in and out of the facility. One officer asked if I was with Casa Alitas, and when I told him yes, he gave me a big smile and thanked me for my work. Another officer spent several minutes explaining why there was a backlog and said she would try to get me an estimated wait time. While several officers gave me confused looks or ignored me, most were courteous, informed about, and grateful for the work Casa Alitas does. My interactions with the CBP officials have fundamentally shifted my understanding of what collaboration can look like in community settings.

I grew up in New York City and just graduated from Oberlin College, two places known for their progressive ideas about immigration and their critiques of state violence embodied by institutions like Border Patrol and ICE. Coming from this background and without any actual experience at the border, I imagined that work supporting folks in the border regions could not involve the state, or would always be in direct opposition to state actors. Everyday I am learning just how many kinds of collaboration make community-based organizing possible.

Putting in the work to build relationships and what I've come to understand as a certain kind of collaboration with the Nogales CBP has been necessary for Casa Alitas to do the work that they do. I do want to be clear that CBP officers are individuals working in a system that I believe to be corrupt, and many will specifically not tell people about Casa Alitas and have no intention of "collaborating" with a place meant to assist those who have just crossed in finding a safe place to go next. My experience with CBP officers also doesn't mean that Casa Alitas and CBPs' missions are at all aligned, but instead that Casa Alita's work relies on its informal collaboration with CBP agents. If this connection didn't exist, CBP officers would be more likely to release people right onto the street at any time of day, often with no support or resources.

Casa Alitas is one among so many communities we have been lucky to spend time in these past three weeks. This week specifically we visited a community that collaborates on different terms. The San Xavier Co-op Farm is run by members of the Tohono O'odham Nation and is committed to healthy and traditional farming practices that support economic development of the community. Administrative Manager Amy Juan gave us an incredible tour and made it clear that while the farm has fought tirelessly for basic things they need, such as rights to water and freedom to practice Tohono O'odham ways of relating to land, they are able to make decisions about the farm that emerge from the needs and desires of their own community,

without having to form relationships with the state. She told us about San Xavier's community-based programs like buying back wild harvests from community members, their community work days, and their programs for Tohono O'odham youth. These practices are by and for their community and are not in any sort of collaboration with the government, in large part because they do not rely on the government for funding, unlike Casa Alitas, which is funded by Pima County.

In telling us about the farm, Amy Juan was clear about how deeply impacted San Xavier, the Tohono O'odham nation, and her own life have been by the increased militarization of the border. She talked about "checkpoint trauma" and having to negotiate with border patrol to be able to carry out Tohono O'odham rituals. However, when she spoke of the farm's future, she told us, "we have so much vision now." This vision emerges from the members of the farm co-op and the larger Tohono O'odham community, not any partnership with the state.

The San Xavier Farm Co-op and Casa Alitas are but two of so many communities we have been welcomed into, and one thing that's remained consistent is that each is situated to enact collaboration differently. In these last three weeks, I've come to understand the border to be precarious, intense, militarized, and contradictory. These strong, dynamic, and uniquely collaborative communities we've been so blessed to be welcomed into emerge out of these conditions and create new ones. In moving through these communities, in our own BCA intern community, we have found joy, solidarity, autonomy, and hope. It is here that I can feel my very understanding of collaboration, what it means to work with people towards a common goal, deepen. The more we experience, the more I realize just how vital it is for communities that work together to fully explore the diversity of forms collaboration can take on.



