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Refugees of the South:
Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary

Ana Patricia Rodríguez

In the corrido “Tres veces mojado” by the Mexican norteño group Los Tigres del Norte, Central Americans personify the (un)sung heroes of legendary border crossing, their monumental efforts to reach safe haven in the United States undocumented and unrecognized.¹ In the film *El Norte* (1984), Maya-Quiché brother and sister Enrique and Rosita cross the perilous borders between Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States to escape Guatemala’s civil war and its repression of indigenous communities. In an episode of the defunct television series *21 Jump Street*, detective Doug Penhall marries a young “illegal” Salvadoran woman who is deported and “disappears” in El Salvador.² Richard Boyle’s Salvadoran girlfriend in Oliver Stone’s film *Salvador* (1985) faces a similar fate as she crosses the U.S.-Mexico border, only to be plucked from a bus by immigration officers. In these popular musical and visual texts, Central Americans are featured in their own border narratives while playing the role of refugee in a growing corpus of U.S. Latino texts.³

Many of these texts produced by the mass media in the U.S. Latino cultural boom create an image of Central Americans as political refugees who, after fleeing locally manufactured repression, death squads, and wars south of the United States are redemptively transformed into U.S. Latino (im)migrants.⁴ Reality, however, confounds this image. Displaced first by the Reagan-Bush geopolitics in the Caribbean and in Central America and now by the global economy of the new millennium, Central American refugees represent the contradictions of U.S. policies and politics in the region. Victims of the disorder and violence [End Page 387] in their homelands, they seek safe haven in the United States, only to be received as depoliticized labor migrants, rarely granted the status of political refugees.⁵

Refugees of the Old and New South

Throughout the 1980s, most Central Americans were denied legal political asylum.⁶ Although the United States led a decade-long economic blockade and “contra-revolutionary” war in Nicaragua and granted Nicaraguan immigrants political asylum from the Marxist Sandinista government, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans in flight from right-wing military dictatorships and war conditions funded by the United States were not granted political refugee status. The 1980 Refugee Act, which established political refugee and asylum classifications in the United States, all but rejected most Central American applicants. In fact, “[i]n 1990, the INS received 22,271 asylum applications from Salvadorans; 260 individuals were granted asylum; 8,648 applications were denied.”⁷ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Congress enacted successive immigration laws that tightened restrictions on immigration while some government programs negotiated the terms for deporting immigrants seeking political and economic asylum in the United States.⁸

It was Central America’s violence in the 1980s that paved the way for the region’s inclusion in the New South, the area of the globe formerly known as the Third World, now linked to the “First World” by economic globalization. Spanning a vast terrain heedless of national borders, this South comprises two-thirds of the earth’s surface and three quarters of humanity. Many of its three-and-a-half billion people live in extreme poverty, including 68 percent of Central Americans, due to a variety of factors: large population growth, the concentration of wealth among a few, foreign political and economic intervention, low literacy and basic needs attainment, and extremely low annual income earnings per capita.⁹ Central America, as a whole, has suffered “the long-term, grinding deprivation of poverty” and ever “declining living conditions” that now make it part of the economic South.¹⁰

In addition to poverty, the countries of Central America share the impact of similar neoliberal regimes; not only are these countries individual nation-states, they are also part of the vast economic composite of the new South. This region can be understood as a “location of [End Page...

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