

Padilla, Yajaira M. *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals: US Central Americans and the Cultural Politics of Non-Belonging*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022. 249 pp.

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Yajaira M. Padilla's *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals* offers an insightful analysis of the ways in which US Central Americans have been imagined in US political discourse, mainstream media, and cultural production from the 1980s to 2020, as well as literary, cinematic, and artistic counternarratives to these problematic portrayals. In her scrutiny of hegemonic depictions of US Central Americans as undesirable Others who are unworthy and incapable of belonging in US society, Padilla focuses primarily on the tropes of threatening guerrillas, political refugees, domestic workers, MS-13 "gangbangers," and "forever illegals." Engaging with previous scholarship premised on the purported invisibility of US Central Americans in the multicultural landscape of the United States, Padilla points to the paradoxes of visibility, arguing that, on the one hand, they have become visible in mainstream media portrayals as a public threat, while on the other hand remaining invisible or as expendable laborers, as designed by the regimes of government, law, and the agricultural industry.

Padilla begins her study with an overview of the history of Central American migration to the United States, lending particular attention to the connections between US intervention in the isthmus during the Central American revolutions of the late 1970s to the 1990s, and emigration from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. In doing so, the author fills in the historical vacuum that often surrounds the portrayal of Central American immigrants in US culture. She notes that President Ronald Reagan's portrayal of Central Americans as strongmen and violent subversives transformed them into a menacing threat to the nation, which subsequently served as justification for the denial of asylum petitions for the majority of Guatemalans and Salvadorans during the 1980s.

Chapter One, "Signifying US Central American Non-Belonging," provides further historical context, establishing a chronology of exclusionary immigration policies, including Reagan's 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and President Bill Clinton's 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Having established a broad history of the discourse and policies of US Central American non-belonging, Padilla offers a brief analysis of Gregory Nava's *El norte* (1983), with a particular focus on how Rosa's deathbed scene summarizes the experiences of persecution,

dislocation, discrimination, and marginalization that many Central American immigrants have faced. Her discussion of *El norte* also serves as a point of departure for an interrogation of the ideal of the American Dream, with its inherent affirmation of immigrant assimilation. In her elaboration of the concept of non-belonging, Padilla engages with theoretical constructs, such as Aníbal Quijano's "coloniality of power," Arturo Arias's "invisibility," and Susan Bibler's "non-existence." The latter half of the chapter provides a genealogy of the tropes of non-belonging. She begins with the Cold War representations of the threatening guerrilla portrayed in such films as John Milius's *Red Dawn* (1984), Roger Spottiswoode's *Under Fire* (1983), and Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1987), as well as the political refugee as helpless victim in novels including Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988), Ana Castillo's *Sapogonia* (1990), Graciela Limón's *In Search of Bernabé* (1993), and Demetria Martínez's *Mother Tongue* (1994). She argues that "although they do not render US Central Americans in overtly threatening ways, these portrayals of refugees add to the sense that these populations do not belong and cannot 'make it' in the United States, thereby also reinforcing their undesirability as potential citizen-subjects" (36). Shifting to post-Cold War cultural production, Padilla focuses on the representation of Central Americans in the era of Central American gangs. In her analysis of the episode "The Woman in the Garden" from the TV series *Bones* (2005-2017), the author elucidates the risk of conflating gangs such as MS-13 with the military death squads of the revolutionary era, arguing that in doing so El Salvador is characterized by "lawlessness and a deeply rooted savagery" and that US Salvadorans are portrayed as helpless and unassimilable victims with no history and no future (38). Finally, inspired by Roque Dalton's characterization of his Salvadoran compatriots as "los eternos indocumentados," Padilla asserts that contemporary mass media depictions of US Central Americans as, first and foremost, undocumented aliens underscore the impossibility of their acceptance in US society and thus their status as "forever illegals." The chapter concludes with a brief commentary on the possibility of cultural production to contest the concept of US Central American non-belonging through the analysis of a nuanced representation of an MS-13 member who protects an unaccompanied youth from the blows of a border patrol agent in Javier Zamora's poem "Second Attempt Crossing" from his 2017 collection *Unaccompanied*.

Chapter two, "Domesticated Subject? The Salvadoran Maid in US Television and Film," is more limited in scope than the previous chapter, but no less insightful. Noting that the representation of the Latine maid/nanny has become more visible in US television and film since the 1990s, Padilla argues that

because the Salvadoran *doméstica* is explicitly constituted as an immigrant laborer on which the United States depends, the way in which this foreign Other is situated within dominant discourse is through a process of “domestication.” Non-belonging is implicated in this process, given that domestication can also be seen as providing the Salvadoran immigrant women subjected to it with the veneer of inclusion while still reinscribing their undesirability and marginalization. (50)

The chapter contrasts the portrayal of Rosario from the NBC prime-time show *Will and Grace* (1998-2006, 2017-2020) and Dolores from Nancy Savoca’s independent film *Dirt* (2004). Padilla convincingly argues that despite Rosario’s high visibility as a Salvadoran domestic worker, her portrayal ultimately adheres to the representation as a domesticated foreign Other, partly due to a lack of historical contextualization for her presence in the US. By contrast, in *Dirt*, Dolores’s character is not content with being subservient to her employer and refuses to forfeit her cultural identity completely. Moreover, Padilla contends, the portrayal of her traumatic border crossing situates her character within the social reality of Salvadoran maids.

Chapter three, “Lance Corporal José Gutiérrez and the Perils of Being a ‘Good Immigrant,’” examines the story of one of the first soldiers to die in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. A native of Guatemala, Gutiérrez migrated to the US as a teenager and, upon graduation from high school, enlisted in the Marines as a means to obtain US citizenship. Padilla’s chapter focuses primarily on the analysis of a human interest article about Gutiérrez’s story published in the *Los Angeles Times* after his death. Specifically, she argues that the article entitled “Death of a Dream” upholds the logic of neoliberalism that distinguishes good and bad or worthy and unworthy immigrants. She explains, “Intended to transition the US immigration system into a market-like structure, such measures [as the IIRIRA] transformed the granting of legal entry into the United States into a commodity that immigrants had to show they merited by following certain rules, accepting personal responsibility, and proving that they would not be a financial burden or criminal threat” (72). Ultimately, Padilla concludes that Gutiérrez’s case underscores the need to challenge the neoliberal logic of immigrant goodness and merit, particularly with regard to the representation of undocumented Central American male youth.

The fourth chapter, “Central American Crossings, Rightlessness, and Survival in Mexico’s Border Passage,” analyzes narrative strategies in feature-length fictional films and documentaries that portray the perilous migrant passage through Mexico. Feature-length films in this category include Cary Fukunaga’s *Sin nombre* (2009), Luis Mandoki’s *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (2012), and

Diego Quemada-Diez's *La jaula de oro* (2013). Padilla analyzes documentaries, such as *Asalto al sueño / Assaulted Dream* (2006), *De nadie (Border Crossing) / No One* (2007), *Wetback: The Undocumented Documentary* (2007), *La vida en la vía / Life on the Line* (2007), *Which Way Home* (2009), *María en tierra de nadie / Mary in No-Man's Land* (2010), *La Bestia / The Beast* (2011), and *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (2013) as “migrant documentaries,” which she considers a subgenre of human rights media. Such films, she argues, humanize Central American migrants by appealing to the affective responses of viewers and connecting migrant suffering to larger systems of power. She further maintains that in these films, Mexico is depicted as a dehumanizing passageway and part of an interstate regime intended to extend US immigration and national security policies beyond its borders. Migrants, Padilla asserts, are shown to be merchandise and inhumane objects frequently subjected to rape and violent crimes often carried out while being robbed or used for other financial means. Through this process of abjection, these films reveal the perception of Central American migrants as expendable Others in both Mexico and the US, thus reifying their non-belonging.

The fifth chapter, “The Cachet of Illegal Chickens in Central American Los Angeles,” persuasively illustrates how Los Angeles-based artist Carlos Castañeda’s (also known as Cache) work functions as an art of resistance. Situating his street murals between the genres of street art and immigrant art, Padilla characterizes Cache’s work as a form of protest against the oppressive economic, social, and political structures that seek to maintain the marginal status afforded to US Central Americans. Ultimately, she posits, the examples of Cache’s work analyzed in this chapter “both expose and challenge the regimes of visibility (those of government, the law, and industry) that determine to what extent, where, and how US Central Americans are made visually legible and, consequently, deemed welcomed additions to LA’s diverse community” (127).

In her brief conclusion, Padilla analyzes Roy G. Guzmán’s 2020 poem “Payday Loan Phenomenology” and one of Breen Nuñez’s comics strips from the series *From There to Here* as a means of pointing toward further critical possibilities for the paradigm of non-belonging. Guzmán’s poem, she contends, “complicates notions of non-belonging from the vantage point of being both US Central American/Honduran and queer” (131), whereas Nuñez’s comic strips offer “a counternarrative to exclusionary and racist notions of regional or national belonging for Central Americans premised on hegemonic discourses of *mestizaje* and the prevalence of representations of US Central Americans as *mestizos* or *ladinos*” (132). Although these final readings might have been better situated in a chapter focused on counternarratives that would combine Padilla’s analysis of

Cache's art with her reading of Zamora's poem from chapter one, they are nevertheless astute and provocative.

In sum, Padilla's monograph is a valuable contribution to the fields of (US) Central American studies and Latinx or Latine studies. Following Ana Patricia Rodríguez's call to move the discussion of US Central Americans beyond the trope of invisibility, Padilla successfully articulates the paradox of receiving heightened visibility in hegemonic depictions yet simultaneously being denied any sense of history or belonging in the US multicultural landscape. She thoughtfully engages with prior scholarship on US Central American culture and provides illuminating analyses of a variety of cultural productions. This study would be a useful and accessible resource in undergraduate or graduate Latine cultural studies courses or courses on US Central American history and culture. It would also likely be of interest to Central Americanists and scholars of Latin American transnational migration.