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On Silences: Salvadoran Refugees Then and Now

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Abrego Bio Sketch

Leisy J. Abrego is Associate Professor of Chicana/o Studies at UCLA. She is a member of the first large wave of Salvadoran immigrants who arrived in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Her research and teaching interests—inspired in great part by her family’s experiences—are in Central American immigration, Latina/o families, and the inequalities created by gender and by U.S. immigration policies. Her book, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* (Stanford University Press 2014), highlights the role of gender and legal status in determining the well-being of Salvadoran transnational families.

Abstract

US military and economic intervention in El Salvador has set the conditions for mass migration since the 1980s. Both then and now, despite well-documented human rights abuses, the US government refuses to categorize Salvadorans as refugees. Weaving in personal and political narratives, this essay examines the parallels of violence against refugees in the 1980s and the present. It also analyzes the silences created through the denial of state terror and the political and collective consequences of these silences for Salvadorans in the US.

On Silences: Salvadoran Refugees Then and Now

In a recent conversation during a visit to my grandmother's house, my mother mentioned that one of her Facebook friends who lives in San Martín, our hometown in El Salvador, had posted alarming information the night before. Her friend, Amanda, updated her status to relay that a series of gunshots were being fired nearby as opposing gangs were attacking each other. The drama unfolded on Facebook as Amanda continued to post on this thread, asking for prayers and describing how she and her kids hid under the bed to wait out the shooting.

Like many people who fled war in a previous era, my mom rarely shared stories with her kids about the state terror she had witnessed. Her Facebook friend's posts, however, got her to reminisce out loud about having been in a very similar situation over thirty years earlier. Upon hearing bombs nearby, like Amanda, she hid in the bedroom with her children; my sister was a newborn and I was almost five years old. Still recovering from giving birth days earlier, my mother recounted, she stood up and felt warm globs of blood sliding down her leg. Amid the surrounding explosions, her teeth chattered uncontrollably. She forced herself to pull it together long enough to focus on making us feel safe.

Having opened the door to these memories, her mind led her to more details that she continued to narrate—details that I heard for the first time that day. Inundated with fear, she opted not to leave the house for days. We ate only eggs. As the time passed and the bombings subsided, she finally gained the courage to go out shopping for more food to el mercado (the outdoor market), only to find a single vendor—an older woman—who had braved through the fear to be there. She was selling only tomatoes. Walking next to a pile of lifeless mutilated bodies on the street, my mother came home with nothing but a bag of tomatoes and the resolve to leave that place as soon as possible. We would be on our way across three international borders within weeks.

I did not grow up hearing these stories. As jarring and injurious as those experiences were for her to live and for me to learn about, I treasure the moments when my mother slips out of the silence. Like many fellow Central Americans, my family's history is inextricably woven into a national and regional history of multiple layers of state and gendered violence that most humans would prefer to forget. Understandably, survivors and witnesses want to protect loved ones from the haunting memories of such brutally tragic details. My need to learn about our history, therefore, was less pressing than the survivors' need to suppress it.

It was not until college in a class on Central American Politics that I finally learned more. I read about the deep-seated economic inequalities that historically kept the majority of the population of Central America in debilitating poverty; about the many organized attempts at revolution that aimed to redistribute the unjustly concentrated wealth; and about the many times the United States intervened by repressing popular uprisings to protect business interests (Almeida 2008; Barry 1987; Dalton 2000).

In the 1970s and 80s, US support for the military and elites of El Salvador set the conditions for the immensely devastating consequences of the civil war. Determined to prevent a communist victory in the region that would stand in the way of US corporations' profits there, as part of its Cold War operations, the Reagan administration armed and trained the military and paramilitary leaders of death squads with the goal of eliminating all opposition (LaFeber 1993). Upon losing to Nicaragua's Sandinistas, they doubled down to train soldiers in Honduran lands to prevent leftist wins in Guatemala and El Salvador. At the School of the Americas—in the same way they had done with dictators throughout Latin America—they instructed military leaders on how to commit vicious torture and carry out murder techniques that would also serve the purpose of instilling fear in the rest of the population, all with the goal of deterring attempts at a more equitable redistribution of wealth (Martín-Baró 1983). The military indiscriminately scorched entire villages (Viterna 2006; Weitzhandler 1993). By the end of the 12-year war in El Salvador, at least 75,000 people had been killed (Menjívar 2000).¹ Tens of thousands were also tortured and disappeared.

These conditions pushed the population into the conflict—through forced recruitment, because people conscientiously decided to fight, or because violence became unavoidable. People joined the war openly, supported it clandestinely, or aimed merely to survive by following the unspoken rules of silence. Silence during the war entailed not speaking truths about what people witnessed or endured. It was the kind of silence that made families rush out of restaurants in a panic when they heard music by the popular Venezuelan political protest group, Los Guaraguao, play on the jukebox; the same silence that inspired people to carefully build concealed spaces under

¹ Next door in Guatemala, they suffered an even worse fate. By the end of the 36-year genocidal war in Guatemala, at least 200,000 people had been killed (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015).

covered tables, in the back of the house where they hid to read a censored book about social justice; the particular sort of silence that echoed in the whispers of neighbors making everyone wonder who was watching and who was truly trustworthy.

The brutal violence and deafening silence thrust tens of thousands of Salvadorans to leave the country. Fleeing for their lives, in the 1980s they began what would eventually become a long-term migration stream to the United States. Though there was ample documentation to prove that they met the conditions established by the United Nations 1951 Convention and the US Refugee Act of 1980 to qualify for protection, the United States did not recognize them as refugees (Weitzhandler 1993). The lens of the “politics of protection” that makes “visible the politics at play in the existing refugee protection regime” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014: 70), reveals that while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) claims to manage refugees from a non-political stance, in practice, this is impossible whenever nation-states are making determinations about who counts as a refugee and who does not; when they set stipulations that label people refugees or categorize them instead as “economic,” or “illegal” migrants (Hayden 2006)—as though people in the latter categories were less deserving of human rights protections.

In the case of Salvadorans coming to the United States, refugee status or asylum would have translated into a much more welcoming and stabilizing entry,² helping to increase their chances of thriving (Coutin 2000). The economic, social, and educational services available to refugees could have shielded Central Americans at a time when they needed the stability to heal from emotional scars left by state terror (Martín-Baró 1983).³ On the contrary, however, the general US policy response toward

² Refugees apply for admission from outside the borders of the country of destination. Asylum seekers apply for legalization from within the desired country of destination.

³ Cuban exiles, for example, were granted refugee status, helping them to translate their various forms of capital to their new home in the United States (Portes and Bach 1985). Refugee status, I understand, is certainly not an all-encompassing solution. Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong who fled similar state terror as Salvadorans and Guatemalans in their homelands, were granted refugee status and all the financial and other assistance associated with it. Refugee status alone, however, has not provided sufficient relief to fully counteract the repercussions of trauma (Sack et al. 1999).

Salvadorans—and Guatemalans—was to obstruct them. Because of the US government's financial and political support of the war, it refused to recognize Salvadorans in the 1980s and 90s as refugees (Coutin 1998). In a sense, the US government opted for silence regarding its extensive role in perpetrating human rights abuses. This meant that Salvadorans, like Guatemalans, were deemed unauthorized immigrants, or later, liminally legal inhabitants of this country, unable to plan toward a stable future (Menjívar 2006). Decades later, this notably hostile context of reception continues to shape many Salvadorans' inability to attain stable legal status (Menjívar and Abrego 2012), while also officially denying their history.

The denial of services and protections, as damaging as it was for the day-to-day lives and long-term stability of Salvadorans in the US (Menjívar 2000), also signaled other less conspicuous but equally consequential forms of denial. The silence surrounding the US role in the war served to deny validation of my parents' generation's status as survivors and refugees. The trauma they had endured—the memories that some nights still woke them up in an anxiety-ridden sweat—none of it was legally confirmed. The official version of why Salvadorans were in the United States negated their experiences as refugees; failed to register the state terror that drove them to this new place; and denied them a justification for their need to heal.

That denial, in turn, translated into various silences. There is the silence that is the large void in generations of children of Salvadoran immigrants growing up in the United States being denied access to our own histories (Cárcamo 2013). There is the silence that was filled by others who did not know how to understand us, so they used stereotypes and imposed their own experiences to make sense of who we are. And we continue to reproduce the silences when we do not know, cannot locate, have never been told of the structural, political, economic sources of our collective pain, or of our collective resilience.

We fill those voids as best as we can, guided by social expectations that were never meant to be attainable by the most vulnerable among us. Gendered ideals play a critical role here (Abrego 2014). In a heteropatriarchal context, the gendered ideals that govern our lives sneak into our understandings of ourselves and of our place in the world to powerfully communicate to women that they must be mothers who love, protect, and provide stability for their children through daily care work. Similar social and structural

forces are at play in gendered ideals that expect men to be effective economic providers for families, earning enough money in desirable jobs to meet all of their material needs. In the context of such deeply rooted inequalities—the very same inequalities that were set in motion and maintained through US military and economic intervention—these ideals are out of reach for most Salvadoran women and men, both in El Salvador and in the United States. It is in a search for a dignified life, then, that Salvadorans—victims of multiple forms of violence (Walsh and Menjívar 2016)—must find ways to make meaning of life beyond unfulfilled expectations.

In El Salvador, in the aftermath of the war's devastation, neoliberal policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank did not account for needed investment in education and only promoted the creation of jobs that pay what people there call “sueldos de hambre” – wages that are so low that they can only result in hunger for workers and their families (Almeida 2008; Moodie 2010). Boys who had been forcibly recruited to fight in the war still had access to weapons, yet faced limited opportunities for schooling (Villacorta et al. 2011). Their reintegration to civilian life was structured to block them not only from upward mobility, but also from much needed emotional and psychological healing.

During this period, in the United States, Salvadoran youth who had settled into poor neighborhoods were met with other forms of violence and exclusion (Coutin 2013; Ertll 2009; Zilberg 2004). While their parents worked multiple jobs or dealt with their war trauma in unhealthy ways (Jenkins 1991), youth—especially boys—joined gangs seeking belonging and protection (Vázquez et al. 2003; Zilberg 2004). As a result, many were imprisoned. In the 1990s, after the signing of the Peace Accords, the United States government deported gang members to El Salvador and Guatemala where the limited educational and labor opportunities blocked them from meeting their gendered expectations. Unable to find dignity in the most traditional forms, deportees and other impoverished youth instead devised power and survival in gangs.

Today, in the continued and deepening absence of opportunity for a dignified life, profound poverty, corruption, and a raging US sponsored War on Drugs (The Mesoamerican Working Group 2013), all continue to fuel the proliferation of gangs that force more people to migrate. To be sure, Central American children have been migrating

alone or with families since at least the 1980s (Jonas and Rodríguez 2015), but mainstream media has mainly covered the dramatic increase of Central American “unaccompanied minors” and children with young mothers reaching US borders. Reports reveal that these newest migrants most often cite gang violence as their immediate reason for seeking refuge in the United States (UNHCR 2014; UNHCR 2015). In essence, structural violence is exacerbated when the consequences of unresolved trauma from state terror are made evident in horrific interpersonal violence that now generates new refugees.

The parallels between the refugees of the 1980s and those of the 2010s are noteworthy. In the 2010s, gangs have become the most common representation of Salvadorans and other Central Americans in mainstream US media portrayals – just as paramilitaries and guerrillas represented the refugees of the 1980s. Popular documentaries, as well as films and television shows feature one-dimensional Central American characters (Padilla 2012). Both in the 1980s and today, without sufficient political, economic, or social analysis to contextualize the proliferation of violence, and in the absence of balanced representations, viewers are likely to misunderstand Central Americans as inherently violent and dangerous. But let me be clear: gangs are a legacy of US-funded state terror. When analyzed through a gender lens that makes visible heteropatriarchal gendered ideals, gangs are the result of deep-seated inequalities fed by the kind of massive violence that has generated social trauma in the region for generations (Godoy 2002). Gangs—because they provide men who have been categorically denied opportunities access to social and financial resources and because they enact gendered violence upon women (Martínez 2016)—permit men to achieve an alternative form of masculinity and power.

Violence against women, too, is a central parallel between the two historical moments of Salvadoran exodus. In 2015, the UNHCR published a report titled, “Women on the Run,” about the conditions women are fleeing in El Salvador and neighboring countries (UNHCR 2015). Domestic, sexual, and other forms of gendered violence forced the women—many of them with small children—to embark on a dangerous unauthorized trek north. It is worth noting that given the ages of the women – many in their 20s and 30s – they were born during the height of the civil war and their lives, therefore, have been framed through multiple forms of violence. Today, the women describe harrowing

events of gendered violence that they suffered at the hands of their intimate partners, gang members, and others. Their stories are eerily reminiscent of those recounted by refugees fleeing El Salvador during the 1980s when repressive conditions were set by military and paramilitary groups.

The parallels are disturbingly evident in a 1991 article published in the journal *Women's Studies International Forum* titled, "The Gender-Specific Terror of El Salvador and Guatemala: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Central American Refugee Women" (Aron et al. 1991). The authors begin by describing the kind of power military soldiers had in targeting victims in gendered ways:

Allegations of guerilla involvement provide a justification for murder, should anyone try to hold a soldier accountable for his deeds; but no suspicion need be present for a woman to be targeted. If she is not politically involved, but is desired as a sexual object by a man in the military, he may allege a guerrilla involvement, secure that his word will prevail over hers. (Aron et al. 1991: 39)

The authors go on to explain that women victims of soldiers, "cannot call for help, cannot press charges, cannot demand justice, cannot find refuge, for any act of resistance becomes a threat to existence" (41). In other words, for women, only silence is acceptable. In such an oppressive context, some women moved to "voluntarily" turn themselves in to individual soldiers "as their private sexual property, so as to avoid becoming the common property of a whole battalion..." (40). Women's bodies, then, became "a commodity in a market controlled by officers of the Armed Forces, who truck and barter as they choose, and while men may trade in cigarettes or male prestige when seeking favors, women more often must resort to the coin of the flesh" (40).

Women had to risk their lives to escape, knowing that they would not achieve justice in their country. If they were lucky enough to make it to the United States, they might try to file a claim for political asylum. This process, however, also often involved a re-traumatization:

When a refugee applies for political asylum, the process demands that she retell her painful story, and, as in rape trials, offers no guarantee that her testimony will be respected or believed. If she cites sexual assault as evidence of having suffered persecution, the institutionalized character of the crime may go unrecognized, thereby disqualifying the abuse as a claim for political asylum. The refugee is

likely to be deported, and to face reprisals (often death) in her home country. (Aron et al. 1991: 43)

Much like in that period of civil war when the military terrorized the population, today gangs—the very children of war and state trauma—are the most direct and visible victimizers of the people of the northern region of Central America (Martínez 2016).⁴ Take, for example, a 29 April 2016 article in a Salvadoran newspaper.⁵ The journalist described a common trend now, to find dead, often mutilated bodies with their hands and feet tied behind their back, inside plastic bags, or covered in sheets, thrown on the side of the road in verdant areas. One of the “experts” interviewed for the piece states that while men are killed for strictly gang-related business, “among the women it’s usually due to infidelity to her partner, generally someone in prison who she hasn’t gone to visit in recent months. In some cases, the women have changed partners and that is what angers the previous partner.”⁶ Men, therefore, are targeted mostly for their actions against the gang. Women, on the other hand, are murdered for not following men’s wishes, when they stop behaving like the property they are considered to be. Such descriptions minimize and justify these murders, as they explain why there were a record 954 homicides just during the first 40 days of 2016 alone.⁷

Fleeing multisided forms of gendered violence in El Salvador and throughout the region (Walsh and Menjívar 2016), women are then likely to experience further victimization during their long trek north to the United States. Along with the risk of losing their limbs and lives by clandestinely riding the freight train that runs through much of the length of the Mexican territory, women migrants are also highly vulnerable to rape and sex trafficking rings run by gangs and drug cartels (Izcara Palacios 2016; Martínez 2016; 2010). Given the high frequency and consistently severe nature of the violence perpetrated against women migrants along this journey, the UNHCR calls for the

⁴ Northern Central America is also hostage to neoliberal economic policies and drug war efforts that produce structural forms of violence that, while less recognizable as sources of violence (Torres-Rivas 1998), nonetheless cause great generalized harm.

⁵ The newspaper is ElSalvador.com.
<http://www.elsalvador.com/articulo/sucesos/cuatro-meses-han-dejado-cuerpos-embolsados-111143>

⁶ Author’s translation.

⁷ These figures are especially disturbing given that El Salvador is only about 8,000 square miles – almost twice the size of Los Angeles County (4,700 square miles) and about the size of Massachusetts.

protection of Central American women seeking asylum outside their countries.

Although the US is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention,⁸ an international treaty on refugee rights, the Obama administration has not protected Central American asylum applicants. In its May 2015 press release, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) states that, “our borders are not open to illegal migration, and that individuals apprehended crossing the border illegally are a Department priority.”⁹ By refusing to recognize them as refugees, ICE deems these women and their children as “illegal” migrants who need not be protected. In the current post 9/11, Homeland Security chapter of this ongoing history of US responses to Central American migrants fleeing the consequences of US policies and interventions in the region, not only are Central Americans denied refugee status, but they are also labeled “illegal migrants” whose presence poses danger to the nation. The latter assertion creates a false justification for the government’s indefinite detention of dozens of mothers and children as a way to deter future migration from the region.¹⁰

In the 1980s, the US government denied Salvadorans refugee status to avoid recognition of its role in countless human rights abuses in El Salvador, all in the name of protecting corporate profits there. Today, denial of refugee status prioritizes the profits of a new set of corporations — for-profit prisons. As David Hernandez explains, the current exodus of Central American refugees is being used as an excuse to vastly expand the practice of family detention: In 2014, there was only one detention center in Berks County, Pennsylvania with 100 beds. After mainstream news covered the appalling detention conditions for children at the border in summer 2014, the government added 1,100 beds in:

... a temporary public facility in Artesia, New Mexico, and a privately run, for-profit facility in Karnes County, Texas. In December 2014, a 480-bed, for-profit facility opened in Dilley, Texas, while a larger 2,400-bed facility is being constructed next door. Also in

⁸ <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>

⁹ <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ice-announces-enhanced-oversight-family-residential-centers>

¹⁰ See the August 2014 statement by Philip T. Miller, Assistant Director of Field Operations for the Enforcement and Removal Operations of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s <https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/immigrantjustice.org/files/Government%20No%20Bond%20Declarations.pdf> (Accessed July 14, 2016)

December, the Artesia facility transferred its final detainees, while simultaneously, the for-profit Karnes County Residential Center agreed to expand its facility by 626 detention beds, making up for the closure of the New Mexico facility. All together, family detention capacity increased thirty-five times over in fewer than six months. (Hernández 2015: 14)

While ICE uses the wrong juridical categories for Central Americans who should be categorized as refugees, it also deceptively uses language to conceal its human warehousing practices. Despite the fact that all detainees refer to detention as prison or jail (Lovato 2016), when women and children are warehoused together, ICE has euphemistically called these “family residential centers.” These family residential centers are minimally disguised former prisons that have been sites of suicide attempts by both women and children. Detainees get sick from the rotting food, have trouble sleeping, and become depressed at being incarcerated for fleeing violent conditions. As these stories of suffering and victimization are publicized, there has been mounting public pressure in the form of large demonstrations, negative national press coverage, and multiple petitions from a number of organizations, including elected officials. In response to the massive calls to end family detention, ICE has now succeeded in attaining a license in the state of Texas to officially call these “child care facilities” (Preston 2016).

There have been hundreds of asylum-seeking families at Karnes City family detention center. Among them there are at least 20 families who despite passing credible fear interviews were denied bond and held in detention for 10 months or longer because they had a “prior deportation.” ICE has invoked national security concerns to bypass international law—and much of it has been possible precisely because they will not categorize them rightfully as refugees.¹¹

In the current historical moment, the unwillingness to recognize Central Americans as refugees creates new silences that will have lasting repercussions for the newest arrivals and future generations. When we refuse to call people refugees, to name the trauma and locate the source of the violence in the state and its various social structures, we create a void that then is filled, I argue, in ways that can

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<https://immigrantjustice.org/sites/immigrantjustice.org/files/Government%20No%20Bond%20Declarations.pdf>

be erroneous and detrimental. This is what I have witnessed in various spaces in Los Angeles, despite the city's strong immigrant rights movement and its large population of Salvadorans who arrived in previous eras.

In Los Angeles, the silences and misnomers for previous generations have created voids too easily filled with stereotypes and misinformation. In practice, this means that among the general public not well versed in the basics of Salvadoran migration, refugees are lumped together in a single unauthorized, dehumanized category. In my experience, without complex or balanced representations of Salvadorans or Central Americans in any mainstream media or social institution (whether in English or Spanish language), even well-meaning, well-educated observers do not have a proper framework through which to understand what is happening. To fill these silences, they turn to what is now the too-often empty rhetoric of “comprehensive immigration reform” presumed to solve the problems of anyone without a stable legal status (Gonzales 2013). Without the language to recognize the vast ways the US is implicated in people's forced migration, or without the words to understand the forced nature of their displacement, even sympathetic members of the public want to “integrate” these newcomers and envelop them in messages of “Sí se puede” that are too simplistic and even problematic for the current circumstances.

In immigrant rights circles in Los Angeles, I have witnessed DACA¹² recipients – young adults who formerly called themselves undocumented “DREAMers” (Negrón-Gonzales 2014) – respond with great compassion to the plight of these new young arrivals. Doing what they do very well, they organized quickly to protest hateful responses, mobilize resources, and offer children various social services. In these community and educational spaces, they tried to motivate the young newcomers with their personal stories of triumph—the same stories that had done wonders to inspire a general US public to support DREAMers politically (Gomberg-Muñoz 2015). The young Central Americans, however, listened with blank stares. The narrative of meritocratic success seems unattainable, perhaps even quixotic, as they recover from the social

¹² Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals is an executive action that grants a subset of undocumented young people access to state identification and a work permit, while clarifying that they are not a priority category for deportation.

trauma and massive violence that marked their escape. Among them, the girls seem particularly unmoved.

In the UNHCR report and in countless other journalistic accounts, we hear of unspeakable violence against girls and women in their home countries and as they transit to the United States. Six out of ten, perhaps as many as eight out of ten, are raped. More recently, we are hearing accounts of sexual abuse in US detention centers, as well. The language of “sí se puede” and “comprehensive immigration reform” does not begin to address their trauma. Even among allies, we do not have the right language or the proper lens to understand how to approach them as refugees. The silences have made it likely that we will draw on more widely dispersed narratives, even when these do not apply.

Growing up in these silences, however, has also made many of us curious, pushing us to find our voices to counter mainstream narratives, and seek social justice. Even in the face of such historically-rooted multisided trauma, Central American women have fought back. They fled in previous generations and do so today when their lives are in danger. Despite facing multiple forms of oppression, even detained women, arguably among the most vulnerable, have managed to organize and draw national and international attention to their plight. In March 2015, timed to take place during Holy Week, some 40 women in Karnes County Residential Center—most of them Central American—went on a hunger strike (Bogado 2015). 78 mothers there also signed a letter demanding to be released. Later that year in October, another group of detained women, this time at the T. Don Hutto detention center in Taylor, Texas,¹³ ran another letter writing campaign. Twenty-seven women went on a hunger strike to voice their grievances, telling stories of food that makes them sick, lack of proper healthcare, and psychological, sexual, and physical abuse within detention. They denounced that they are treated as less than human, followed around, or put in solitary confinement for speaking out. Most recently in August 2016, 22 women in Berks County Detention Facility in Pennsylvania also published an open letter and went on a hunger strike to denounce inhumane conditions and demand their release.¹⁴ Through these collective actions, Central American women are once

¹³ <http://grassrootsleadership.org/blog/2015/10/breaking-least-27-women-hunger-strike-hutto-detention-center-hutto27>

¹⁴ <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/LettertoSecJohnson-Berkshungerstrike.pdf>

again putting their bodies on the line, risking their health and their lives to demand humane treatment. They have moved past the silences to make a clear and consistent demand: release everyone immediately.

As the atrocious consequences of neoliberalism and the drug war continue and more people flee from El Salvador and the rest of northern Central America, the United States remains mostly silent around its support of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the Drug War, and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)—the policies that set the conditions for current violence (The Mesoamerican Working Group 2013). Generations of us, however, have been watching. We have been moving between silences, learning, and preparing. Those of us who directly or indirectly suffered the consequences of the violence of the past, the very children of the refugees who were never labeled as such in a previous era, are now ready to break the silence, to fill the voids, to correct the official versions of our history. As coalitions of various social justice seekers unite around the US to demand justice for these most recent newcomers, some of the fiercest activists are precisely Central American women, some of whom are children of previously unrecognized refugees. Esther Portillo-Gonzales, Nancy Zuniga, Suyapa Portillo, Adalila Zelaya, Oriel Siu, Monica Novoa, Jennifer Cárcamo, Kryssia Campos, Lizette Hernandez, Cecilia Menjívar, Cristina Echeverría, Morelia Rivas, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, Ester Hernandez, Cristina Gonzales, Cynthia Santiago, Fanny García, Karina Oliva Alvarado, Arelly Zimmerman, Maricela López Samayoa, Ana Patricia Rodriguez, Martha Arévalo, Rocio Veliz, Jacqueline Munguía, Cinthia Flores, Yajaira Padilla, Rossana Perez, Sara Aguilar, Siris Barrios, Dora Olivia Magaña, Carla Guerrero, Maya Chinchilla, Ester Trujillo. These Central American women have moved beyond the silence, using their gendered consciousness and their knowledge of the silenced history of the region to push these conversations in different spaces; to organize the women in detention; to amplify the voices of refugee mothers who seek justice in their own individual cases, but also more broadly for all women who are fleeing violence. These activists have been able to recognize the humanity of the women because they have not relied on the political vocabulary that is rooted in other struggles and other populations. They have instead centered these women and their status as survivors of gendered violence. As an activist and a child of refugees, I

add my name to this list and ask that for the sake of our liberation, you the reader, too, move beyond limited and limiting language, to stop ignoring the silences that currently surround Central American refugees.

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