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Araceli Pérez Mendoza\*

## Canadian Refugee Status Pinning Hope on the “Other Norte”

“I’m goin’ far away, Father; so, I’ve come t’tell you.”  
 “And where’re ya goin’, if ya don’t mind tellin’ me?”  
 “I’m goin’ to the North.”

*Paso del Norte*, JUAN RULFO<sup>1</sup>

“El Norte” is an expression used by Mexican migrants as a synonym for the border area between Mexico and the United States, or figuratively, to refer to the United States. It conjures up the imaginary line between their poverty in Mexico and the hope of a better life, despite the hostile reality of a risky, deadly border for those who cross it clandestinely.

Borders are visible or intangible: geographical, cultural, symbolic. The borders of countries that consider themselves stable and economically prosperous are the most controlled; and these legal borders—restrictive or flexible, depending on the case—regulate the flow of migrants and determine which people are desirable for entry into their lands. In recent years, thousands of Mexicans have gone through the iconic North between Mexico and the United States to reach the *other* “Norte,” Canada. However, after clearing the physical and legal bor-

\* Professor and researcher at the Mexico City Autonomous University (UACM); araceliperez.academico@hotmail.com.

ders, they come up against others: the cultural and symbolic.

### The “Other Norte”

The implementation of the General Strategy to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime (2007-2012) did not lessen organized-crime-related violence in Mexico. It did, however, increase the number of forced internal displaced persons and individuals who left the country seeking asylum in Canada. Information from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada shows a significant increase in applicants from 2006 to 2011 compared to the period between 1996 and 2005. The number multiplied almost tenfold in ten years.

### Intangible Border: The DCO List

On December 15, 2012, the Canadian government reformed its Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which specifies the time and procedural limitations on application processing.<sup>2</sup> Two months later, on February 15, 2013, Mexico was included on the list of Designated Countries of Origin (DCO), those that do not normally produce refugees and do respect human rights and offer state protection. This practically disqualified the central argument of the Mexican asylum applications.<sup>3</sup> But in contradiction to this, human rights defenders have reported on how the Mexican population is exposed to growing violence in the country and that the government has not been able to control the situation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, “Canada has recognized that Mexico is a refugee-producer country, despite its safe country labeling.”<sup>5</sup>

### The Legal Border

Renata’s family, made up of her father and mother and a brother over 18, arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2008.<sup>6</sup> She is the youngest. In Mexico, her dad worked in a bank. Between him and his wife, a public clerical employee, they earned enough money to be considered middle class, to have a home of their own and two cars, and to

REFUGEE APPLICANTS OVER THE AGE OF 18  
(the stock on December 1 each year)

Year	2005 Report	2012 Report
1996	1 327	
1997	1 845	
1998	2 401	
1999	2 703	
2000	3 060	
2001	3 652	
2002	4 525	
2003	4 832*	5 906*
2004	6 843*	6 911*
2005	7 677*	8 001*
2006		10 030
2007		13 416
2008		18 340
2009		21 118
2010		16 296
2011		11 133
2012		7 944

**Source:** Developed by the author using data from *Facts and Figures. Immigration Overview. Permanent and Temporary Residents, 2005 and 2012.*

**Note:** The asterisks indicate the years in which variations were detected in the figures for 2004 to 2012 in the *Facts and Figures. Immigration Overview. Permanent and Temporary Residents reports.* The table was developed using the two figures that showed the least variation.

pay their two children’s private school tuition. Family life was disrupted when the father witnessed a robbery at his workplace during which one person died. Unfortunately, he saw the killer’s face perfectly. Like all the other employees, he testified that he had seen it and gave a detailed description of the facts.

In recent years, thousands of Mexicans have gone through the iconic North between Mexico and the U.S. to reach the “other Norte,” Canada. However, after clearing the physical and legal borders, they come up against others: the cultural and symbolic.

**Cassandra is eager to chat. Once her refugee request was approved and she had crossed the legal border, she talks about another symbolic border, intangible, but visible and audible: Canadian racism.**

As the investigation progressed, the authorities arrested a suspect and a face-to-face hearing was held in which he declared that the arrestee was indeed the aggressor. A few days later, Renata's father received threatening phone calls on his cellular phone and on their home phone demanding that he recant his statement or "he'd be sorry." He did not do that because he was afraid of everyone, including the investigative police, since he had also noticed that during that time, more than once a van had been circling his house. He was so afraid that he suspected that the justice system was in cahoots with the robbers. So, after talking with a cousin who lived in Toronto, he decided to move his family to Canada, since his cousin told him, "With what happened to you, you can ask for asylum."

The family arrived in Vancouver, where they made contact with some acquaintances of his cousin, and, while they were doing their immigration paperwork, the father worked as a construction worker. He did not have a work permit or experience in construction since he had always done a desk job in Mexico. It took almost five years to process the asylum request (2008 to 2013), but it was denied, and they were ordered to leave the country within 30 days. As Renata says,

When I came here five years ago, it was very hard. I was afraid of arriving in Canada because I didn't know if we were going to be able to stay. At first, school was very frustrating because I didn't speak much English. Fortunately, I became friends with a Chinese girl and an Indian girl, and they helped me translate what the teachers were saying and to learn a little English. I missed my friends, my grandparents, and my home very much. It took me almost a year to learn enough English for school and to make myself understood. I made friends. And now they're telling me that we have to go back to Mexico because our application was denied. Five

years ago nobody asked me if I wanted to leave Mexico, and now they're throwing us out of this country, where I have friends, where I've studied, and where I've learned to appreciate the good things here.

## Cultural Borders and the Return

Like Renata, hundreds of children and teens spend the whole period in which their asylum applications are being reviewed feeling alien in a country where many do not understand the language and the culture. This is because they were abruptly taken out of their family surroundings with the idea that they would be safer in a country known for defending human rights.

For them, this is a drastic change that shakes them up emotionally because they have barely begun their process of symbolic crossings over cultural barriers by learning English. They may even have gotten used to the idea that they have a future in Canada, and now they have to leave everything behind again to go back to their countries of origin.

Renata, like so many who have been refused asylum, returned to Mexico, where the levels of violence have not changed. Suffice it to cite an example: the statistics state that 2013 was the year with the most kidnappings in a very long time; and 2017 was the most violent of the previous six years, with 84 169 homicides. Together with those who have been forcibly displaced internally, Renata will have to face her life in surroundings in which the murders of women and disappearance of adolescents and young people just do not stop. In addition, she will have to reinsert herself into interpersonal communicational processes with her counterparts and with adults in which her more-than-five-year absence from Mexico will mean she goes through yet another crossing of cultural borders.

## The Symbolic Border: Canadian Racism

Cassandra is 15 years old. She arrived in Canada with her parents from the state of Guanajuato when she was seven and her sister was six. They live in a modest apartment in Vancouver. Sitting on a log in Deer Lake Park, near Canada Way, Cassandra is eager to chat, speaking in a mix of Spanish and English. Once her refugee request was ap-

proved and she had crossed the legal border, she talks about another symbolic border, intangible, but visible and audible: Canadian racism. This materializes in harassment and humiliations due to her origins, particularly at school, that affect many Mexicans, above all teens, in their process of crossing cultural borders:

They make fun of you . . . : “Go back to the border, you Mexican.” They also call you “beaner” or “cholo”; they say you “smell like a burrito” . . . or that you’re a “burrito maker.” . . . It doesn’t matter where you’re from, from Chile or Argentina. They call you a Mexican because that’s the meanest stereotype they can label you with. For them, you’re “a dirty Mexican.” That’s the biggest insult.

## Afterword

As the “other Norte,” Canada has given refuge to Mexicans escaping from the violence at home. But that is only the beginning, because, in addition to competing in the labor market with highly skilled migrants, they will also have to learn to cross cultural and symbolic borders. In addition, Mexican asylum applications due to violence reveal the existence of both internal and international forced displaced persons, a phenomenon that has been invisible in the media and is ignored by the Mexican government. This is yet another task inherited by the new govern-

ment, which, as international bodies to protect human rights have pointed out, will have to create public policies to mitigate the implications of forced displacement. ■■■

## Notes

- 1 A short story included in Juan Rulfo, *El llano en llamas* (1953), translated as *The Burning Plain, and Other Stories* (Austin: U. of Texas, 1967). [Editor’s Note.]
- 2 For detailed information about the changes, consult the following documents of the Government of Canada at the Justice Laws Website: *Balanced Refugee Reform Act*, [https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/2010\\_8.pdf](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/2010_8.pdf); *Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act*, [https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/2012\\_17.pdf](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/2012_17.pdf); *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/I-2.5.pdf>; *Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/SOR-2002-227.pdf>; and *Refugee Protection Division Rules*, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/SOR-2012-256.pdf>.
- 3 Designated Country of Origin Policy, Immigration Canada. See <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/claim-protection-inside-canada/apply/designated-countries-policy.html>, accessed June 10, 2018.
- 4 See the recommendations of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, after his 2015 visit to Mexico about violence and human rights violations, [http://www.hchr.org.mx/images/doc\\_pub/Recommendationsmx\\_HighCommissionerhr\\_en.pdf](http://www.hchr.org.mx/images/doc_pub/Recommendationsmx_HighCommissionerhr_en.pdf), accessed July 20, 2018.
- 5 Maia Rotman and Kristin Marshall, “Unsafe” and on the Margins. *Canada’s Response to Mexico’s Mistreatment of Sexual Minorities and People Living with HIV*, p. 7, University of Toronto, Faculty of Law, International Human Rights Program, [https://ihrp.law.utoronto.ca/utfl\\_file/count/publications/Report-UnsafeAndOnMargins2016.pdf](https://ihrp.law.utoronto.ca/utfl_file/count/publications/Report-UnsafeAndOnMargins2016.pdf), accessed July 20, 2018.
- 6 The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

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 unamcisan@facebook.com

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 <http://ru.micisan.unam.mx/>

