

I Remember

Mark Menjívar

Mark Menjívar is a San Antonio–based artist and associate professor in the School of Art and Design at Texas State University. His work explores diverse subjects through photography, archives, oral history, and participatory project structures. He holds a BA in social work from Baylor University and an MFA in social practice from Portland State University.

I was standing in the garden the first time I heard that there was a secret room behind the sanctuary. Most people stayed there after ICE released them in the middle of downtown with nowhere to go.¹ I didn't know any of their names yet or what their stories were, but the fact that the room existed was enough to make me remember.

I remember being nine years old and lying in my backyard in San Salvador watching the red streaks of the tracer bullets fly across the sky. It was November and the Offensive was the strongest attack on the capital yet.² United States–backed government forces were put back on their heels.

I remember hugging my Tio Julio and feeling the hard scars across his belly. He was kidnapped in the 1970s, and even though they paid the ransom, he was shot three times in the stomach.

I remember the first time I went to Santa Marta, in rural El Salvador, just over the mountain from Honduras.³ The community elders invited me to sit and listen to the story of their community. Violence beyond my imagination. The recorder mysteriously stopped halfway through. At first I was devastated. Then I accepted it and was thankful.

I remember seeing a group of young men in a car whom I had not seen on any of my other visits. When I asked, I was told that the gangs were now coming out here. *Even out here.*

I remember deciding to not book a flight to go back for the sixth trip. My boys were getting older and the stakes seemed higher.



Mark Menjivar, *Secret Room*, 2020. Archival pigment print, 24 × 30 in.

I remember getting a phone call from the Karnes County Residential Center.⁴ Carlos was there. I could barely remember his face, but his mother had made me pupusas one evening in Santa Marta and we talked for hours about crops and civil wars and babies. Carlos had to come north. He couldn't stay and do the things the gangs were going to make him do. His parents said he had to come north. The neighbors said he had to come north. His uncle was in Virginia. It was late 2013.

I remember the security guard telling me that I couldn't take my stack of papers in with me as I walked through the metal detector. He was barely eighteen and shrugged back when I told him I needed it. He paid no attention to me when I came back five minutes later with phone numbers, addresses, and questions written in black ink up and down my arms.

I remember finally finding an attorney who would take the case. She walked me through the documents we needed to gather. I remember writing checks. And making phone calls. And not knowing what to do. And friends and family helping. And I remember Carlos passing his credible threat hearing and heading north.⁵

I remember the news headlines that followed. Thousands of women and children were showing up at the border seeking asylum.⁶ They were fleeing violence. Violence beyond my imagination.

I remember interviewing Stacey Merkt about her time spent in federal prison for helping families along the border in the 1980s.⁷ She refused to take a "slap on the wrist" plea bargain. She was pregnant and sentenced to six months in federal prison. There is a photograph of her talking to the press on the courthouse steps next to a man holding a sign that said "God's Law, not Reagan's Law—Free Stacy Merkt." The Sanctuary Movement was strong during those years.⁸

I remember finally hearing someone on NPR say that what we were seeing was directly connected to US foreign policy that stretched back more than one hundred years. I was shaking with anger and gratitude because I thought if people could understand, then things would change.

I remember when ICE dumped more than twenty thousand women, children, and men on the streets of San Antonio. And the city set up a shelter. And the Interfaith Welcome Coalition started doing even more outreach and connecting people to family and friends in other parts of the country.

I remember getting a call from Jack Elder asking if I would like to see the posters he had found in his attic.⁹ There were twenty-seven of them. About half spoke about El Salvador. One was for a 1984 US-Mexico border conference against US intervention in Central America.

I remember driving by a residential facility for youth on the south side of San Antonio that was surrounded by a tall chain link fence with barbed wire on top. It was being run by a private company to house and educate children who had been separated from their parents at the border by ICE.

I remember seeing the first picture of kids being held in cages, separated from their families.

I remember buying my first bouquet of flowers from a community of women who lived together on a farm. All of them seeking asylum from different parts of the world. All of them at different stages of waiting.

I remember when they couldn't find the parents of 545 children separated from their parents by the Trump administration.¹⁰

I remember making the bed and tucking in the corners of the sheet. He had been separated from his family by ICE. A child lost. He needed a place to stay while he learned the system.¹¹

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I'm grateful for Joe Brainard and his practice of remembering.

Notes

1. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a federal law enforcement agency under the US Department of Homeland Security. The stated mission of ICE is to protect the United States from the cross-border crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety.

2. Outraged by the results of the 1988 fixed elections and the military's use of terror tactics and voter intimidation, the FMLN launched a major offensive with the aim of unseating the government of President Alfredo Cristiani on November 11, 1989. This offensive brought the epicenter of fighting into the wealthy suburbs of San Salvador for essentially the first time in the history of the conflict, as the FMLN began a campaign of selective assassinations against political and military officials, civil officials, and upper-class private citizens.

3. The rural community is approximately twelve miles from the Honduran border, where many were forced to flee at the onset of the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–92). Indeed, thousands of families fled the scorched-earth policies carried out by the US-sponsored Salvadoran military. After years of living in refugee camps in Honduras and long negotiations with authorities, repatriation to their former communities began on October 10, 1987.

4. The Karnes County Residential Center is a detention center for immigrant women and their children in Karnes City, Texas. The facility is run by the GEO Group, a publicly traded real estate investment trust that invests in private prisons and mental health facilities in North America, Australia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

5. A portion of a legal asylum hearing. A “credible threat of violence” means intentionally saying something or acting in a way that would make a reasonable person afraid for his or her safety or the safety of his or her family.

6. The protection granted by a nation to someone who has left their native country as a political refugee.

7. Stacey Merkt is a longtime activist for illegal immigration from Central America, who was a prominent member of the Sanctuary Movement and co-founder of RAICES, the largest immigration legal services provider in Texas.

8. The Sanctuary Movement was a religious and political campaign in the United States that began in the early 1980s to provide safe haven for Central American refugees fleeing civil conflict. The movement was a response to federal immigration policies that made obtaining asylum difficult for Central Americans.

9. Jack Elder is a longtime activist for illegal immigration from Central America, who was a prominent member of the Sanctuary Movement and cofounder of RAICES, the largest immigration legal services provider in Texas.

10. These children were separated from their parents at the US border by border officials under President Trump’s zero-tolerance policy from 2017 to 2018.

11. All of these endnotes were sourced from online outlets, including Wikipedia and KeyWiki, and edited to fit my own needs.