

FOREWORD

I remember the bewilderment. Central American asylum seekers sat in every chair and on the floor in a large room inside downtown Los Angeles's La Placita Church, also known as Nuestra Señora Reina de Los Angeles, in late 1987. They told stories of the horrible acts of violence being perpetrated in their countries. Those from El Salvador, the majority, told us stories of the grotesque repression organized against the peasants and workers, the students and communists. There was an eyewitness to the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero, there was discussion about the massacre at El Mozote, and there was general despair about the disappearances and the murders. Father Luis Olivares, who presided over La Placita, would lead these conversations, prodding when necessary, offering comfort when needed. What seemed to grip the people in these rooms was their anger alongside the futility of their position. Chased out of Central America by wars egged on by the government of the United States, and then denied asylum once they crossed the Mexico-US border, these men and women lived in a kind of limbo that defined them.

La Placita was a sanctuary, a place where the Catholic leaders—Olivares as well as Father Mike Kennedy—defied the US government by preventing them from entering the church and deporting these brave souls. Father Mike had served in El Salvador from 1980 to 1983, bringing to Los Angeles those experiences of the US-imposed war on the poor in that country. He would offer context for the details that were otherwise overwhelming. It was Father

Mike—and my college friend Noel Rodriguez—who sent me down to volunteer at the Los Angeles office of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES).

The war did not end at the US-Mexico border. Earlier in July 1987, some masked men kidnapped Yanira Corea outside the CISPES office. She had come to CISPES to talk about holding an event with the Salvadorean women's organization with which she worked. The men beat her, questioned her about her activism, burned her with cigarettes, raped her, and then left her on the streets with a message: "Tell others that we are here." A few days later, a Guatemalan immigrant, Anna María López, was abducted by masked men and asked about her work with Salvadorean asylum seekers. Another woman received a phone call at home and was warned, "For being a communist, we will kill you." Finally, Father Olivares received a letter that was signed "EMI," the initials referring to *Escuadron de la Muerte*, the Squadron of Death, which was the name of the Salvadorean death squads.

Impossible not to have remembered these stories, including standing outside La Placita in a human chain, trying to prevent the US government from entering the sanctuary and sending the asylum seekers to their death. In those years, the US government led by Ronald Reagan had fully supported El Salvador's brutal regime led by President José Napoleón Duarte, and because of this support it could not accept the asylum applications of the thousands of Salvadoreans who fled to the United States, most to Los Angeles. Reagan's policy offered men like Duarte a green light to conduct massacre after massacre, the soldiers involved trained and supported by the US military. The Salvadoreans did not come to Los Angeles in search of the promised land. They came to flee the US-imposed war on their country. And they found that the war followed them to Pico Union, Vermont Avenue, and La Placita as well as to the office of CISPES.

The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador was part of a network that took form in the shadow of the US empire. In a globalizing Los Angeles that boasted it was the place "where it all comes together," multicultural affinities, shared neighborhoods, and revolutionary solidarities created an alternate vision to the wars, disappearances, and poverty peddled by Reagan and his criminal associates. The Nicaragua Task Force. The Union of Democratic Filipinos. The Communist Workers Party. Alliance for Survival. MEChA. The Coalition to Stop Plant Closings. Friends of the ANC. These, and many others, were the lights in a dark sky.

These organizations and the activists who built them left us a chronicle of resistance, not only to imperial war making but against the everyday drumbeat

of division and discord, the “common sense” that says that working people who speak different languages can only ever see each other as rivals or enemies. Place making is part of this—Danny Widener’s Louisiana-born grandmother Loretta worshipped at La Placita—and *Third Worlds Within* recalls cultural affinities and shared lives between Black, Latinx, and Asian people. So too are the legacies of war, from Native California and Mexico to Angola, Korea, and Vietnam. First and foremost, however, are stories of solidarity, among those who, as Malcolm X said, “didn’t have nuclear weapons, they didn’t have jet planes, they didn’t have all of the heavy armaments that the white man has. But they had unity.”

They also had a powerful and immoral enemy. The Salvadoran war was crafted not only in the salons of San Salvador, where the landlords and the oligarchy reigned, but also in the bureaucratic offices and steak houses of Washington. On March 19, 1963, US President John F. Kennedy told the hastily assembled presidents of six Central American states that “communism is the chief obstacle to economic development in the Central American region.” Kennedy, the liberal, pushed the Declaration of San José, which strengthened the spine of these presidents to crush any sign of communist or socialist insurgency. In El Salvador, the government welcomed members of the US Eighth Special Forces unit that was led by Colonel Arthur Simons in Panama, and these Green Berets went ahead and showed the Salvadorean military how to assemble these death squads through ORDEN (a rural counterinsurgency force) and ANSESAL (the president’s intelligence service). ORDEN was specifically set up to “indoctrinate peasants regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the communist system,” an indoctrination program that was more extermination than pedagogy. This was the “Salvadoran option” that Dick Cheney proposed for Iraq in 2004. For Salvadoreans in Los Angeles, their history was intimately related to the history of the United States and its ugly, dirty wars.

The death squads that stalked the immigrant communities of Los Angeles did so in a city marked by generations of low-intensity war between African Americans and a police force full of imperial entanglements. William Parker, who ran a violently racist police department, had been appointed honorary chief of the national police of fascist South Korea in 1952. Parker’s deputy chief, Frank Walton, served as a top advisor to the government of South Vietnam, where he oversaw what he called “the largest prison in the free world.” By the 1990s, of course, the Twin Towers facility in Los Angeles was the world’s largest jail. Parker’s chauffeur, Daryl Gates, would develop the first SWAT team in the United States, deploy it against the Black Panthers,

and offer it for paramilitary use to US allies abroad. Local counterinsurgency extended beyond collaboration between US police and the violent satraps of the United States. It also took the form of constant surveillance, with more than fifty thousand Black youth placed in gang databases, and more than two hundred organizations and individuals, including then-mayor Tom Bradley, investigated by the Public Disorder Intelligence Division, a strangely named outfit.

Reading Danny Widener's *Third Worlds Within* reminded me of these stories, the impact they had on me, no doubt, but more so, the impact they continue to have on El Salvador, the United States, and elsewhere. Danny's book, which bristles with stories that we are told to forget, tells us that the social and cultural history of the United States is impossible without an awareness of the international role of the United States and of the survivors of that role who often try to find their way into it, thinking, erroneously that the US bombs are intended for their homelands alone and not for them when they somehow, miraculously, cross the border into El Norte. If you drive through any neighborhood in Los Angeles, you will find restaurants that serve up food from those countries that have had their agricultural lands burned by US chemical weapons—from Vietnam to Guatemala; and if you talk to the men and women of a certain generation who work in the kitchens of these restaurants, you might find one or two people who had been active in the massive solidarity campaigns that brought their songs and slogans to such unlikely places as Claremont, Crenshaw, or Boyle Heights. That's the message of *Third Worlds Within*, a book that demystifies the landscape of US cities and “brings the wars home,” as they used to say in that earlier era.

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