

AVIVA CHOMSKY

UNWANTED PEOPLE



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Aviva Chomsky

Edited by Jorge Majfud
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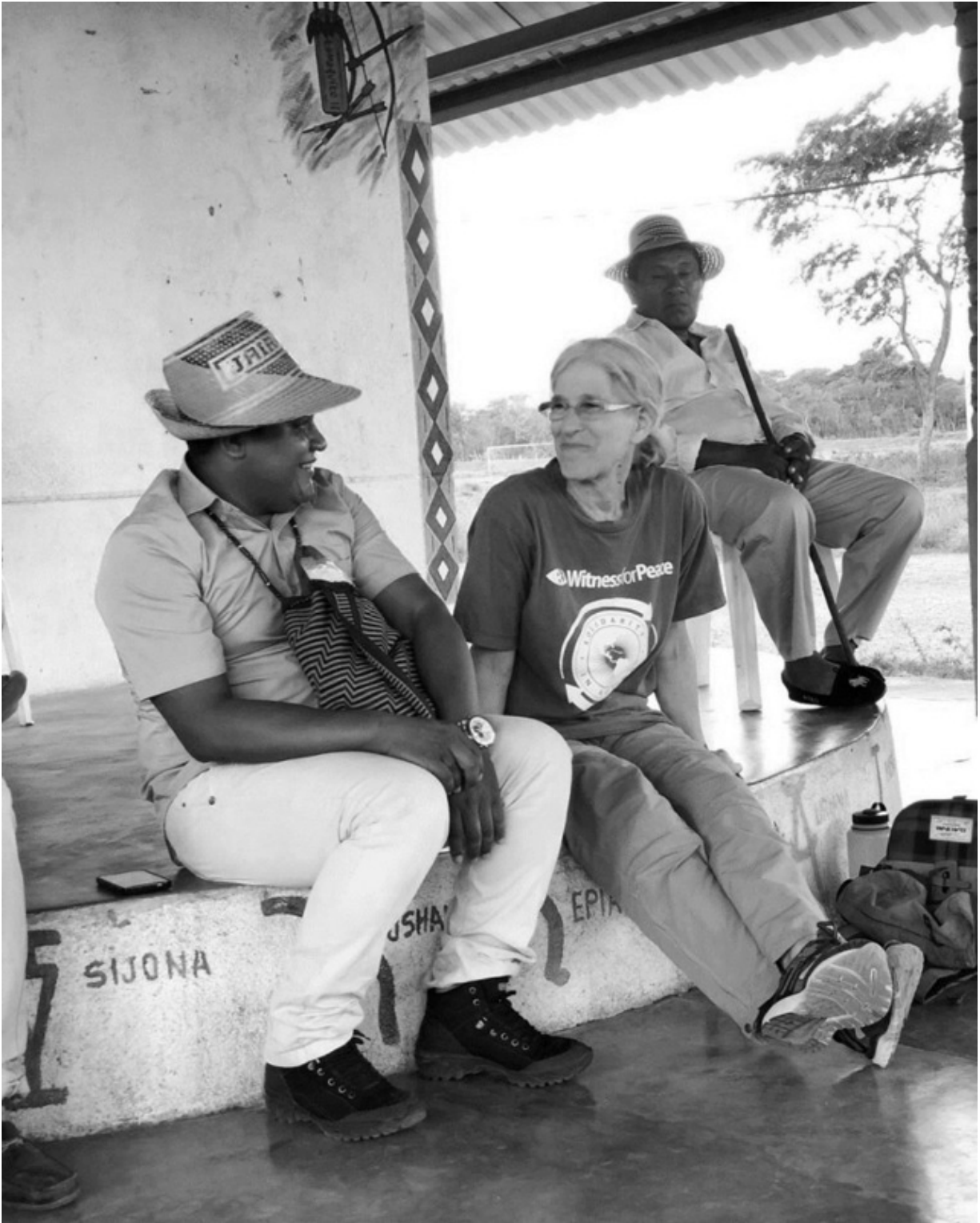
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Every year since 2006 my colleague Steve Striffler and I have organized a delegation to the Colombian coal mining region of La Guajira with the help of Witness for Peace. One of the communities that we've been working with since the start is the indigenous community of Tamaquito. When we first met with Tamaquito community leaders, they were fighting to get the mine to recognize the destructive effects its operation had on the community, and agree to a collective relocation. The community did not want to leave its ancestral land, but the mining operation had rendered the area uninhabitable. Jairo Fuentes Epiayu, the Indigenous Governor of the community, presented us with the petition that appears as *Primary Source 2* in Chapter 1 of this volume. (He's also quoted in Chapter 16, and Tamaquito is discussed in Chapter 15.) We spent many hours discussing the petition and how we could fulfill some of what was being asked of us. After many years of local organizing in La Guajira and an international campaign to support the community, the mine finally agreed to many of Tamaquito's demands and the village was relocated in 2013. Even after the relocation the struggle has continued to force the company to fulfill its promises to provide clean water for domestic and agricultural use to allow the new community to become sustainable. In June 2018 I interpreted for Jairo as he explained the history of his community and its struggle to our delegation, at the community center in the relocated village.

♣Avi Chomsky, March 2019

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"The Real Story Behind the 'Invasion' of the Children." *TomDispatch*. August 24, 2014.

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The Dark History of the "Nation of Immigrants." *TomDispatch*. September 13, 2016.

"Talking Sense about Immigration: Rejecting the President's Manichean Worldview." *TomDispatch*. March 18, 2018.

"How (Not) to Challenge Racist Violence." *Common Dreams*. August 21, 2017.

"Why 'Black Panther' Is Revolutionary, Even Though It Isn't." *Common Dreams*. February 28, 2018.

“On the History of Immigration to the United States” in
The Yale Politic. September 24, 2016.

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Introduction

Unwanted People: Histories of Race and Displacement in the Americas

Sarah E. Parker and Jorge Majfud
Jacksonville University, 2018

For more than a century Latin American governments have promoted a model of national development based on land privatization and privileging the interests of foreign investors rather than the rights of workers; policies that in fact promoted economic growth without development. In many cases, this kind of economic growth instead increased inequality and poverty. Democratic or dictatorial governments implemented these policies by hook or by crook, which often forced the people to choose between renouncing their rights or submitting to the brutality of power concretized in armies who served the creole oligarchy in the name of “national security” against foreign invaders. In such armies, often the most deprived individuals were the most zealous and violent guardians of the privileges of others.

This domestic and national economic policy was concretely connected to the interests of international corporations. The social structure in which creole elites of

the Postcolonial era served the ruling classes mirrored the relationship between the indigenous nobility who served the Spanish crown. In the twentieth century, such power lodged itself in traditional commodities-export ruling classes and transnational foreign companies, which were often supported by direct interventions from superpower governments. Despite repeated attempts to prove otherwise, Latin American history cannot be understood without taking into account the history of U.S. interventions, from the Monroe Doctrine (1823) to the dozens of U.S. military interventions in Latin America. The latter includes the annexation of more than half of the Mexican territory in mid-19th Century, a long list of military interventions leading to the dramatic establishment of bloody puppet dictators throughout the 20th century, which left hundreds of thousands murdered, and the destruction of democracies such as Guatemala or Chile in the name of freedom and democracy. Large multinational corporations, such as the *United Fruit Company* in Central America, *Pepsi Cola* in Chile and *Volkswagen* in Brazil, motivated or supported many of these *coups d'état*. The dominant creole classes in turn supported the overthrow of legitimate governments because they stood to gain more from the export business of cheap natural resources than from the internal development of their nations.

The extreme violence that resulted directly from these social inequities generated internal displacements and international migrations, especially to the United States, the world hegemonic economy. Yet many immigrants arrived in a country that denied them the same individual rights that had been withheld from them in their home countries. As Chomsky illustrates in this volume, the United States' history of racially motivated class stratification and

anti-labor policy dovetailed with the shape that the country's immigration took in the 1960s.

Unwanted People presents a selection of historian Aviva Chomsky's writings, which explores the roots of these problems from the concrete perspective of groups who have experienced the effects of this violent history. Aviva Chomsky's work is always incisive and challenging. Each text dismantles modern myths about Latin American immigration, U.S. history, and the labor movement. Specifically she highlights popular superstitions about immigration that are exacerbated by international reporting and the "master narratives" that have been consolidated by a strategic forgetting, both from U.S. and Latin American perspectives. Chomsky brings these challenges to the dominant narratives of colonial history to bear on topics ranging from the United States' global and colonial economy to an analysis of the colonial history of Africa in the movie *Black Panther*.

In "The Logic of Displacement" and "A Central American Drama," Chomsky analyzes two apparently different realities that are nevertheless connected by their subterranean logics. The historical displacement of Afro-Colombians, she argues, has not only been caused by racism but also by the logic of economic convenience. Chomsky questions the historical explanation of *La Violencia* in Colombia (initiated with the murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948) as a simple dichotomy "liberal versus conservative" and reviews the interests of the white Catholic elite of Antioquia over Afro-Colombian regions, rich in natural resources. Thus, in Colombia there is a case similar to that of others on the continent: the internal displacement of rural, indigenous or afro-descendant communities for economic reasons (gold, platinum, wood), is executed "voluntarily" through the purchase of property accompanied by violence inflicted by paramilitary groups,

which functioned as an extralegal arm and ally of the army and the governments of Latin American countries.

Leftist guerilla groups emerged as a counter to the paramilitary groups that represented the typically conservative right interests of the government. These also served largely as an excuse for military and paramilitary violence.¹ Although it could be argued that the guerrilla groups' amplification of regional violence also played a role in the displacement of people, Chomsky argues that displacement was not one of their objectives, as it was in the case of paramilitaries, who furthered the interest of the big businesses laying claim to the land and its natural resources. Meanwhile, the impunity of those in power contributed dramatically to the scale of this movement's violence.²

Internationally, displacement was not always due to direct military actions, but it was always the result of economic forces. The United States increased control of immigration, especially immigration of the displaced poor, as a solution to the increased migration that resulted from years of interventionist foreign policy. The Mexican-American border, which had been permeable for centuries, became a violent wall in 1965, forcing job seekers to avoid returning to their homes in the south as they used to do. This reality was aggravated by the policies and international treaties of the new neoliberal wave of the 1990s, such as NAFTA, which financially ruined the Mexican peasants who could not compete with the subsidized agriculture of the United States. Meanwhile, U.S. conservatives attacked leftist guerrilla and community groups, such as the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico, who resisted such policies.

Neoliberal economic policies combined with an increasingly militarized southern United States border had an impact on Central American migration and was the

direct result of United States foreign policy. In Chomsky's words:

U.S. policies directly led to today's crises in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Since Washington orchestrated the overthrow of the reformist, democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, it has consistently cultivated repressive military regimes, savagely repressed peasant and popular movements for social change, and imposed economic policies including so-called free trade ones that favor foreign investors and have proven devastating to the rural and urban poor.

As Chomsky rightly points out in her book *They Take Our Jobs! And 20 Other Myths about Immigration* (2007), it is no coincidence that, when racial discrimination became politically incorrect in the 1960s, it was replaced in the law and in the political and social discourse by national discrimination. This, coupled with the fact that Mexicans and other Latin American immigrants were no longer returning to their countries because of widespread violence made the new border policies even more dangerous and sometimes deadly for both migrant workers and those fleeing political and social violence, mostly people from the Northern Triangle of Central America.

This sequence of historical events has countless consequences in the present. However, politicians, major media, and U.S. citizens only see the faces of children, men and women speaking a "foreign language" (though, of course, Spanish is older than English in the United States). Political and news discourse represent immigrants as "invading" cities to take advantage of the services and benefits of American democracy, which strips immigration

politics of its historicity. It is a false logic that turns workers into idlers, imagines welfare abusers when in fact immigrants sustain the care economy with their labor and their taxes, and the victims of neocolonial trade policies into invading criminals. In a recent interview with Aviva Chomsky about the current myths that dominate the social narrative in the United States today, she explains:

I'd say there are two: one, that immigrants are criminals, and two, that immigrants come here to take advantage of the United States. In a way, these are connected—by turning immigrants into “bad hombres,” Trump helps to erase history and the disasters that US policy has helped to create in the countries that immigrants are currently fleeing, especially in Central America. [3](#)

This collection of Aviva Chomsky's writings approaches complex discussions about race, labor, and immigration in the United States from the more nuanced perspective of a historian. Often conversations about immigration center on the subject of labor, and yet, as Chomsky illustrates in the essays collected here, labor in the United States has its own troubled history. With a focus on New England, and especially Boston, Chomsky connects the history of labor struggles dating back to the nineteenth century to modern-day discussions about race and immigration. By uncovering hidden histories that challenge the dominant narratives about the working class, Chomsky reveals the importance of discussing racial justice alongside economic justice. Rather than participating in the shrill and polarizing rhetoric of political and media hype, Chomsky invites us to look to the economic and political history that has led up to this point. As Chomsky points out, “Until we are able to

acknowledge and understand the past, we will not be able to act in the present for a better future.”

¹ “In February 1997, only days before the land claims were to be awarded to the Cacarica communities, the paramilitaries killed or “disappeared” some seventy community members. This was the opening salvo of Operation Genesis, carried out by the infamous 17th Brigade of the Colombian army, beginning with an aerial bombardment campaign that displaced some 3,700 people over the course of a few days, along with thousands of others displaced in the following months. It was years before they could return” (Aviva Chomsky).

² “As of 2003, only two people had been convicted in the dozens of murders and thousands of displacements that took place in El Chocó.” (Idem)

³ “Why Myths About Immigrants and Immigration Are Still with Us Today.” Beacon Broadside, April 24, 2018.

UNITED STATES

1

Industrialization, Deindustrialization, and Immigration in a New England City

One of the beautiful things about studying history is that it allows us to see our everyday realities with new eyes. Instead of taking their existence for granted, we can see the people, the culture, the institutions, and even the roads, buildings, and neighborhoods around us as products of history.

In New England, local history is frequently taught and commemorated. But global history is less well acknowledged, even though New England's cities and towns have been deeply connected to global trends for hundreds of years.

Salem, Massachusetts, a small coastal city north of Boston, was a Native American village before the English arrived in 1620. Thus one of its histories is part of a global history of European expansion and colonialism. While Salem's colonial history—in particular, the witch trials—has been the subject of creative and historical works—its commonality with ongoing issues of race, citizenship, national identity, and neocolonialism is rarely explored.

In the eighteenth century, Salem rose to national and global prominence as the most active port in the newly-established United States. Slaves, sugar and rum produced by slaves, and salt cod to feed West Indian slaves were some of the major products flowing between Salem and the Caribbean, while Salem ships also dominated the East Asia

trade. Much of Salem's wealth was created in this period. The historic houses of Chestnut Street and the McIntyre District and the Peabody Essex Museum offer silent testimony to Salem's maritime age.¹

As Salem's port lost ground to the growing harbors of Boston and New York in the early nineteenth century, members of its merchant class joined forces to invest in what appeared to be New England's next frontier: a textile mill. Salem ship out cotton and wool textiles from Lawrence and Lowell, and brought in cotton, hides, glues, and jute from everywhere from the U.S. south to South America and South Asia. In 1838 they incorporated the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, the first New England mill to run on steam power—with coal brought in from Appalachia. The mill produced cotton sheeting—Pequot sheets—sold throughout the United States and as far away as Zanzibar, where the manufactured American cloth came to be known as *merekani* [American].²

The new industry attracted a portion of the migrant stream then coming into the U.S. Workers from Ireland were soon joined by French Canadians and Polish immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As was the case with many of the Europeans streaming into the United States between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, these were national minorities from the peripheries of capitalist and industrial development. Their national identities were sometimes oppositional and even revolutionary.³

New immigrants brought with them radical ideas, and fought hard for their rights as workers. Within a generation or two, these immigrants assimilated. They gained some rights, and many began to identify with, rather than challenge, the capitalist system that they worked for and their adopted country.

Two ethnic neighborhoods housed many of the new immigrant workers. By the end of the nineteenth century French Canadians had flocked to the old Stage Point, newly christened "Le Point" where company tenements and private boarding houses lined the streets with triple-decker houses. The later arrivals, the Austrian Poles, filled the Derby Street area near the wharf. These neighborhoods still exist today. The Polish history of Derby Street is still alive, with street names, social halls, veterans' associations, and many families still living there. The French Canadian history of the Point has mostly vanished, as French speakers moved out and Spanish speakers moved in during the second half of the twentieth century. Today the small shops are Caribbean *bodegas* and restaurants.

The first generations of Irish immigrants formed a union at the mill and there were several strikes in the first decades of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, though, New England's textile sector was in decline, as the country's first wave of plant closures struck the industry. This neighborhood ethnic and industrial history is quite visible to the discerning eye. In Salem, like in any industrial or post-industrial city, students can explore it through old photographs, newspapers, and strolls through neighborhoods.

Textile magnates had explored the idea of multiple siting for decades, and the U.S. south held a number of attractions for them. Taxes and wages were lower there. Instead of radical immigrant workers they could employ "native American stock." Unions were almost unknown. The legacy of slavery was omnipresent in racial divisions, in white conservatism and reluctance to challenge the social order, and in suspicion of government regulation. Spartanburg, South Carolina advertised itself directly to

mill investors as “The Lowell of The South.” By the 1920s, mill after mill was making the decision to move.

Mr. Seamans’ report (see Primary Source 1 in Appendix) documents the Salem mill’s exploration of a southern location in the 1920s. The report reveals the rush by northern factories to relocate, and shows the specific factors like labor and taxes that were cheaper in the south. Although the report doesn’t address how this situation affects people living in the south, students can consider how low wages and low local and business taxes might affect residents. They can compare the mid-twentieth-century shift of the textile industry to the south with the current deindustrialization that is taking manufacturing jobs to places like China and Bangladesh, and ask who benefits from this process. They can consider why the mill preferred “native American stock” to immigrant labor.

For the mills that remained in New England, the threat posed by the south served as a potent tool for labor control. Mill owners complained that the southern competition was ruining them. (Even though frequently, their southern “competitors” were branches of their own companies.) They appealed to their workers, and to local governments, to accommodate their needs and replicate southern conditions—in particular, low wages, low taxes, and minimal regulation—in order to help them compete and stay profitable in the north. And they threatened that if they didn’t get their way, they would leave.

Today, analysts call this process the “race to the bottom” and it affects virtually every industry. Popular opinion tends to blame other countries, like China and Mexico, for “stealing” industries and jobs from the United States with their low-wage, low-tax, low-regulation environments. Some also blame Free Trade Agreements that the United States has signed with countries like Mexico. But the roots of the surge in off-shoring, runaway plants, and

deindustrialization in the late twentieth century can be found in the textile industry a hundred years earlier. And like a hundred years ago, employers frequently use the threat of plant closure to control their workers, especially when confronted with union organizing drives.⁴

In Salem, the mostly male- and mostly Irish-controlled union entered into an experiment in labor-management collaboration in the 1920s. The main issue at stake was speed. The company wanted to speed up the labor process and increase production and efficiency by having workers tend more machines. This way fewer workers could produce the same amount of cloth. In early 1933 the workers rebelled and walked off the job. For 11 hungry weeks over a thousand workers held firm to their demand that “we want no more research!”

The city took on a festive atmosphere as thousands of workers and their supporters held massive meetings, marches, and fundraisers. Support poured in from other unions and organizations. The mill argued that increasing productivity was to the benefit of all. If the mill remained profitable, it could remain in Salem, while other factories were relocating in the south. Moreover, increased efficiency could keep prices low, which would help consumers and increase production. True, the work pace would be increased and some workers would be laid off, but this, they argued, was the cost of progress.

Workers defined their goals differently: by the quality of their working lives, and by their collective identities. They were fighting, they claimed, for the rights of textile workers everywhere. If they agreed to accept worse working conditions, workers in other mills would also be forced to accept them to keep their mills “competitive.”

Salem’s strike engaged with key questions of twentieth century labor history. Should workers collaborate with management to lower production costs and increase sales,

in order to maintain profitability and keep jobs from moving? Or should they fight to maintain decent working conditions, and challenge the race to the bottom? Are workers in other regions—and other countries—their potential allies in the struggle of labor against capital, or their competitors, in the struggle of one region or country against another? To what extent should government regulate labor relations? Finally, is constantly increasing production and consumption a viable economic model for the national, or the world, economy?

These questions come to the fore again in a late twentieth-century struggle in Salem, over its 1950s-era coal fired power plant. Local environmental groups organized to regulate or close the plant, which studies and local experience showed it to be emitting hazardous levels of coal dust and increasing rates of asthma, cancer, and other illnesses in its environs. Plant officials protested for exemptions from environmental regulations. The union at the plant and city officials opposed the environmentalists, arguing that the plant was essential to the city's tax base, and for the jobs it provided. Labor and environmentalists lined up against each other.

In Kentucky and West Virginia, where most of the plant's coal came from, parallel battles over regulation and production were taking place as the region's underground coal mines were being increasingly replaced by a surface mining technique known as "mountaintop removal." Appalachia's mountains began to be blasted away one by one as mining companies sought more efficient, less labor-intensive, access to the coal hidden within them.

The mining union, the UMWA, was torn. Mountaintop removal cost the jobs of underground miners, but created new sectors to organize, even if it required far fewer workers overall. Local residents—many from mining families—were outraged at the destruction of the

mountains so central to their history, identity, and local economies beyond coal. Many there felt that the extractive economy had only entrenched the region's poverty over the past century, and that mountaintop removal would only accelerate the process. The battle lines were drawn over regulation. The union fought alongside grassroots environmental organizations for greater regulation of surface mining in the 1970s, but by the 1990s had reformulated its position to become part of the "coal lobby" that argued that the environmentalists were standing in the way of progress and jobs.⁵

By the 1990s Salem's plant was moving increasingly to imported coal from Colombia, South America. Major U.S. coal producers like Exxon and Drummond had begun to close their U.S. mines in order to invest in Colombia where labor was cheaper and regulation minimal. By the 1990s northern Colombia boasted two of the world's largest open-pit coal mines, and had become one of the world's major coal exporters. Most of it went to the eastern seaboard of the United States, including Salem's plant.

Battles were being fought over coal mining in Colombia, too. The mines began a process of displacement of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities that had practiced subsistence farming and herding in the area for centuries. As the communities protested, they sought allies in Colombia's mining union, and also among those who consumed the coal. During the first decade of the twentieth century, numerous representatives of these communities and of Colombia's mining union visited Salem to educate residents about the human costs of their use of coal and their energy consumption.

Community activists described the impact of the constantly-expanding mines that took over their lands, contaminated their water and air, and destroyed villages and cultures. Union leaders described abysmal working

conditions, and a climate of anti-labor violence that had claimed the lives of dozens of union activists in the coal region, and thousands nation-wide, in Colombia. They accused the mining companies of colluding with right-wing paramilitary forces to destroy the union movement.

Like Salem's workers in the 1930s, though, they refused to accept the paradigm that posited an inevitable conflict between jobs and progress, on one hand, and human rights and decent working conditions on the other. Like Salem's workers, they demanded a redefinition of "progress" that was based on quality of life rather than increasing production at all costs. "Without the river, there is no water. Without water, there is no life. Without life, there are no jobs," the union president told a group of visitors in 2012, when asked how it could be that a union was opposing the mine's plan to expand—and create more jobs—by diverting the region's major river.⁶

Salem was invisibly connected to these events in Colombia because of its regular imports of coal from these mines. The invisible connection became visible through community activists in both regions who challenged the idea that increasing jobs and consumption was a goal to be pursued regardless of the costs.

In a petition in 2006 (Primary Source 2) the residents of one indigenous village affected by the mine asked a visiting delegation from Salem and other coal-consuming communities to take responsibility for the damage that their coal consumption was causing. Students—like the visitors who were handed this petition—can reflect on the hidden ways in which people in distant regions are connected. Seeing the devastation caused by Colombia's mines led some people to ask whether there was something wrong with the economic model of "development" itself. Could it be that our search for ever-increasing "standard of living"—i.e., consumption—was inherently unviable?

Residents of Salem, of the Appalachian coal fields, and the Colombian coal fields engaged in fruitful dialogues about these issues over the course of visits and meetings over the years.

Salem came closer to Latin America in other ways in the second half of the twentieth century as well. The Pequot mill closed in the early 1950s, moving, as had so many other New England mills, to South Carolina and then to Mexico. As the mill's tenement houses emptied of their French-Canadian residents, they were filled with new immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. It was a pattern repeated throughout the region. As industry migrated to Mexico and the Caribbean, Mexicans and Caribbean peoples migrated to the declining mill towns. They were attracted by the cheap housing stock, but even more so by the jobs created by the declining industrial economy. The few, small factories that couldn't afford to relocate sought ever-cheaper workers in order to compete with those that had moved abroad. Meanwhile deindustrialization created a new, low-wage service economy. Those that profited from the process sought more personal services (like nannies and landscapers). Those that lost out in the process also needed more services, as they worked longer hours and had to scrape by on less. In the second half of the twentieth century struggling middle class families relied more on fast and processed food, (produced cheaply by immigrant workers), childcare, and other expanding, low-wage sectors that underlay continued high consumption in the deindustrializing economy.⁷

In Salem, the first Dominican workers were recruited to work in the declining small leather shops in the 1980s. Their numbers increased and they moved into the service sectors. By 2010, over 30% of the children in Salem's schools came from Spanish-speaking homes. In this process Salem resembled a multitude of other New England textile

towns, like Lawrence and Lowell in Massachusetts, and Central Falls, Rhode Island.

Salem's history has been deeply intertwined with global trends and events in multiple ways over hundreds of years. Making visible these invisible global links offers a challenge and an opportunity to local historians, and offers valuable material for the classroom.

Salem is not unique in its global connections. Every area of the United States has been affected by colonialism, industrialization, deindustrialization, migrations, and globalization. Students can search for these global connections in their own communities' past and present.

They could begin by looking at the global origins of the products they use. Most supermarkets state the origin of their produce, and students can see a global system there in the aisles. Clothing and shoes by law must state where they were manufactured. What the labels don't tell us is who worked in those factories and on those farms, and under what conditions. They don't tell us why manufacturers have moved, or outsourced their work, to those countries, or why peasants and farmworkers around the world remain poor, while the food they produce graces our supermarket shelves in the United States. But a bit of research, and investigation into history and political economy, can start to answer those questions. Students can first become more aware of their contemporary realities, and then try to understand how they came to be.

Migrations, past and present, also create very visible markers in local communities. Students can be encouraged not only to find those markers, but also to ask those historical "why" questions that lead to global connections.

The production and movement of energy sources—coal, gas, and oil—may be more invisible than those of food, clothing, and people, yet they affect the lives of every person in the United States. Learning about one case, like

the Colombian coal in Salem, can lead to questions about other energy-producing regions, the social impact of extraction, and the interests, policies, and relationships that have structured our energy-hungry world.

When students begin to learn about inequality and social injustice, they often also begin to ask what they can do to create a more just society and world. These were, in fact, the questions that motivated me to study history. For if we do not understand the events, systems, and forces that brought us to where we are today, how can we begin to imagine how we can make change?

(2013)