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# Creating Homeplace in Chicago's Public Housing

Submitted to  
Professor Lily Geismer

By  
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for Senior Thesis  
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# Abstract

This thesis rediscovers the history of Chicago's public housing through the voices of residents. Under the guidance of bell hooks' "homeplace," Black Chicagoans consistently demonstrated their struggle to find a homeplace in Chicago after systematic residential segregation before, during, and after the height of the institution of public housing. Using the voices of mothers, gang members, and children, this paper highlights the contradictory and multidimensional lives, thoughts, and desires of Chicago's public housing residents.

# Acknowledgements

I want to thank my Abuela and my mother for living the lives that they could. I hope to make them better in the coming years.

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# Introduction

*In Chicago, the fates have avenged themselves on the fighting liberals of the first half of the 20th century. Their names live on in the titles of the city's most infamous public housing projects. Ida B. Wells, Henry Horner, Harold L. Ickes, Jane Addams, John Peter Altgeld - all instantly call to mind stories of children falling out of windows, broken heating that never gets fixed and gun battles between teen-age gangs.*

*-Nicholas Lemann, New York Times, 1991<sup>1</sup>*

*It is no accident that this homeplace, as fragile and as transitional as it may be...is always subject to violation and destruction. For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance.*

*-bell hooks, Homeplace (a site of resistance), 1990<sup>2</sup>*

In 1991 journalist Nicholas Lemann penned a story capturing the experience of the Haynes family, four generations of whom lived in Robert Taylor Homes, Chicago's largest public housing project. Lemann focused on the experiences and hardships of the Haynes' family in Robert Taylor, with a particular focus on the matriarch, Ruby, who demonstrated the resilience required of women to create space for families despite financial and political institutions.

Ruby Haynes began her family's journey toward the project when she left her sharecropper hometown of Clarksdale, Mississippi in the late 1940s. Hearing of job opportunities in Chicago, she moved there with her two children in the late 1940s.<sup>3</sup> While staying at her aunt's house, a stop for many Mississippi migrants, Ruby met Luther. For the rest of the 1950s the two of them would live together. They experienced housing instability despite living together with

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Lemann. "For One Family, Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, Once Considered the Ideal for Public Housing, has been a Model of Crime, Drugs and Unkept Promises." *New York Times* (1923-), Jan 13, 1991. <http://cc1.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/historical-newspapers/one-family-chicagos-robert-taylor-homes-once/docview/108653512/se-2>.

<sup>2</sup> Hooks, bell. "Homeplace (a site of resistance)." In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 41-49. Boston: South End Press, 1990. Reprinted by permission of South End Press. <https://libcom.org/article/homeplace-site-resistance>.

<sup>3</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

two incomes. They moved from place to place, describing their fluctuating financial status as “lower working class at best to hungry-poor at worst.”<sup>4</sup> Luther held jobs on and off in factories. Ruby, working at a janitorial service, legally qualified for welfare as a single mother. However, her relationship with Luther, an able-bodied man, required them to avoid run-ins with caseworkers, creditors, and landlords. This status quo had been a consequential double standard when the CHA rejected Ruby’s application in 1949 because she was an unwed mother. Unable to secure eligibility for public housing, Ruby and Luther looked to nearby real estate brokers.

In 1961, the Haynes’ bought a house for their family, which grew to seven children. They moved into Englewood, which was a South Side neighborhood that was shifting from White to Black. Unfortunately, the Haynes purchased their house “on contract.” Their down payment was only \$200, but their monthly house and car payments became unmanageable.<sup>5</sup> Their real estate broker used this tactic to repossess their house within a matter of months. For the winter, the family returned to the South Side slums. On the horizon, however, was Robert Taylor Homes.

Under Mayor Richard J. Daley’s supervision, Robert Taylor Homes’ construction finished one year early. The housing project replaced two miles of slums with twenty-eight fifteen-story buildings to provide affordable housing for over 25,000 people. Ruby, excited for the large clean apartments, applied for the residence. Again, because of her marital status, a CHA social worker denied Ruby’s application. The next day, Ruby married Luther. Her application was immediately approved. Apartment 902 in 5135 South Federal Street became their new home. There, the Haynes’ lived with their seven children, six boys and one girl.

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<sup>4</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

<sup>5</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

Ruby's children, growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Robert Taylor Homes, endured critical decades of public housing. Kermit, Ruby's second oldest, was 17 when they moved into Taylor Homes in 1962. On the day they moved in, the Vice Lords confirmed Kermit's involvement with a greeting at their doorstep. Kermit's adolescence revolved on his involvement with the gang, detailing regular pickups by Chicago Police and his mother finding him bleeding out on a baseball field. As Luther was not Kermit's father, the two of them struggled over authority and discipline. After a physical altercation between him and Luther, the relationship between Luther and Ruby ended in 1965.

Ruby, a single mother of seven, had no resources in the deteriorating community. The disappearance of job opportunities and "equitable" rent controls on tenants created high unemployment for the poorest and waning occupancy of middle-class families.<sup>6</sup> Residents faced difficulties combating crime and worsening structural conditions as "visitors from the outside world" refused to step within the boundaries of Robert Taylor Homes. Due to the threat of gangs, emergency services and police avoided servicing the community. Tenants who could move relocated to the nearby all-white suburbs, causing vacancy of one third of all units in the project. Stores, businesses, and churches left with them, leaving Robert Taylor tenants in a world of their own. Socially isolated from the city, the Haynes children's lives represented the harsh reality of life in the projects.

George, Ruby's oldest, married and maintained work as a meat cutter. When the west side riots of the 1960s destroyed his workplace, he and his family moved into Robert Taylor too. George helped Ruby with the other children when he had the chance, getting groceries and

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<sup>6</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."



babysitting. By this point, most of them were grown. Kermit aged out of the gang and went from one girlfriend's place to another. Larry, five years younger, joined the army after high school, worked for the postal service, and moved to Evanston, a north suburb of Chicago. Terrell, the next oldest, grew up with relatives in Ohio, never living in Robert Taylor. The younger ones, however, spent the entirety of their youth in the projects.

Johnnie and Robert, the next two children, enlisted in the military after dropping out of high school. Robert fizzled out of the Navy while Johnnie came back from Germany with a drug addiction. Johnnie met a young woman, Connie Henry, through George. Connie had three children before she met Johnnie, and when they moved into Taylor Homes, they had one more. Robert remained close to his mother despite his gang affiliation with the Cobra Stones. When George's marriage fell apart, he suffered a mental breakdown and became homeless. Robert went to Los Angeles to bring him back for the family's Thanksgiving in 1977. And it was through Robert that Juanita, Ruby's youngest and only daughter, met Thomas Chairs, another Cobra Stones member. After Thomas' subsequent prison sentence, he and Juanita broke up. Juanita and her two children moved in with Ruby, but further strife would follow.

On the day George's divorce became final, he went to see his ex-wife and children. When George left Ruby's apartment and didn't return after a night of temperatures below zero, Ruby filed a report with the police. The police instructed Ruby to wait and not worry. Nearly a month later, in early April when the ice was long gone, George's naked body washed ashore. On the anniversary of George's wake, Ruby moved into a small two-story project in Clarksdale. She

lived on her Social Security check and what she earned at a flower shop. In an unfortunate end, Ruby returned home, “having come north thinking she was leaving Clarksdale forever.”<sup>7</sup>

Juanita moved into Apartment 902, Ruby’s old place. Living alone in the projects proved dangerous for Juanita. In the early 1980s, crack cocaine took over the projects. A friend introduced her to cocaine, and she became addicted. Her apartment became a spot for users, especially younger folks. Juanita, only in her early twenties, sent her oldest child to Clarksdale, but became pregnant again. She smoked cocaine throughout her pregnancy but did not give birth to a “crack baby” like so many of her friends. She also sent that child to live with Ruby. At her lowest, Juanita shoplifted, resold her food stamps, and gave her welfare identification card to her dealer. Soon after, Juanita overdosed and went into cardiac arrest. She immediately packed what little she had from the apartment and moved to Clarksdale to be with Ruby. She found a unit in the same housing project and got clean.

Three floors down from the now abandoned Apartment 902, lived Connie Henry. The Haynes’ fourth generation continued through Johnnie and Connie’s children. With her five children, Connie survived Taylor Homes, an epicenter of infant mortality, shortened life expectancy, crime, and family disunity. Connie committed to raising her children in a space of their own. Her oldest, Maxine, graduated from high school and community college. She studied computer science. Mario, Connie’s next daughter, studied to be a secretary at a college in the Loop. Melanie, the middle child, majored in psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago after earning valedictorian at DuSable high school. Melissa had a baby at sixteen and still finished high school. Lastly, Melvin, the youngest, attended a high school outside of the

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<sup>7</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

neighborhood to avoid pressure from the gangs. Despite the efforts of Connie and her children, the conditions of Taylor Homes seemed irreversible.

To keep her family on the “right path,” Connie separated her family from the Taylor Homes community. She instructed her children to nod at neighbors, ignore provocations from men, and walk directly home. Connie suspected no change would come from the 1988 announcement of the CHA’s new director, Vincent Lane. Connie, “having heard of many promises of change over the years,” held little hope for Lane’s plan to turn the projects around. Her building received new security systems and guards, but residents of the building continued to perpetuate crime and drug-dealing activities. After two decades in Taylor Homes, Connie applied for a Section 8 voucher, a program for low-income tenants to receive subsidized housing in the private market. She shared with Lemann the saying that “if you apply for Section 8 when your children are young, your grant won’t come through until they are grown up.”<sup>8</sup> More than anything, Connie wanted to leave.

At last, the city also desired to leave Taylor Homes in its past. In a process that began in 1998, in 2007, the City of Chicago authorized the demolition of the last building of Taylor Homes. The city, once eager to welcome families into the doors of its new public housing, now agreed with the national consensus to erase its projects. In turn, scholars, journalists, and politicians deemed its residents as victims of one of the nation’s greatest failures of modern welfare and social policy.

The Haynes’ appearance in the *New York Times* illustrated the long social and political processes that produced the conditions of their family. Lemann excerpted the Haynes’ story from

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<sup>8</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

his book *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. The Haynes' symbolized the great search for economic and social freedom in the industrial north. Now, they represented all that was wrong with the promise of public housing.

The Great Migration during the early and middle twentieth century stressed Chicago's labor and housing market. Politicians were acutely aware of the housing shortage and the tensions that Black Americans would cause. White interests have always dictated housing policy, which has always wavered between the public and the private. First, the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) "redlined" aging, mixed, dense, and Black communities.<sup>9</sup> Their land value recommendations excluded Black Americans from receiving Federal Housing Authority (FHA) mortgage loans. They were left to the whim of manipulative real estate brokers. Then, President Roosevelt declared housing a need for the "quality" working Americans in the face of the Depression. Without America's commitment to integrationist ideals, Black people faced extremely disproportionate access to Chicago's new public housing program.

Chicago's Black Belt formed as a result of the intentional and legal exclusion of Black people from affordable housing options. The Black Belt became a city within itself. Revolutionary protests of the late 1920s across Chicago's south and west sides demonstrated the sense of Black independence (and separation) from the city.<sup>10</sup> However, the Depression leveled the financial progress that their internal economies made. Black slums became further entrenched in poverty. The dire need for affordable housing began the national agenda to replace slums with cost-effective housing during the Great Depression and eventually the working

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<sup>9</sup> Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed April 20, 2023, [https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/\[YOUR VIEW\]](https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/[YOUR VIEW]).

<sup>10</sup> Massey, Douglas S, and Nancy A Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, 115.

families of World War II. Of course, America was a decade from declaring its integrationist ideals.

The Housing Act of 1949 financed the program of urban renewal. To keep inner-cities attractive for middle-class families, Chicago began extensive slum clearance programs. The city replaced the slums with public housing stock. In the interests of costs and white neighborhood lobbying, the city built concentrated developments over the Black Belt. However, the replacement of units razed took years, causing waiting lists for public housing. Until the doctrine of integration became ingrained in every public institution, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) adjusted their eligibility and Black families moved in. Middle-class families moved out of public housing as their incomes rose, and the CHA replaced them with those most in need in the spirit of the civil rights movement.

Thus, the demographics of Chicago's public housing from 1940 to 1960 became overwhelmingly Black. Scholar and native Chicagoan, Arnold Hirsch called this process of maintaining ghetto lines through segregationist policy "the making of the second ghetto."<sup>11</sup> Significant portions of families received some type of welfare post-World War II, but now public housing developments concentrated them. Sociologist William Julius Wilson attributed the concentrations of Black impoverishment to the exit of middle-class Black families who provided social stability. Instead of working-class families, welfare-dependent tenants with nontraditional family structures moved in. Wilson termed the residents of the fully formed second ghetto the "truly disadvantaged."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, Arnold R. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History. Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1983, xii.

<sup>12</sup> Massey & Denton, *American Apartheid*, 117.

Since the 1970s, Chicago's public housing residents have stayed under the telescope of studies and articles for their survival in the nation's most dangerous and poorest census tracts. The attention primarily focused on the young single-mothers, the violent teenage gangsters, and the child constantly at risk of death. While life was hard, and all residents would admit that, public housing defined their stories and became part of their relationship with their homeplace. In the words of bell hooks, "despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of dominion, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issues of humanization, where one could resist."<sup>13</sup> To understand the story of the individual homeplace and their histories is to fairly remember life in the second "modern" ghetto.

It is not by coincidence that Chicago's public housing developments were called the "projects." Originally funded by the Public Works Administration (PWA), "housing projects" were an opportunity for working families to secure financial mobility to participate in society. However, the "projects" of the latter half of the twentieth century became known as a laboratory for residential segregation, welfare policy, and urban planning. Now seen as stigmatizing, the phrase "projects" referenced a time when the communities of Black Chicagoans were subjected to the experimental policy of the post-New Deal age. The "projects" became synonymous with the plight of the urban Black.

Subjugation did not mean apathetic subordination. In the breadth of literature that exists on the projects, particularly after the creation of the second ghetto, it is clear the residents of the projects shared their stories through their own media, mostly newspapers, and collaborated with scholars and researchers to provide an accurate account of their daily struggle. Women and men,

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<sup>13</sup> hooks, bell. "Homeplace (a site of resistance)." In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 41-49. Boston: South End Press, 1990. Reprinted by permission of South End Press. <https://libcom.org/article/homeplace-site-resistance>, 384.

young and old participated in using their voice through whatever available means to bring attention to their lives beyond the great epoch of public housing.

In every piece of literature on the residents of Chicago's projects, the studies considered the state of the individuals. Scholars and agencies measured unemployment, school dropout rates, and welfare-recipients. The papers featured the number of homicides, recent turf wars, and occasionally, "a success story." However, when journalists and scholars found the story of individuals from the projects, the residents' entire lives intertwined deeply with the history of Chicago's public housing. The collective voices of residents complete a more comprehensive memory of life within Chicago's public housing.

Hirsch prefaced *The Making of the Second Ghetto* with, "It was only after I was deeply engaged in my research that I learned that Chicago's experience [of residential segregation]m was indeed, of national significance."<sup>14</sup> In the sentiment of Hirsch's realization, then the residents bring life to the history in the making of the second ghetto and in the living of its sustainment. Hirsch devoted "primary attention [to] whites. That is where the power was. That is not to say that blacks have simply "reacted" to the actions of others and do not 'act' in their own behalf."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the narratives of women, teenagers, and children of the projects depict the constant struggle to work and hope within their bounds. The "projects" – their community – always remained this site for daily resistance despite the erasure of space, which has been observed not once but twice in the clearance of Chicago's Black community in the name of urban renewal.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, xiv.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch, xii.

<sup>16</sup> Vale, Lawrence J. *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities*. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

The story of Chicago's public housing has been extensively studied alongside residents' lives from the "projects." Since the 1970s, attention has revolved around the stories of the pieces of the family within the housing developments. At the root of many stories, women and children tried to create joy in "special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place."<sup>17</sup> The projects, neither because of nor despite what they were known for, were a site for forming Chicago's Black community. Reviving the voices of the tenants through their work, popular scholarship, and representational media complicates the current narrative of Chicago's public housing and what it means to create community. Through a chronological and thematic history of personal narratives, this thesis will reflect and expand on the ways in which unheard and heard stories complicate and enhance the memory of Chicago's public housing.

Chapter 1 grounds Chicago's public housing in the city's long practice of residential segregation. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), born out of the PWA in 1937, faced neighborhood opposition from the interests of racist white residential organizations. The Black Belt slums grew rapidly, identifying the city's compliance in creating ghettos. In 1948, Robert Weaver, former secretary of housing, identified the dire state of Chicago's residential segregation and the condition of Black people in *The Negro Ghetto* (1948). When federal legislation financed large scale urban renewal in the form of slum clearance and the construction of high-rise developments, the city offered affordable, modern projects to Black tenants. To develop the continued systematic concentration of Black people in projects, Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* (1983) demonstrated the early critiques of Chicago's residential segregation program through housing policy. To frame the narrative voice of the Black community, the *Chicago Defender*, historically black newspaper first published in 1905, recorded the efforts and

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<sup>17</sup> hooks, "Homeplace," 383.



consciousness of outspoken Blacks during the processes to contain them in the “first” ghetto and ensure their position in the second ghetto.<sup>18</sup> This historical background demonstrated the beginning and perseverance of the Black struggle for homeplace within Chicago's public housing. The chapter ends with the tumultuous year of 1968, which drastically changed the life of the “projects” first new tenants: Black mothers.

In Chapter 2, the history of the projects begins with its first tenants: two mothers. Lucicita “Lucy” Darlene Vides shared her time living in Cabrini-Green and then Lathrop Homes. Lucy endured a life of abuse from her family, peers, and then her husband. Lucy self-reflected on how her moments of weakness negatively impacted her relationship with her kids. Lucy’s navigation through the racial and gender divides in certain communities in the projects confined her to the immediate needs of her and her children, separating her from the community. Not in contrast, but on the spectrum of a sense of control, Dolores Wilson participated in the civil and social organization of her building. While she endured many losses and hardships, Dolores ended her time in Cabrini with a sense of homeplace. The power of these women’s lives is that they are only two generations removed from today’s children. They lived and raised those who would grow up in the hardest years of the projects. They were the first to adapt to tenant policy changes and create social bonds. These women, these mothers, began the struggle to sustain community as the men and boys in their lives lost control from spaces to create dignity and an integrity of being.<sup>19</sup> The chapter shows the longest memory of the “projects” lives in this generation of Black women who. They saw the neighborhood change and its children grow up. The answer to how

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<sup>18</sup> Ethan Michaeli, "The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America: From the Age of Pullman to the Age of Obama," (Houghton Mifflin: New York, New York, 2016), 20.

<sup>19</sup> hooks, "Homeplace," 383.

the “projects” became a stain on the city cannot be without the recognition of the constant struggle that Black mothers practiced within their homeplace.

Chapter 3 explores the process by which and how boys participated in gangs. Through the intimate work of scholar and observer, Sudhir Venkatesh, gangs are framed as a historical development and a social force that proliferated within Chicago's projects because of residents' economic, social, and political exclusion from the city's legitimate institutions. In *Gang Leader for a Day* (2000), Venkatesh recounted his companionship with J.T., leader of the Black Kings (BKs) gang in Robert Taylor's late eighties and nineties. Through the story of J.T. and the BKs, Venkatesh confronted the difficulties of entering the legitimate economy for Black men and the incentives of power and security to join the gang. Several empirical studies proved the intersection of education, home life, and self-perception of one's race and identity are integral to the evaluation of long-term impacts of gang life. The repetition of such studies demonstrated the nation's acute knowledge of the “statistical” conditions of life in the projects, yet there was never substantial economic or social policy to integrate Black youths from the project into mainstream life. Indeed, the chapter culminates in the findings that the city's complacency with Black joblessness and active incarceration campaigns further entrenched young men in the informal economy of the projects.

Chapter 4 focuses on the heavily publicized condition of the projects' children during the late eighties and nineties. Two salient works illustrated the daily life of children through their self-narrativized stories of two pairs of boys. Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here* (1991) documented the life of Pharaoh and Lafayette Rivers from 1989-1991. Surely, the title indicated the hardships that the boys experienced, but of all places, the statement came from their mother, LaJoe. Their experience always mirrored that of their families, demonstrating the deep struggle

of their mother to cultivate a homeplace in the disparaging Henry Horner Homes. A couple years later, journalist David Isay collaborated with LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman to publish *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (1997). The book is the full transcription of tape recordings by Jones and Newman, aged 13 and 14, during their life in Ida B. Wells, a historically Black housing development. The interview efforts of the boys demonstrated their desire to civically engage with the issues they saw in their community. The reproduction of children's experiences during the all the boys' stories during the nation's condemnation of the city's operation of the greatest slum spoke to the power in using the voice of the most vulnerable, the one most reliant on the creation of a homeplace.

When I was young, my mother told me about her childhood in Lathrop Homes. The CHA constructed Julia C. Lathrop Homes in 1937. It joins Addams Houses and Trumbull Park Homes as the three oldest developments. Lathrop Homes replaced a poorer area, but it remained miles north of the Black Belt. My mother recalled her horrific abuses, her teen pregnancy, and the sound of gunshots outside her stifling hot apartment. Only recently, I realized my mother hardly ever acknowledged her efforts to receive her GED through night school while she raised a son, her courage to fight back, and her capacity to always, *always* find work. Because of all the ways my mother moved to make life work during and after life in the projects, she began yet another process of reconciling the shared and contradictory perspectives of Chicago's public housing by sharing her struggle for homeplace with me.

## ‘Urban Renewal is Negro Removal’

*“The most persistent proponents of residential segregation in the North are the well-organized real estate dealers, home builders and home finance institutions. These groups can be counted on to lead the fight in opposition to any modification in residential segregation. They will be ably assisted and encouraged by neighborhood business and community institutions that serve a segregated area. The mass of whites in the North, who have been deluded into believing that they, too, have a vested interest in maintaining white areas of living, will at first co-operate in the fight to sustain the status quo.”<sup>20</sup>*

*-Robert Weaver, The Negro Ghetto, 1948*

The formation and crystallization of Chicago’s Black ghettos have been extensively researched throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Public servants, private actors, and community members have long attributed such persistent residential segregation of Chicago’s Black communities to the institution of public housing. The Federal Housing Act of 1937 established the United States Housing Authority (USHA) and its local counterparts to provide public housing to those in need. The CHA became the local arbiter of the city’s public housing. By 1937, however, established European immigrants and Black southerners from the Great Migration outlined the city’s settlement patterns. The precursory federal initiative under the Public Works Administration (PWA) did not prohibit racial discrimination at any level of public housing implementation.<sup>21</sup> Thus, at the founding of the CHA, Chicago faced racialized residential patterns.

The ways in which the CHA, interest groups, and Black Chicagoans dictated the location of public housing became a cause and effect of interracial tensions. The process of building public housing and rebuilding the city’s Black communities spanned difficult times in the nation.

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<sup>20</sup> Weaver, Robert C. *The Negro Ghetto*. First Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948, vii.

<sup>21</sup> Martens, Betsey, Glenn, Elizabeth, and Mangum, Tiffany. “Race, Equity and Housing: The Early Years,” *Journal of Housing & Community Development* 77, no. 5, (September/October 2020). [https://www.nahro.org/journal\\_article/race-equity-and-housing-the-early-years/](https://www.nahro.org/journal_article/race-equity-and-housing-the-early-years/).

The PWA projects intended to stimulate the economy during the depression. The two World Wars halted domestic construction and redirected resources. Lastly, the Civil Rights Era cemented housing as a people's right. Throughout these periods, which overlap and interconnect, systematic housing policy institutionalized the city's residential segregation in the form of public housing. The moments in which this happened converged at the individual, local, and national levels.

By the end of the 1960s, Chicago's cityscape included the infamous high-rise projects of Cabrini-Green, Robert Taylor, Henry Horner, and more. These buildings became nearly all-Black and all-lower class by the end of the 70s. Before the condition of the Black individual became heavily researched and published, scholars and journalists investigated the phenomenon of the Black Ghetto as a result of public housing. Guided by two prominent works of the twentieth century, this chapter will examine the conditions to which the city formed and solidified the Black Belt through public housing and posed Black Chicagoans for an endless conflict in racial tensions for the rest of the twentieth century. Weaver's *The Negro Ghetto*, published in 1948, promptly identified the early expansion of Black Belts as an indicator of Chicago's segregation. Weaver further assessed this systematic racism as an evolution from old racism to an explicit disenfranchisement of the Black community, and their expressions of protests would prove that. In 1982, Hirsch extended Weaver's identification of the "negro ghetto" to that of second one, produced by and contained within public housing. Hirsch's account of race relations from 1940 until 1960 cemented the recognition of Chicago's residential segregation. In *Making of the Second Ghetto*, Hirsch justified the chronological evolution and classification of the projects as Chicago's "second ghetto."

Despite constant relegation to the Black Belt up until the 1960s, Black Chicagoans created communities within the economic and spatial mobility boundaries instituted for them. In their struggle for property rights and protection, Black Chicagoans exercised their participation in their history through coalition organizing and the power of the press. Most importantly, Black people looked to build a homeplace, and they were acutely aware of the forces that tried to prevent it. First, they would endure the century-long process of segregation through racial covenants and then through urban renewal. That process of building ghetto upon ghetto—the *making* as Hirsh termed it—is necessary to understand the complexities of the ghetto’s confinement to public housing as it is conceptualized today. The result of such events in this time period explains residents’ unique ownership and reclamation of the projects as their communities in the seventies.

## The First Half of the Century

Over the first half of the 1900s, thousands of Black southerners arrived in Chicago every month. Since emancipation, Black southerners gained new freedoms and desired work in the industrial northern cities. This “Great Migration” poised urban centers for housing shortages given the influx of Black Americans and construction shortages that followed the first World War and would occur at the Great Depression’s onset. Cities were unprepared for the settlement densities of the southern migrants. Throughout the country, city and community leaders acknowledged continued migration would cause congestion and expand the city's slums.<sup>22</sup> The PWA, under Roosevelt, constructed Chicago’s first projects. To accommodate immigrants and

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<sup>22</sup> "Segregation Following Northern Migration: Chicago Real Estate Board Adopts Plans for Legalizing Proscriptive Measure On Account of Increase in City's Negro Population From South--Pittsburg Facing Serious Housing Problem." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), Apr 28, 1917. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/segregation-following-northern-migration/docview/566889025/se-2>.

veterans, the PWA modeled the Julia C. Lathrop Homes, Trumbull Park Homes, and Jane Addams Homes after settlement houses.<sup>23</sup> These projects began operation in 1938.

At the time, only white ethnic groups occupied Chicago public housing. Poor southern migrants found their communities in the city's growing Black Belt. These areas were concentrated just south of the downtown center, a pocket on the near north side, and on the west side. These were ideal locations for daily laborers' commutes. Typically, tenements in the slums were unfit for families, lacking adequate rooms for children, running water, and indoor plumbing. Yet, these were the only places Black renters could afford to live. As stated by Weaver, the major opponents to the relocation of slum dwellers were local political and financial institutions that codified racism into their practices.

As early as before the Great Depression, White residential institutions organized to protect their house and land values through racial covenants. Racial covenants were legally binding contracts that homeowners signed to prohibit the selling of their property to non-White buyers.<sup>24</sup> In 1924, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) declared in its code of ethics:

Article 34.

A Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Choldin, Harvey M. "Chicago Public Housing." Encyclopedia of Chicago, Chicago Historical Society. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/253.html>. Accessed 3 February, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> University of Minnesota, "What is a Covenant?," Mapping Prejudice, 2022, <https://mappingprejudice.umn.edu/racial-covenants/what-is-a-covenant#:~:text=Racial%20covenants%20are%20clauses%20that,from%20buying%20or%20occupying%20land>.

<sup>25</sup> "1924 Code of Ethics of the National Association of Realtors®," National Association of Realtors Archives, <https://www.nar.realtor/about-nar/history/1924-code-of-ethics>.

The private real estate market encoded racism into procedures that would manifest in local practices. In Chicago, White neighborhood associations formed to extend the arm of NAREB's clear prescription of segregation in housing.

The nature of White ethnic groups to exclude Black migrants indicated the continuation of excluding Black and brown communities from generational wealth, and in turn, a position of full participation in society. Neighborhood leaders, presidents, and founders of the associations, framed Black people as a threat to the already stressed economy and housing market. The Auburn Park Property Restriction Association petitioned their restrictive covenant to white residents, claiming the protection of their housing values. The letter to a Mr. Wagner Wagner read:

This is the agreement originally drafted by the Attorneys for the Chicago Real Estate Board and upon the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, and is legal, lawful and binding...To date the property owners in your section have signed the restriction about 80%...The Auburn Park Restriction Association was organized by the Local Bankers, leading business men and property owners who felt that this movement was necessary to uphold property values.<sup>26</sup>

The Auburn neighborhood, which was overwhelmingly white in 1930, illustrated the effect of these policies in as little as ten years. Chicago's residential dissimilarity (or segregation) index increased from 10% to 70% from 1900 to 1930.<sup>27</sup> The efforts of the neighborhood associations kept Black people from integrating into healthy neighborhoods, thus from opportunities of mobility. Scholar Roy Brooks attributed the opposition to Black homeownership as a means for improving White ethnics' position on the racial hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> Many immigrant groups like the

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<sup>26</sup> Auburn Park Property Restriction Association, Inc., "Letter and Restrictive Covenant, Auburn Park Property Restriction Association, Inc., 1929," archived digital scan, Chicago Historical Society (ICHi-31705, IChi-31706), accessed February 12, 2023, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11237.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Roy L. Brooks. *Integration of Separation?: A Strategy for Racial Equality*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1996, 47, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks. *Integration of Separation*, 48.



Italians and Polish were subjected to slum dwelling during the post-World War I period. Thus, many racial identities sought affordable public housing and economic relief across racial lines. However, white real estate interests continued to exert their influence on the placement and eligibility of public housing.

The Oakland Men's Business Association, backed by realtors and bankers, advised the FHA to avoid constructing low-cost housing on Chicago's near South Side unless it was in a select area.<sup>29</sup> The association expressed its sole support for project development in the area delineated between the east-west 43rd and 53rd streets and north-south boundaries Wabash Avenue and the Rock Island Railroad. This area would become the "State Street Corridor" that housed the two-mile-long Robert Taylor Homes complex among several other projects throughout the late 50s and early 60s. These plans suggested the building of public housing on top of existing slums. The displacement and replacement of the Black Belt began, and there were federal funds to build it.

As part of the 1937 Housing Act, the USHA dispersed sixteen million dollars for Chicago's slum clearance program. John R. Fugard, chairman of the CHA at the time, declared the "major consideration in view...must be for residents in the distressed area of the Southside where insanitary dilapidated buildings abound."<sup>30</sup> Fugard as well as many Chicagoans desired to eliminate and replace slums with functional residential areas. A reporter documented the persistent efforts of white interests:

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<sup>29</sup> "Whites Oppose Seven Million Slum Clearance Plan; Can't Exploit Race: Tells Why White Realtors Oppose Housing Project." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Dec 08, 1934. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/whites-oppose-seven-million-slum-clearance-plan/docview/492501733/se-2>.

<sup>30</sup> "Chicago to Get Slum Project: Federal Homes Will House 1,700 Families Start Soon." *Atlanta Daily World (1932-)*, Dec 20, 1937. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chicago-get-slum-project/docview/490542393/se-2>.

Powerful white realty interests bordering on the community waged a bitter legal fight and delayed construction so long that funds were shunted to other works. Southsiders have organized to combat this attitude. It was announced the original project will be studied in the light of the experience of the past two years.<sup>31</sup>

*New Journal and Guide*, a historically Black newspaper of Virginia, reprinted the article not two weeks later, emphasizing the projects' potential to accommodate approximately 1,700 Black families who awaited new homes after the slum clearance project.<sup>32</sup>

Only recently did public housing extend its benefits to Black Chicagoans. For the first time in 1938, the CHA approved the applications of three Black families to live in Addams Homes,<sup>33</sup> which challenged the existing immigrant settlement residences since the founding of Hull House in 1889 for European ethnics.<sup>34</sup> This incremental admittance filled only a fraction of the 25 units of 1,027 designated for Black people residence immediately upon completion.<sup>35</sup> The *Defender's* story on the three "Race families" (capitalization in original) detailed the gratitude of Clinton Lee, a married mother of two, when she learned that Black applicants from two years prior had still not been accepted.<sup>36</sup> The *Defender* promoted the inclusion of "the race" in public housing at all levels of operations. In the construction of Wells Homes, Elizabeth Wood assured the *Defender* that "Race labor" would be contracted throughout all construction phases as the PWA employed white would be represented in all phases of the construction" (capitalization in

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<sup>31</sup> "Chicago Housing Project to Get Under: \$16,000,000 Granted by Government New Project Will Accommodate 1700 Families." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), 1938. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chicago-housing-project-get-under/docview/567432147/se-2>.

<sup>32</sup> "Chicago Housing Project," *New Journal and Guide*.

<sup>33</sup> "Select Families for Chicago Housing Rent: One of First Three." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Mar 26, 1938. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/select-families-chicago-housing-rent/docview/492597655/se-2>.

<sup>34</sup> Addams, Jane. *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. 1910, 77-78, 81.

<sup>35</sup> Choldin, "Chicago Housing Authority."

<sup>36</sup> "Select Families for Chicago Housing," *The Chicago Defender*.

original) as the PWA contracts historically created white jobs and excluded Blacks.<sup>37</sup> Wood, the first chairwoman of the CHA and a true integrationist, maintained some racial balance in public housing. Robert Taylor joined her at the CHA in 1938.<sup>38</sup> With a background in private building management and architectural engineering, Mayor Edward J. Kelly appointed Taylor as the first Black man on the board of the CHA.<sup>39</sup> Taylor entered the CHA when public housing became the latest (and most well-funded) argument for maintaining segregation.

At the end of the month, the *Defender* returned with an update on the selected site for the fourth public housing project: South Park Homes.<sup>40</sup> The *Defender* spoke of the “man on the street’s” questions and concerns. Chairman Fugard responded to the man on the street, but other CHA officials left inquiries unanswered. Among those were Elizabeth Wood, CHA secretary, and Victor A. Olander, a CHA administrative member. However, Fugard reiterated the importance of financing and then, architectural plans could be released. While the CHA constructed Lathrop and Trumbull Homes immediately, and yet the Ida B. Wells housing project met sustained and aggressive public opposition.<sup>41</sup> This project designated all 1,662 units for Black families.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "Approves Loan for Housing in Chicago: Roosevelt Sanctions \$8,674,000 Loan for Project." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Oct 29, 1938. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/approves-loan-housing-chicago/docview/492646271/se-2>.

<sup>38</sup> "Taylor on Chicago Housing Board: R. R. Taylor is Appointed to Housing Body: First of Race on Board; To Serve Out Term of Resigned Member Appointed." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Dec 10, 1938. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/taylor-on-chicago-housing-board/docview/492494263/se-2>.

<sup>39</sup> "Taylor on Chicago Housing Board," *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>40</sup> "Action Soon on Housing, Says Fugard: Man on Street Ignored by Other Officials About Project." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jan 29, 1938. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/action-soon-on-housing-says-fugard/docview/492565833/se-2>.

<sup>41</sup> "The Ida B. Wells Housing Project." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Sep 09, 1939. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ida-b-wells-housing-project/docview/492562676/se-2>.

<sup>42</sup> Choldin, "Chicago Housing Authority," Encyclopedia of Chicago.

The CHA dedicated the South Park Homes site to activist Ida B. Wells, following the commencement of its construction as the fourth promised public housing project from the Housing Act of 1937. Wells Homes explicitly rented to Black families. The *Defender* celebrated the beginning of construction by stating, “the long and patient prayers of 350,000 members of the Race had at last been answered.”<sup>43</sup> However, the white neighborhood associations continued to protest the expansion of such projects, particularly if Black families came with them. Newton C. Farr, previous president of the Woodlawn Property Owners Protective Association (WPOPA), argued, “[there is a] dividing line between whites and blacks, and I consider the Ida B. Wells apartments too near the line. They should have been built farther south.”<sup>44</sup> The *Defender* identified the WPOPA as one of Chicago's institutional parents of restrictive codes. Many residents adjacent to Wells did not object to its existence, however Farr expressed the growing fear of the “encroachment” of Black families.<sup>45</sup>

Through the practice of “redlining,” the FHA directly denied Black Americans access to homeownership and simultaneously perpetuated pathological reasons for their impoverished condition. The FHA based its home mortgage lending on the grading scales of the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC). The HOLC’s categorization of the Black Belt as undesirable demonstrated the institutional norms that Black people inherently created substandard communities (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The rationale of the HOLC field surveyors explicitly attributed their grades based on the presence of other non-White groups. Black residents, specifically those concentrated in areas such as public housing projects, immediately impacted those grades. For instance, the HOLC graded the tract with Wells Homes, at that point only

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<sup>43</sup> "The Ida B. Wells Housing Project," *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>44</sup> "The Ida B. Wells Housing Project," *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>45</sup> "The Ida B. Wells Housing Project," *The Chicago Defender*.

under construction, red. Wells replaced a slum area, but the HOLC focused heavily on the topic of race. The description cited Farr's objections to the project's location, and explicitly stated the concerns of "encroachment." In addition, the description noted the migration of working whites to the suburbs, and the replacement of their households with households of color. Whites were not expected to buy in neighborhoods bordering areas with a "shifting or infiltration [of] "Negroes."<sup>46</sup> The HOLC predicted but also directly influenced the expansion of the Black Belt because of its recommendation to contain the so-called inherent ills of Black communities financially and spatially.

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<sup>46</sup> Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed April 20, 2023, [https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/\[YOUR VIEW\]](https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/[YOUR VIEW]).

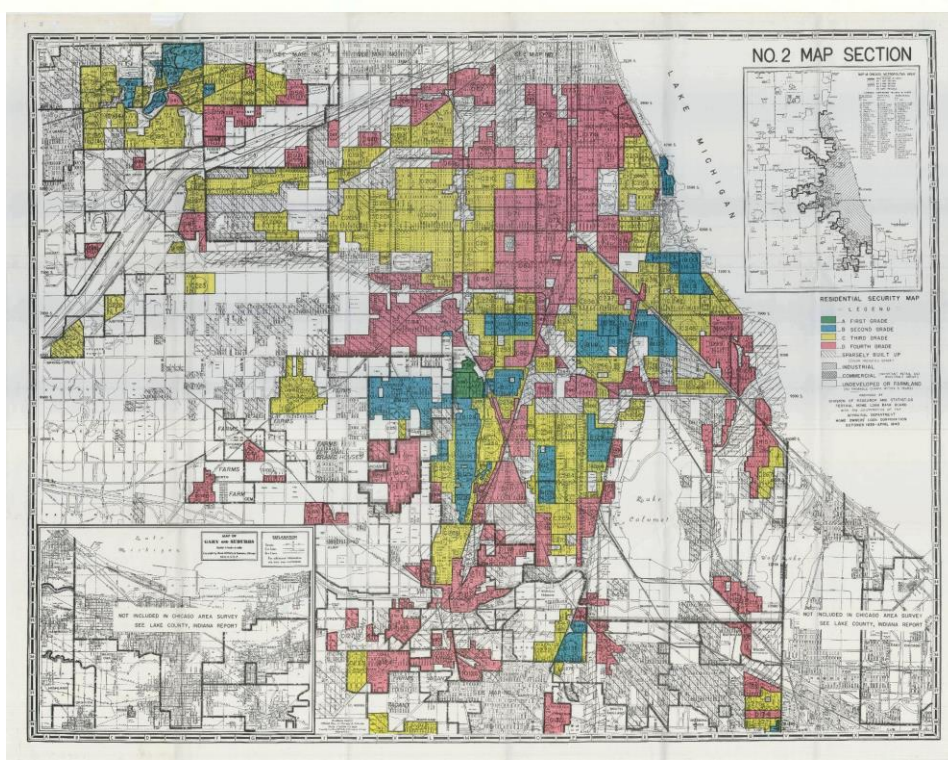
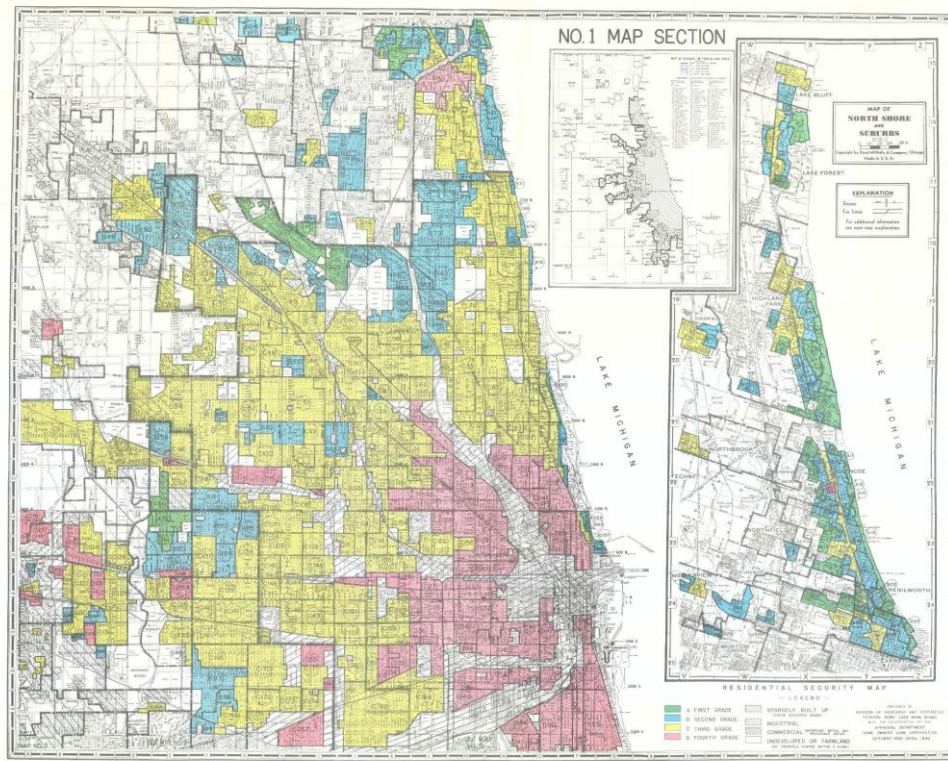


Figure 1 (top) & Figure 2 (bottom). Chicago's HOLC grades (Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," American Panorama, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed April 20, 2023, [https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/\[YOUR VIEW\]](https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/[YOUR VIEW])).

The Black voting block became a powerful interest in the city, connected by churches and community organizations. However, they also became a target for political patronage as they invested participation in public institutions like housing.<sup>47</sup> The *Defender* urged Black Americans to take advantage of the midterm election year to refocus congressional and mayoral agendas on public housing programs.<sup>48</sup> The *Defender* recognized that “In every city of the country where the Race resides in large numbers there exists a housing problem.”<sup>49</sup> The *Defender* positioned public housing as a vehicle for advancement and to continue the Black community’s “attack” on slums everywhere. Unfortunately, existing projects required the attention of local and federal authorities after five years. The maintenance of the projects would continue to be a factor in the lived experiences of its tenants. The CHA released a bulletin detailing the living conditions of the Wells Homes’ residents, highlighting scenarios of “eleven persons in two rooms” and “fourteen families share toilets.”<sup>50</sup> Despite the maintenance costs of the current projects, residents of the slums required housing— a demand that persisted beyond the Great Depression.

In the same bulletin, the CHA promoted the recent clearance of a slum area. The bulletin invited “you and your friends” to tour a prospective public housing site and neighborhood.<sup>51</sup> In the corner of the invitation, a compass outlined the bordering streets of cleared sites. The prospective site, demarcated by Larrabee Street, Oak Street, Hudson Avenue, and Chicago Avenue, would become Cabrini Homes by the end of the following year, 1942. The CHA

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<sup>47</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

<sup>48</sup> David, Ward Howe, "The Observation--Post: Chicago Housing Authority May Lose Confidence of Community." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jan 13, 1940. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/observation-post/docview/492567990/se-2>.

<sup>49</sup> David, "The Observation--Post," *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>50</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Bulletin of the Chicago Housing Authority (March 1941, page 3)*, digital scan, Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/10874.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Bulletin of the Chicago Housing Authority (March 1941, page 5)*, digital scan, Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/10875.html>

constructed six developments during the 1940s, but the seven thousand units did not rehouse the Black poor that slum clearance displaced. Unmet demand, particularly considering World War II veterans and workers, resulted in the construction of sixteen housing developments in the 1950s, including Chicago's famous high-rises.

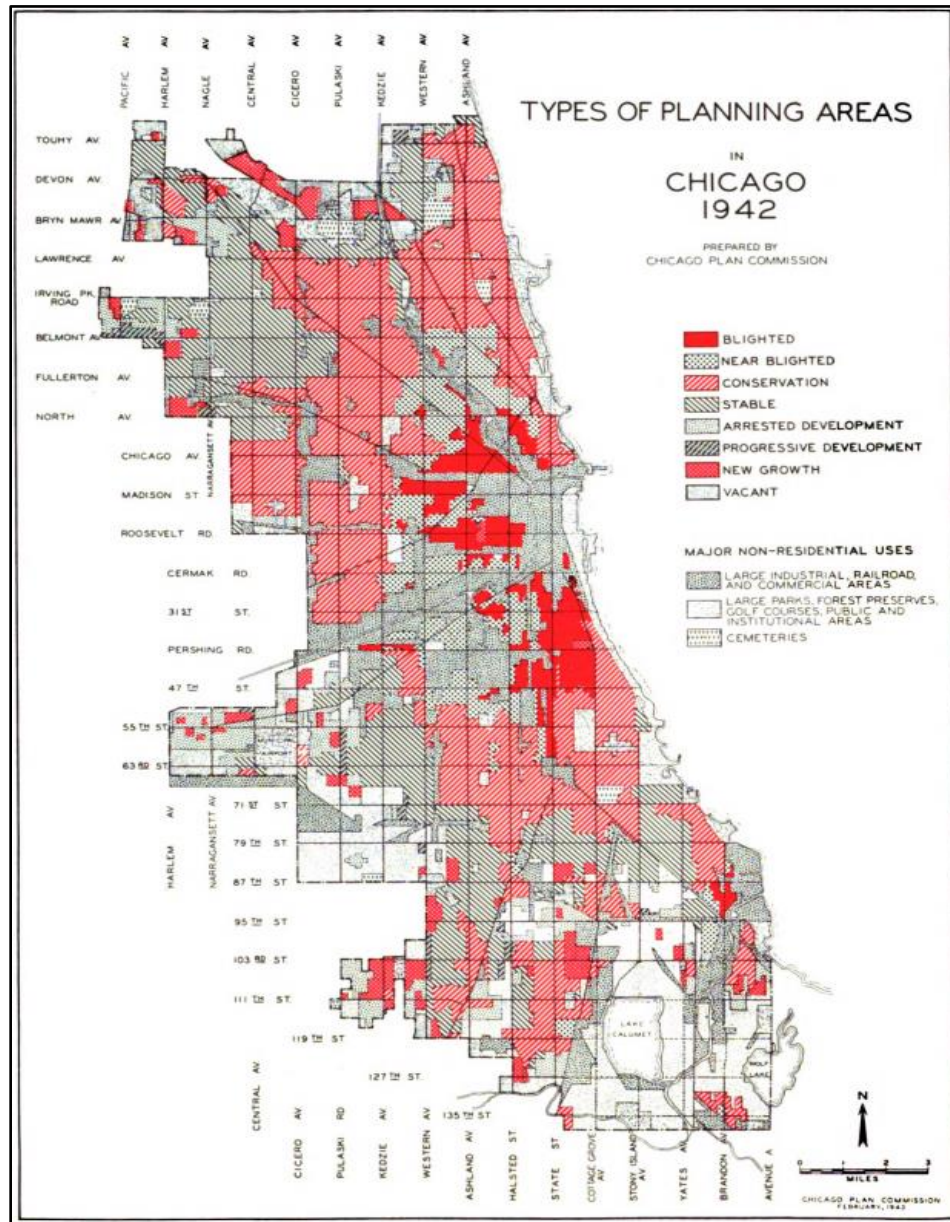


Figure 3. Types of Planning Areas in Chicago 1942 prepared by Chicago Plan Commission ("Master plan of residential land use of Chicago," 1943, Chicago Plan Commission, Chicago, Ill. [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007189734&view=1up&seq=1, 68.](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007189734&view=1up&seq=1,68))



World War II produced a unique shortage and demand for housing. In 1943, the *Defender* called “war [time] housing legislation” a failure of the NHA.<sup>52</sup> They demanded the dismissal of NHA office holder John Blandford Jr. The *Defender* cited “evidence that Blandford is not discharging adequately his responsibility...in the provision of war housing for Negroes is irrevocable and rapidly mounting.”<sup>53</sup> Blandford took no responsibility upon the suggestion of the community planning and interracial organizations to provide housing for Negro war workers. Instead, Blandford allowed local agencies and actors to prevent or delay housing projects for Negroes. In particular, the prejudice of local housing authorities dictated site selection of future projects. Local housing authorities, under no direction of urgency by Blandford, did not supply working negroes with adequate living places. It was in this article that Arnold Hirsch found his description of Blandford possessing “the backbone of a jellyfish.”<sup>54</sup> In the wartime labor and housing emergency of 1944, there were 500 “emergency” relocation cases and 10,000 other Black migrants seeking housing. The NHA supplied 93 units for Negro housing.<sup>55</sup>

With encouragement from the federal government and local demand persisting, the CHA looked to create bigger public projects. As the Black population climaxed in Chicago, settlement patterns, mostly undisturbed in the city, reinforced racial lines throughout the city. In 1954, the CHA named one of the projects under Harold Ickes, who served as the Secretary of the Interior under Roosevelt.<sup>56</sup> While Harold Ickes, a former settlement house resident, Ickes created the

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<sup>52</sup> "John B. Blandford and Nat'l Housing." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jun 12, 1943. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/john-b-blandford-natl-housing/docview/492701598/se-2>.

<sup>53</sup> "John B. Blandford and Nat'l Housing," *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>54</sup> Hirsch, Arnold R. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History. Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Hirsch, 12.

<sup>56</sup> Martens, “Race, Equity and Housing: The Early Years,” *Journal of Housing & Community Development*.

pressing office of Race Relations Services, he required that public housing projects follow the “neighborhood composition” rule.<sup>57</sup> For instance, Lathrop and Trumbull Park Homes were in white neighborhoods and so they excluded Black tenants. As previously mentioned, the Addams Homes, as previously mentioned, admitted a mere 25 Black households to maintain the pre-war era’s status quo.<sup>58</sup> USHA’s policy enforcement at local levels reproduced and solidified previously nonexistent racial designations of neighborhoods throughout the city. Throughout the 1940s, Chicago became more segregated as the housing market bowed to neighborhood associations and public housing projects reproduced separation explicitly across racial lines.

In 1945, the American Council on Race Relations, based in Chicago, released a Community Relations Manual to guide cities’ responses with the question: “What to do about your community’s problems of intergroup relations.” The council, headed by Robert Weaver, outlined the country’s civil rights agenda to end discrimination legally across public institutions and services, specifically to provide decent housing for all.<sup>59</sup> After World War II, affordable housing became even more scarce as wartime laborers and veterans returned to major industrial cities like Chicago. The manual identified accessible housing and education as crucial for “full participation of all citizens” in communities.<sup>60</sup> The guide presented community organization and local policy as the first line against cultural divides and practices of segregation. More notably, the manual warned:

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<sup>57</sup> Martens, “Race, Equity and Housing: The Early Years,” *Journal of Housing & Community Development*.

<sup>58</sup> Choldin, “Chicago Housing Authority.”

<sup>59</sup> Weaver, R. C. *Community Relations Manual: What to Do About Your Community's Problems of Intergroup Relations*. Place of publication not identified: American Council on Race Relations, 1945, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Weaver, *Community Relations Manual*, 2.

Your community must break down the barriers to the expansion of space for minority group living. If, however, this takes the form of enlarging existing ghettos or creating new ones, no lasting progress will have been made.<sup>61</sup>

With the implementation of the neighborhood composition rule in effect and the underpinnings of restrictive codes, the placement of project sites reproduced the concentrations of Black populations in the city that previously existed in the slums. Despite the CHA's wide acceptance of the report's conclusions, the housing shortage as well as the dilapidating conditions of existing projects required the continual construction of bigger projects.

While the CHA faced bureaucratic delays and barriers to building projects, the Black community, who only had a right to live in Wells Homes, faced restricted access to affordable housing. To answer the question, "What is the Negro himself doing to help this situation," Black artisans, contractors and home builders began to construct single-family residences under the supervision of Matthew Goodwin Sr., former student of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee University.<sup>62</sup> Goodwin and family trained local community members in brick laying and electric to complete more than 700 homes for Black families. The scope of the housing shortage required national action, and the Truman administration prepared the second and, arguably, most impactful piece of housing legislation.

The city began to face an intensified housing shortage as well as the issue of race relations. With the Black Belt concentrated away from white ethnic enclaves and the city center, the advancement, and thus, integration, of Black people into the larger residential landscape of the city. At the time, the CHA operated three affordable housing projects. Robert R. Taylor, the

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<sup>61</sup> Weaver, *Community Relations Manual*, 14

<sup>62</sup> Barnett, Albert G. "Chicago Negroes Fight Housing Shortage, Build their Own Homes: One Contractor Erects More than 700 Houses." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jun 07, 1947. Pg. 13. <http://cc1.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chicago-negroes-fight-housing-shortage-build/docview/492754199/se-2>.

first Black chairman of the CHA, was responsible for the expansion of public housing under the Truman Administration's Federal Housing Act of 1949. Critics saw "Taylor's list of sites [in vacant terrain in white neighborhoods] was received as a master plan for neighborhood racial integration on a grand scale."<sup>63</sup> Eastern European, Irish, and Scandinavian communities established themselves in Chicago for generations. As the Black population increased drastically, discourse about public programs and welfare became centered on race. Economic and subsequent housing market competition in the cities increased. Federal and local governments understood racial tensions existed and would increase between groups.

Whites were able to move out given the post-war benefits. The FHA, as administered by Truman and Roosevelt, saw from the end of the war until 1959 that a mere 2% of all housing covered by the FHA mortgage insurance were occupied by Blacks.<sup>64</sup> According to historian Beryl Satter, "most of the homes were built in suburbia to satisfy the desire of middle-class white Americans to leave the crowded cities."<sup>65</sup> Satter documented the predatory real estate market that her father, Mark J. Satter, interacted with as a civil rights lawyer for Black clients. The Haynes family is among many who found relatively quality housing in a South Side neighborhood, requiring a \$200 down payment, however, their monthly payments were much steeper, allowing the broker to evict them after defaulted payments.<sup>66</sup> Mark J. Satter pursued this egregious strategy in the courts. As late as 1957, real estate agents abused geographic and financial

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<sup>63</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

<sup>64</sup> Brooks, 50.

<sup>65</sup> Brooks, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Lemann, "For One Family."

limitations of black working couples.<sup>67</sup> Satter found that a real estate broker had used this strategy on more than 60 black families.

## Integration

The CHA constructed fifteen new public housing projects across the city. However, a precedent set by a Detroit court eliminated the neighborhood composition rule in policy. On behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Walter White reported Judge Arthur F. Lederle's decision that "racial segregation in Detroit's public housing is a denial of the equal protection clause...and therefore is unconstitutional."<sup>68</sup> Judge Lederle further held that the doctrine laid down in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of separate but equal has no place whatsoever in the public housing field.<sup>69</sup> This declaration allowed and encouraged multiracial housing communities, but it did not affect the site selection process of the new high-rise public housing complexes.

The Black community, at least two generations settled in since the beginning of the Great Migration, awaited news about more public housing. The *Defender* charged the City Council's delay as "attributed to such factors as indifference to the existing residential congestions, lack of civic responsibility induced by sinister political influence."<sup>70</sup> Using the example of the Hyde Park-Kenwood area, which surrounds parts of the University of Chicago's campus, the *Defender*

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<sup>67</sup> Satter, Beryl. *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America*. 1st ed. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021, 3.

<sup>68</sup> White, Walter. "Impact of Detroit Housing Decision Extends Throughout the Nation." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jul 17, 1954. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/impact-detroit-housing-decision-extends/docview/492870606/se-2>.

<sup>69</sup> White, "Impact of Detroit Housing Decision," *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>70</sup> "More Public Housing is Needed." *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, Dec 08, 1958. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/more-public-housing-is-needed/docview/493742418/se-2>.

claimed that the City Council would push out of Black citizens “without adequate provision for their displacement.”<sup>71</sup> The independent efforts of the Black community members like Goodwin were not sustainable in comparison to the City Council’s power to erect thousand-plus unit structures. The *Defender* called for “race” representation in every public sector, especially in spaces like the City Council since Chicago’s Black population came to just under one million throughout the 1950s.<sup>72</sup> Housing, seen as an intersecting issue, expanded the call to “far-reaching structural changes in wealth and income, a genuine sharing of political power, and full participation” for all races.<sup>73</sup>

In 1953, Trumbull Park Homes admitted Black families for the first time. Throughout their first year in residence, the first and then subsequent families faced racial violence. Despite the conditions of life, the families, joined by the Chicago NAACP branch, released a statement declaring: “it is here that we will rear our children, send them to school, and as good citizens shoulder our responsibilities in helping to better our community, city and nation.”<sup>74</sup> After barely a year, the Donald Howard family, the project’s first Black family, moved out. In the following years, the Council Against Discrimination of Greater Chicago reported on the unchanged situation of Negro tenants in Trumbull Park Homes. It recalled that Negro tenant family occupied 27 of the 456 units.<sup>75</sup> The report described the tenants as “living in a state of siege for months and years and with a lack of safe mobility.” Victims cited “aerial bombs” as the cruelest

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<sup>71</sup> “More Public Housing is Needed.” *Daily Defender*.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Holt, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Major Problems in African American History: Volume II: From Freedom to “Freedom Now,” 1865-1990s* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 222.

<sup>73</sup> Holt, et al., *Major Problems in African American History*, 222.

<sup>74</sup> “Families Will Retain Homes Despite Threats.” *New Journal and Guide (1916-)*, Sep 18, 1954. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/families-will-retain-homes-despite-threats/docview/568257016/se-2>.

<sup>75</sup> Report on Trumbull Park Homes, April 11, 1956 by Council Against Discrimination of Greater Chicago, E185.89 H6T7 1956 Oversize, Chicago History Museum, Abakanowicz Research Center, Chicago, Illinois.

form of white residents' "psychological warfare." Most notably, residents found police suspicious when they could not charge anyone for such damage. The *Defender* described the extent of racism that Negro residents endured as a "violation of civil rights." Under Wood's management integration did occur, but white residents stood opposed (see Figure 4).

The intensity to which negro tenants face racial violence was displayed by the report's description of how "[Negro tenants] can use only one street that leads to a bus line, and this is not with complete assurance. Police ran an hourly squad car to reach the nearest bus stop, which was at least one mile away. Seven Negro families use this service, as they fear to walk to distance."<sup>76</sup> All other streets to the project remain closed to Negroes. Nor can Negroes go three blocks to the normal shopping area.<sup>77</sup> While the Chicago NAACP said that negroes should have been using all streets for the past week and a half, 100 police officers are on duty 24 hours a day to ensure negro tenants can be transported safely from place to place. In the fourth section, the report found the South Deering Improvement Association responsible for the "South Deering Bulletin," used "inflammatory racist material and extreme right-wing propaganda."<sup>78</sup> For over 30 years, the Bulletin and Association maintained their home values through segregation in and outside of projects.

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<sup>76</sup> Report on Trumbull Park Homes, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Report on Trumbull Park Homes, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Report on Trumbull Park Homes, 5.

Project Name	Units	Percent Non-White population									
		Neighborhood 1950	1951	1953	1954	1956	1957	1959	Neighborhood 1960	1961	1963
Addams	1,027	37%	5%	7%	10%	38%	52%	n/a	46%	76%	81%
Cabrini	586	70%	34%	46%	54%	71%	77%	86%	86%	93%	n/a
Racine Courts	120	29%	76%	76%	75%	83%	86%	90%	28%	98%	100%
Leclaire Courts	316	0%	12%	16%	19%	50%	65%	81%	15%	89%	93%
Harrison Courts	126	8%	14%	10%	9%	37%	44%	n/a	57%	73%	83%
Maplewood Courts	132	34%	18%	11%	11%	53%	69%	n/a	69%	86%	89%
Ogden Courts	136	13%		9%	8%	61%	73%	77%	62%	95%	96%
Prairie Courts	326	94%		72%	71%	76%	81%	n/a	80%	88%	96%
Archer Courts	148	22%		56%	64%	72%	73%	84%	37%	82%	94%
Loomis Courts	126	49%		87%	86%	91%	94%	94%	50%	93%	100%
Lowden	128	53%			50%	69%	85%	24%	74%	96%	100%
Olander	150	54%			68%	87%	93%	n/a	98%	100%	100%
Leclaire Extension	300	0%			25%	50%	60%	75%	15%	84%	82%
Ickes	803	61%			57%	93%	94%	97%	66%	98%	98%
Abbott	1,218	37%			53%	86%	90%	n/a	40%	97%	99%

CHA Executive Director

Elizabeth Wood	William Kean	Alvin Rose
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\* For "Neighborhood" in 1950 and 1960, the census tract of the project and contiguous census tracts were combined to give a figure for the overall area. In many cases, however, racial boundaries were clearly defined, so a percentage of 50% does not mean the neighborhood was integrated.

Figure 4. Non-White Occupancy in CHA's Integrated projects, 1951-1963 (Hunt, D. B. (2000). *What Went Wrong with Public Housing in Chicago? A History of the Chicago Housing Authority, 1933-1982* Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Retrieved from <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/what-went-wrong-with-public-housing-chicago/docview/238141609/se-2>, 134.)

Shortly after the City Council rejected Taylor's list of scattered building sites, they approved the construction of new public housing projects in black neighborhoods, which required slums to be cleared for construction. Out of bitterness, Taylor and Wood resigned from the CHA. Ten years later, the *Daily Defender* declared Taylor's failed mission: "At 49th and State streets...the 4,415-unit development named for the late CHA official will result in the reclamation of about 95 acres of dense slum."<sup>79</sup> The city named the two-mile long project after Taylor. At this point in time, tenant screening steadily integrated based on race and socio-

<sup>79</sup> "Break Ground for \$70,000,000 Project: Named for Ex-CHA Official." *Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1956-1960), Nov 02, 1960. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/break-ground-70-000-project/docview/493842195/se-2>.



economic status. However, the displacement of Chicagoans from the “urban renewal” projects still intensified the conditions and isolation of those in the slums.

## The Sixties

The 1960s culminated in violence brought on by the obvious and politicized desegregation movement, specifically in terms of housing and thus, education. Events of the 1960s illustrated the city’s persistent separation of Black people from the larger community. The CHA operated twenty-one new properties in the fifties and would acquire eight more by the end of the sixties. The construction of new projects and the conditions of existing projects were highly publicized and politicized. As the civil rights movement took roots in Chicago, Black citizens and groups continued to criticize the city through political and legal channels in the name of the desegregation doctrine set forth by *Brown v. Board* decision.

In 1963, the Chicago City Council, after a heated debate, passed its own legislation against racist practices. In the months preceding the adoption of the ordinance, the Chicago Real Estate Board claimed that the open housing ordinance was “destructive of personal property rights.”<sup>80</sup> Open housing was on the state and national legislative agenda as well. Governor Otto Kerner would pass this ordinance as a first step to eliminate discrimination.<sup>81</sup> However, in the post-World War II era, domestic policy took a back seat. In a piece titled “To Be Equal,” Whitney M. Young Jr., executive director of the National Urban League (NUL), charged

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<sup>80</sup> Austin C. Wehrwein, "Chicago Realtors Score Efforts to Ban Housing Discrimination: Board Says Two Proposed Ordinances Would Destroy Property Rights--Calm is Reported in Area of Racial Strife." *New York Times* (1923-), Aug 07, 1963. <http://cc1.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chicago-realtors-score-efforts-ban-housing/docview/116568089/se-2>.

<sup>81</sup> "September 11, 1963—Open Housing Ordinance Passes in City Council." *Connecting the Windy City*. September 11, 2017. <http://www.connectingthewindycity.com/2017/09/september-11-1963-open-housing.html>.

politicians with confining the discourse about public spending cuts to a dichotomy between “military preparedness or domestic programming.”<sup>82</sup> Young eloquently held the country’s economic prosperity in tension with the harsh conditions of life that Americans experienced. Furthermore, Young challenged the public to consider the economic and social conditions that the poor are subject to and the benefits of welfare:

There are those who are reluctant to accept the fact that in this period of unprecedented prosperity and employment: any self-respecting, conscientious, hard-working person would be unemployed and dependent. Finally, there are those who have themselves only reached comfortable incomes in this generation, who feed their own sense of adequacy - and, indeed, superiority- by suggesting that even temporary government support of the unemployables contributes to their dependency; or worse still being unemployable reflects some congenital moral flaw in the person so affected.<sup>83</sup>

The NUL joined several agencies at the local level, mostly Black community collectives, to disseminate the facts and history of policy that created the current tensions between the working class and those in need of welfare.

Housing became Chicago’s site for racial and economic policy. After 1964 surveys indicated the deterioration of the city’s residential plan, Mayor Richard J. Daley created a “Comprehensive Plan for Chicago.” The map identified areas that actionable policy can improve. The map, yet again, followed Chicago’s engrained color line, marking the Black Belt as areas for “major improvement and rehabilitation areas” (see Figure 5).<sup>84</sup> Once again, the city outlined its plan to renew blighted areas even though the CHA declared its first attack on slums in 1937.

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<sup>82</sup> Young, Whitney M., Jr. "To be Equal: Cutting Public Programs." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Jan 08, 1966. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/historical-newspapers/be-equal/docview/493097369/se-2>.

<sup>83</sup> Young, "To be Equal."

<sup>84</sup> Chicago Plan Commission; City of Chicago, Department of Development and Planning, "Comprehensive Plan for Chicago," Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archive, Brochure (p. 11), 1967, <https://www.artic.edu/archival-collections>.

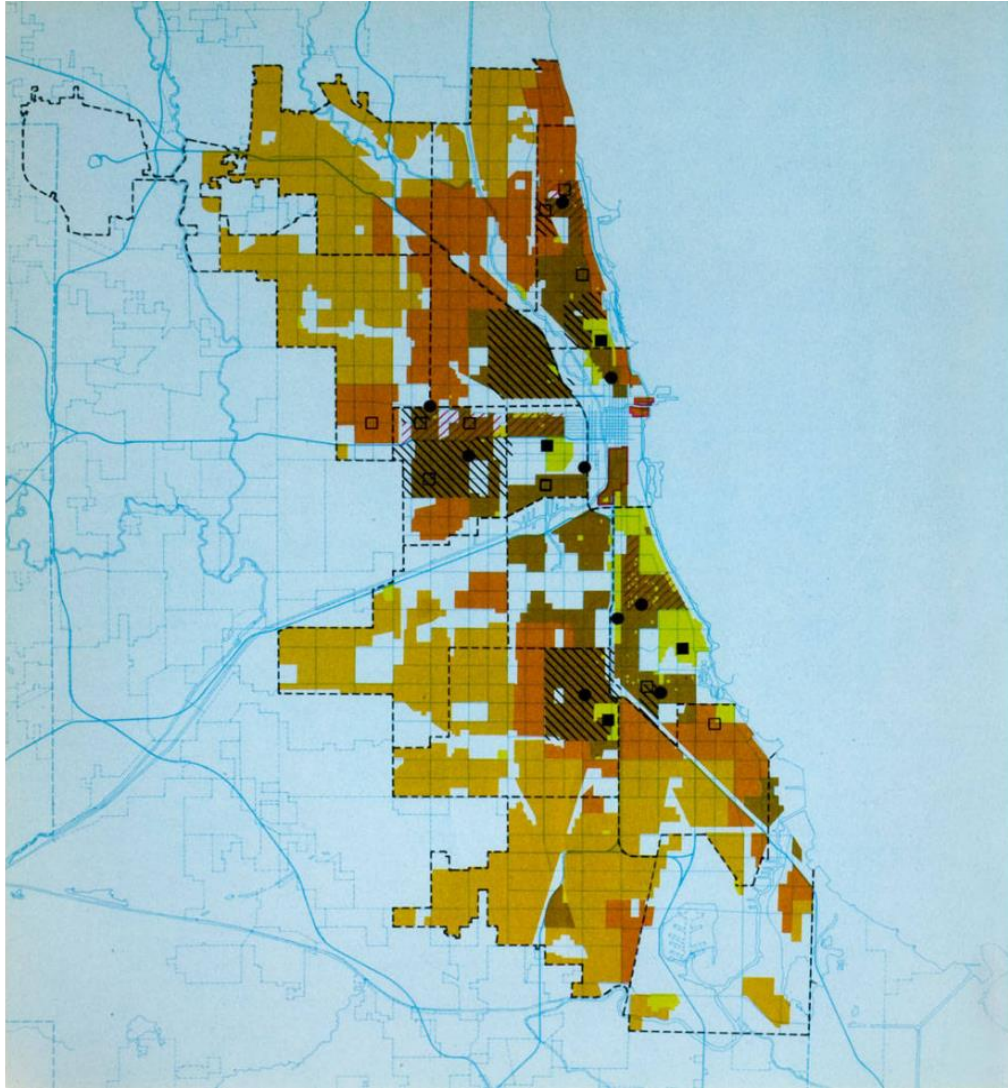


Figure 5. Major Areas for Improvement and Rehabilitation (Chicago Plan Commission; City of Chicago, Department of Development and Planning, "Comprehensive Plan for Chicago," Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archive, Brochure (p. 10), 1967, [https://www.artic.edu/archival-collections.](https://www.artic.edu/archival-collections))

In 1967, the Chicago Urban League accused the city of residential segregation. Harold Baron, director of research, criticized the city's systematic use of public housing to isolate Black

people and “maintain ghetto lines.”<sup>85</sup> Exclusion from white neighborhood associations and the failure of the CHA to battle them confined Black Chicagoans’ first to the slums and then to the public housing structures that replaced them. Baron described the making of the second ghetto in real time whereas scholar Arnold Hirsch studied it fifteen years later. The exclusion of Black Chicagoans from the suburbs also opposed the de-concentration of Black people. Not only did the FHA grant substantially more loans to mobile White families, but the government also constructed highways to ease the commutes from suburbia.<sup>86</sup> Baron acutely acknowledged the decision to clear slums and replace them with even more concentrated segregation as part of the campaign that became commonplace: urban renewal is Negro removal.<sup>87</sup>

Baron concluded his report with the powerlessness of Black tenants.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the hyper concentration of Blacks in poverty faced harsh realities about their sense of political and spatial limitations in the city. Baron suggested that, “[public housing tenants] become wards of the management authority rather than independent clients who are free to protest poor service or move out.”<sup>89</sup> This echoed the conditions that Weaver stated of Black people: “The modern American ghetto of today is a Black Belt from which the occupants can escape only if they move into another well-defined Negro community.”<sup>90</sup> The accusations of Taylor’s plan for integration certainly never came to fruition. Instead, the Black population became more isolated socially as

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<sup>85</sup> "Report Describes How 'Chicago Builds A Ghetto'." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Nov 11, 1967, <http://cc1.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/report-describes-how-chicago-builds-ghetto/docview/493321203/se-2>.

<sup>86</sup> "Report Describes How 'Chicago Builds A Ghetto'." *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>87</sup> "Report Describes How 'Chicago Builds A Ghetto'." *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>88</sup> "Report Describes How 'Chicago Builds A Ghetto,'" *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>89</sup> "Report Describes How 'Chicago Builds A Ghetto,'" *The Chicago Defender*.

<sup>90</sup> Weaver, 7.

well as spatially than ever from society. This led to a unique sense of collectivism among Chicago's poor Black communities during the peak of the Civil Rights movement.

After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a 24-hour long riot resulted in the destruction of 28 blocks of businesses and storefronts on Madison Street. The riots spread from the West Side slum to the South Side and near North Side area. The *New York Times* reported on arson, shootouts between police and snipers, and death counts. Hirsch described the direct connection between the power of collective Black actions, in this case protests, and their residential condition: "Merely a minor black enclave in 1919, by the time of Dr. King's assassination Chicago's West Side housed more than twice the number of blacks resident in the entire city during the earlier riot."<sup>91</sup> Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, head of the famous Kerner Commission to investigate urban race relations, observed the riots from a more diplomatic angle: "These are not race riots... They are rebelling against inclusion in and exclusion out. They are not against white people, they are against the establishment."<sup>92</sup> Kerner missed the direct historical connection between race and policy in forming the separation and resentment of Chicago's Black population. The establishment was rooted in racist practices, and when Black leaders at the CHA attempted to correct them early on, the City Council and alderman rejected their fair and progressive ideas.

The State of Illinois conducted its own analysis of Chicago's residential segregation. Under Governor Kerner, the Legislative Commission on Low Income Housing published its recommendation that the "State [acts as] a dynamic force in the solution of urban problems."<sup>93</sup> His first suggestion: construct more than half a million affordable housing units. To that end

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<sup>91</sup> Hirsch, 2.

<sup>92</sup> "Kerner Urges Open Housing: 'Only Way to Eliminate Ghettos,' He Says." *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1966-1973), Mar 16, 1968. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/historical-newspapers/kerner-urges-open-housing/docview/493441196/se-2>.

<sup>93</sup> "For Better Housing in Illinois" report by State of Illinois Legislative Commission on Low Income Housing, April 10, 1967, Springfield Illinois, Chicago History Museum, Abakanowicz Research Center, F37HJ.I43.

Kerner declared “open housing” as the next step for housing legislation. The Housing Act of 1968 ended the use of redlining and racial discrimination in renting or homeownership. The civil rights helped push housing forward as a right for all and as a recognized site of past injustices. However, half a century late, the first tenants of Chicago’s projects endured the ramifications of the earlier racial and economic prejudices of the earlier 1900s.

## ‘A Model for the Nation’

*“She’s right. I can’t fight, I never fought. I got beat up all the time. And then, I let people beat up my kids because I don’t fight for myself, and I don’t fight for my kids.”*

*–Lucicita Vides on her daughter’s opinion of her, March 2023<sup>94</sup>*

*“And it was hard for me. I was eighty-two years old when I moved. I didn’t want to give up my apartment...By then, I was on the eighth floor. Me and my youngest son, Kenny, we were the only ones still there, till he passed four years ago. But it was still my home and it held everything I owned since we were in 1117 Cleveland, including memories.*

*-Dolores Wilson on leaving Cabrini-Green, March 2011<sup>95</sup>*

When Ruby Haynes filed her first application in 1962 for a unit at Robert Taylor Homes, one of the high-rise projects, the CHA denied her. She was a single mother on welfare. She married immediately after learning their rationale, and the CHA approved her application.<sup>96</sup> Selecting tenants based on specific criteria began as a measure to ensure public housing served those of modest means. In 1950, the nation’s public housing residents averaged sixty percent of the median income.<sup>97</sup> Clearly, the CHA aimed to maintain nuclear and traditional households by denying single mothers. However, the Civil Rights Movement pushed housing rights for Black Americans. With the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, tenant eligibility and screening practices became a site to enforce nondiscrimination. Localities, like the CHA, needed to meet and practice the principal mission of racial equality.

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<sup>94</sup> Forte, Camille, and Lucicita Vides. Living in Chicago’s Public Housing. Personal, March 23, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Petty, Audrey, ed. High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing. Voice of Witness. San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2013, 39-40.

<sup>96</sup> Nicholas Lemann. "For One Family, Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, Once Considered the Ideal for Public Housing, has been a Model of Crime, Drugs and Unkept Promises." *New York Times* (1923-), Jan 13, 1991. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/historical-newspapers/one-family-chicagos-robert-taylor-homes-once/docview/108653512/se-2>.

<sup>97</sup> Vale, Lawrence J. *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities*. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 16.

The CHA originally promised to rehouse residents from cleared slums in its large projects. Slum clearance occurred primarily in the Black Belt. According to the 1950 screening criteria, 60 to 90 percent of slum dwellers were ineligible to occupy public housing.<sup>98</sup> The city faced national and existing pressures to house a surplus of the neediest of people, who were primarily Black. Scholar Lawrence Vale labeled it a “fight” between upholding standards of the current public housing demographics and embracing “civic duty” to those in need. Obligation to the poorest of the poor became the welfare mission of public housing.<sup>99</sup> Nationwide, tenants experienced the changes of their environment as rents and eligibility changed, affecting the demographics of the projects.

After 1960, women became the largest group of heads-of-households in Chicago’s public housing. Specifically, single mothers were prevalent, a demographic with the most urgent need for stable and affordable shelter. After the CHA stopped enforcing strict eligibility requirements, like proof of marriage, working class mothers, who found abuses in their lives, came to public housing for modern and fully equipped homes for their children.

Mothers viewed their relationship to “home” in the projects in many ways. In their daily efforts to create a home, they are a voice that can best articulate the worries of Chicago’s public housing tenants. To discuss the processes by which women became central to the community and the discourse of the conditions of households, there are two voices to present. First, Lucicita Vides shared her experience living through the changes of both Lathrop Homes and Cabrini Green. Her abusive and disruptive relationship with family shaped the trajectory of her life as early as five years old. During the same years, Dolores Wilson began serving Cabrini-Green as a

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<sup>98</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 16.

<sup>99</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 17.



pillar of the community for more than twenty years. She and her family dedicated themselves to social programming despite the absence of resources. The differences between these two voices are not to create nuance between the binary of unemployed and employed or even single or married or women as strong and weak but to illustrate the absence of any binaries within the communities of the projects.

## Esabelia's Mother

When my abuela married for the first time at 18, she changed her last name for the second time.<sup>100</sup> She became Lucicita Darlene *Vides*. Growing up, everyone called her Lucy. She was born on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1949, as Lucy Nolano. Her earliest memories of home began in the basement of her paternal grandmother's two-story apartment building. There, she lived with her mother and father. Her grandmother rented out the second-floor unit and lived on the first floor.

Lucy vividly remembered the racial and gender dynamics of her household. Her grandmother, a "full-blooded" Blackfoot woman, verbally lamented her son's relationship with Lucy's mother, a Puerto Rican woman.<sup>101,102</sup> Every day, Lucy's grandmother's racial insults brought her mother to tears. In addition, she reprimanded Lucy's mother's inaction towards her husband's infidelity. He left for days at a time. With her father absent and her mother depressed, Lucy felt no protection from her grandmother. She recalled the physical abuse that she and her brothers endured because they were Puerto Rican.

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<sup>100</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>101</sup> The Blackfeet Nation is recognized in Montana and Canada. According to records, they were believed to be forced from the Upper Great Lakes region to the west due to white advancement. See Rick and Susie Graetz in <https://www.umt.edu/this-is-montana/columns/stories/blackfeet.php>.

<sup>102</sup> Vides, interview.

School provided refuge from home, at least in the beginning. At Edward Hartigan Elementary, Lucy remembered her first-grade love. Malroy was white and had blue eyes. They shared their first kiss on the cheek. Before fourth grade, Malroy moved away. Lucy could not recall where, but she never saw her friend again. Then, she met Ramon. Ramon, a Hispanic boy, became her second boyfriend. They were both nine, and they played at recess together. He also moved away, and Lucy noticed Hartigan become nearly entirely “Afro-American.”<sup>103</sup>

Lucy felt isolated in school as class became as disruptive as home. Students talked back to teachers and threw spitballs at other students, including her. In one gym class, classmates exhausted Lucy’s tolerance. Another eighth-grade girl hit Lucy on the head with a pipe. She collapsed on the floor. “That was the moment I understood the world was cruel and evil,” and she resolved to isolate herself. With bullying at school and chaos at home, Lucy’s grades plummeted.

In the hope of peace, Lucy’s mother desperately looked to relocate their family. When Lucy’s father lost his janitorial job at a hospital, her grandmother held rent over their heads. “You shouldna been with him. If he’s doing this to you, you should leave. Get out,” Lucy’s grandmother said.<sup>104</sup> Lucy’s mom sought help at the welfare office. There, a case worker told Lucy’s mother they would return with housing options. Lucy remembered the day Jack, the “Jewish man with a book,” came from the office to their house.<sup>105</sup> Jack arrived and told her mother, “We just built new buildings on Halsted and Division.”<sup>106</sup> Lucy remembered the tall white buildings on walks. When Jack offered, “\$26 a month for seven rooms,” Lucy’s mother

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<sup>103</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>104</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>105</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>106</sup> Vides, interview.

asked if there was running hot water.<sup>107</sup> There was no running hot water in her grandmother's entire building. Upon hearing that the apartment had running hot water, Lucy's mother agreed.

Lucy and her parents moved into 1230 N. Burling in 1960. When Lucy entered Apartment 103, she looked to her mother, "Is there any rats here? Any roaches?"<sup>108</sup> Her mother laughed and said no. Soon after they moved in, the CHA built 714, 660, 625, which were "all those white projects."<sup>109</sup> A couple years later, Lucy's fourth cousin moved from New York after receiving letters from her mother. They moved into Apartment 101. Again, as the years passed, Lucy's friends left her community. After 1966, there were no Hispanics or whites. Charlotte and Frances, her white friends, moved from 714. Lucy associated the move in of Black people with the "turn to hell."

Once again, her home life reflected her time in school. At Edwin Gilbert Cooley Vocational School, which primarily served students from Cabrini-Green, Lucy endured racially targeted bullying. Lucy hated it. Black students followed her, threw rocks, and yelled "Black Puerto Rican" at her on the way to school. She asked her teachers to let her out fifteen minutes earlier than dismissal to avoid bullies. Lucy learned to travel without lunch money. Lucy kept to herself throughout the early years of high school until her brother introduced her to Benny.

Benny, her brother's friend, migrated from Mexico to San Antonio, Texas, to Chicago. Benny proposed when she was only seventeen. Her mother insisted on delaying the marriage and finishing school. Lucy admitted she chose wrong, but at the time she thought marriage was the choice above, "learning nothing and getting beat up every day."<sup>110</sup> In 1967, she dropped out of

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<sup>107</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>108</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>110</sup> Vides, interview.

the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. After one year of marriage, Benny filed for divorce. Lucy continued to live in their \$125 a month apartment. Unfortunately, a robbery forced her to move back into her parents' Cabrini-Green apartment. The conditions of Cabrini-Green worsened. Her parents, now elderly, feared racial discrimination by black residents, and her two brothers suffered beatings. Even in the “whites,” her family felt unsafe. Lucy could not live in the “jungle” again.

She worked at a restaurant downtown to save money. There, she met Armando, an immigrant from San Salvador, El Salvador. At the age of 20, Lucy found herself in another relationship. When Lucy felt too sick to execute her responsibilities at work, she did not know pregnancy was the cause. At the age of 21, Lucy did not understand how she got pregnant. After she told Armando in April of 1971, he seemed to lose interest. “I don’t care. Go to welfare or kill it,” he suggested.<sup>111</sup> He left her, claiming his family in El Salvador was always his only priority. On her birthday, November 29<sup>th</sup> in 1972, Lucy gave birth to her first daughter, Esabelia. The hospital promised to arrange for Armando to appear at paternity court to pay child support. Lucy never heard anything after she left the hospital.

Alone with “Esa,” Lucy moved to another CHA project. She had seen Lathrop Homes from across the bridge before. It was “a good neighborhood,” and she attributed that to the absence of Black people. She felt comfortable living alone with Esa. “I shoulda stayed that way,” she admitted in retrospect.<sup>112</sup> Two years later, Lucy decided to visit Armando with Esa. Upon her arrival to the old apartment, she found Osca Vides living in the apartment. Osca, a childhood friend of Armando, said he moved to California with his newborn daughter and wife. Osca

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<sup>111</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>112</sup> Vides, interview.

insisted on taking Lucy's number to update her. In her account of events, Lucy prepared to explain the worst moments of her time as a mother.



Figure 6. Aerial Sketch of Lathrop Homes, c. 1930s (Hedrich-Blessing, "Plans for Julia Lathrop Homes (formerly Diversey Housing Project), c.1930s," scan of architectural rendering on paper, Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2005.)

Lucy invited Osca to her home a couple of weeks later. She did not recognize blatant issues with his demeanor until a particular night. When Lucy asked to go on a stroll around the pleasant neighborhood, Osca insulted Americans, dispelling his homophobic and sexist views of men and women alike. He further demanded that they all return to their rooms to sleep. When Lucy said no, mostly in disbelief of his comments, Osca punched his fist into the side of her head. She fell back and ran up the stairs with Esa. Lucy, confused and alone, fell victim to Osca's apologies and charisma. By September, she became pregnant with her his child. To keep

Lucy with him, he mocked, “Oh, you wanna have another child with no father?”<sup>113</sup> She hardly remembered those “dizzy times.”<sup>114</sup> Lucy’s lowest point was on the horizon.

Osca abused Lucy and her children. One time, Lucy found baby Nino, born in 1974, crying in the crib with a bump on his head and formula spilled on him. Osca denied anything. Esa came crying to her some days, and the three-year-olds’ tears muttered her words. Oscar told Lucy to return to the kitchen. Osca went as far as to beat Lucy into finishing his citizenship papers. Lucy paused and shared, “I guess when you’re being abused or you’re being frightened, you don’t say nothing. You don’t know to say nothing.”<sup>115</sup> Osca took advantage of Lucy and her children. Lucy knew this but could not bring herself to be independent.

Osca coerced Lucy to allow him to live with her for ten years. Six children later, Lucy forced Osca to leave her family. She returned to work at Pizza Hut to support her children. Lucy tried to make right by offering help to her children whenever she could to make up for the life she gave them. She regretted nothing more. Lucy’s story of suffering and insecurity illustrated the extreme consequences of individual isolation that women faced as environmental stability disappeared. Lucy’s observations of residential patterns reflected the large-scale consolidation of Chicago’s poorest in high-rise projects like Cabrini. Lucy did not remember her time in the projects fondly, mostly in part to her failure to her children.

## “The Reds” and “The Whites”

Just as Lucy observed, the demographics of her neighborhood, her schools, and the projects changed. More Black people moved into the projects, and the CHA delayed choosing to

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<sup>113</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>114</sup> Vides, interview.

<sup>115</sup> Vides, interview.

house Chicago's poorest or retain their "standards" for tenants.<sup>116</sup> Thus, two significant realities contributed to the decline of residents' quality of living: the out-migration of white working-class residents and the dedication to serving the "most economically desperate urban dwellers."<sup>117</sup> The CHA admitted the presence of welfare-dependent and broken families, of which Lucy certainly self-identified.<sup>118</sup> Residents and scholars constituted the immediate critics of the consolidation of Blacks into the projects, specifically in high-rise expansions.

The CHA claimed favor for low-rise developments, but federal budget and density requirements forced the city to erect high-rises. Lucy called her family's building, part of the Cabrini Extension, "the whites." This contrasted the William Green Homes, which became "the reds." The Green Homes expansion in 1962 demarcated the final boundaries of Cabrini-Green.<sup>119</sup> The CHA did not favor high-rise constructions. According to the CHA's 1949 report, "the high-rise buildings, permitting a high-enough density to keep this cost per family down, at the same time allow the most open space."<sup>120</sup> After constructing projects for a decade, the CHA's convictions did not change. Their 1957 report reiterated the "best home for a family with children is the two-story rowhouse unit...cost limitations, however, have made this...virtually impossible in recent years."<sup>121</sup> Mathew Thall's unpublished study of Public Housing Agency (PHA) per-unit costs found that high-rise construction costs actually exceeded low-rise construction costs.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, low-rise projects satisfied the density requirements more

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<sup>116</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 18.

<sup>117</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 18.

<sup>119</sup> Amanda Seligman, "Cabrini-Green," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, Chicago Historical Society, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/199.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 218.

<sup>121</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 219.

<sup>122</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 220.

often than high-rise buildings. Scholar Lawrence Vale determined that the CHA's decision to abandon low-rise projects was a consequence of local politics rather than federal mandates or desires.

With the PHA and the CHA at odds, Cabrini-Green and subsequent high-rises filled the city. The unwillingness of the city to use its urban renewal grants to subsidize project construction discouraged the PHA from funding the slum clearance required for proposed developments. Thus, the CHA followed through with the dense, "cost-efficient" high rises. CHA executive director, Alvin Rose, echoed the words of his predecessor Robert Taylor, "we are not doing our job if we continue to pile families one upon the other by building only high-rise buildings."<sup>123</sup> Lucy's family "piled" into Cabrini, and they enjoyed it at first. Perhaps, no one understood the magnitude of disruption that would befall Chicago's Black population in the coming years.

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<sup>123</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 222.





Figure 7. Cabrini-Green High-rises (Betty Hulett, "Cabrini High-Rises, 1959," Chicago Historical Society (ICHi-23200), Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3648.html>).

## Michael's Mother

Dolores and Hubert Wilson moved into Cabrini-Green in 1958.<sup>124</sup> Before then, they lived in a South Side neighborhood, a couple miles west of the lake. They paid real estate offices to find them places to live. Brokers charged them ten dollars each time, only to move into "fire traps."<sup>125</sup> Fire claimed the lives of children; five died in one the subsequent year.<sup>126</sup> The

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<sup>124</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 31.

<sup>125</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 31.

<sup>126</sup> Berry, Edwin C. "The People Speak: Tragic Slum Fires." *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, Jun 25, 1959. <http://cc1.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/people-speak/docview/493777503/se-2>.

tenements in the slums, often made from wood, lacked basic plumbing, electricity, and space for families. Dolores' family lived in the basement of a three-story building. With no windows, their apartment was damp, dark, and cold.

Dolores quickly made her apartment on Cabrini's fourteenth floor her home. "The cars looked like little toys," she remembered fondly. Once neighborhoods moved in, Dolores worried about disruptions to her sense of home. She happily found her Puerto Rican neighbors, the Montanes, to be accepting and generous. They took her child Michael to church with them. Her next-door neighbor, Queenie, had become her best friend.

After ten years, Hubert became the assistant head custodian of a different building in Cabrini-Green. Dolores and family moved from 1117 N. Cleveland to 1230 N. Burling. Like her first apartment, Dolores recalled her new place as a "castle."<sup>127</sup> The CHA promoted Hubert to head janitor, and the building loved him. Together, Dolores and Hubert worked for the city, and they invested in a sense of community. Hubert started a drum and bugle corps with the children, and teenagers helped him clean litter on the grounds. Children and families used the black top, local church and gym.

Dolores noticed a distinct turning point for the community, though. Like Lucy, Dolores pointed to the year 1968. The riots of that year leveled neighborhoods with fires and looting. She watched as people from the affected areas moved into her building. She observed the new presence of graffiti and gang symbolism on the walls.<sup>128</sup> The snipers were the worst part. They killed two police officers in 1970. Despite this, Hubert and Dolores sustained their social programming. The bugle corps, basketball team, and baseball team won many awards and

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<sup>127</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 33.

<sup>128</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 34.

participated in parades. When Hubert passed away in 1981, it was difficult to continue programming.

Dolores stepped into the role of Building Council president after her husband's death. Dolores' success with the building's community stemmed from her resident management course in the late eighties. There, Dolores and other residents created a functioning governance structure with self-initiated roles like work order clerk, janitors, secretary, treasurer, and more.<sup>129</sup> Residents collected rent from each other and advocated for building rehabilitation. Dolores served as president from 1983 to 1993. In 1992, the "first" President Bush and his HUD secretary, Jack Kemp, applauded the residents by incorporating their building. Bush labeled them "a model for the nation."<sup>130</sup> The Building Council's work began on the ground. Residents attended their town hall meetings, waiting to give their suggestions. The youth regularly attended the meetings, and they exercised the values of the council. For instance, children embraced the responsibility of "elevator monitor."<sup>131</sup> Dolores understood the dedication of her neighbors and community, something that outsiders lost.

Dolores remembered the grave misunderstanding of life at Cabrini. She had tried her best to cultivate a safe living, and yet "extreme ideas" about Cabrini interrupted her daily life. Her co-workers asked her about last night's shooting in Cabrini. Dolores stressed the absence of addresses from reporters. The Cabrini-Green spanned two and a half square miles. She insisted Cabrini felt safe despite increased violence.

The recollection of Dolores would be incomplete without demonstrating residents' inescapable closeness to loss and death. For forty-three years, Dolores and her family attended

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<sup>129</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 36.

<sup>130</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 36.

<sup>131</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 37.

the Holy Family Lutheran Church. Her son Michael, the one that begged to go to church with Montanes when he was younger, went too. On August 5, 1991, a sniper shot Michael from one of the nearby buildings. He died immediately. When she told the detectives the rumored culprit, they told her, “Well, it’s just hearsay, we don’t know, we don’t know.”<sup>132</sup> When Dolores instructed them to go inside the building, the police refused. “They don’t even care. That’s what bothers me,” she concluded.<sup>133</sup> The newspapers generalized the issues plaguing the residents and the cops did not address them in real time. The hesitancy for outsiders to investigate life in the projects created inaction and misdirection. The residents could not trust them to represent or protect themselves.

## A Sense of Community

Dolores and Lucy were both active makers of homeplace, whether they personally felt engaged in their community or not. They weathered the economic, gender, and political of the projects independently for years at a time. In addition, they raised the children in the second generation of Chicago’s “projects.” Their lives framed their children’s perception of home. Their children, Esa and Michael, knew home as Lathrop and Cabrini-Green, respectively. Their stories became part of the larger development the process by which these places became home and then disappeared from the material world.

Each project engendered this sense of attachment to the place and the people. In 1978 field survey, pedestrians helped the City of Chicago demarcate neighborhood boundaries. Individuals identified all 35 CHA housing projects as their own neighborhoods.<sup>134</sup> However, the

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<sup>132</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 38.

<sup>133</sup> Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 38.

<sup>134</sup> "Chicago Neighborhoods," City of Chicago, 2006, [https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/doit/general/GIS/Chicago\\_Maps/Citywide\\_Maps/City\\_Neighborhoods\\_1978\\_11x17.pdf](https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/doit/general/GIS/Chicago_Maps/Citywide_Maps/City_Neighborhoods_1978_11x17.pdf).

attachment of community became complicated with violence, drugs, and gangs. Popular beliefs became rooted more in the personal defects of residents instead of the long-term processes of economic isolation and social abandonment that they endured.

Residents like Lucy and Dolores provided an inside account of the problems that affected them. The two women experienced the projects differently. Thus, the “insider” answers the questions by outsiders complicated responses and perceptions of everyday people in the projects. The greatest similarity between Dolores and Lucy was their desire for their children to experience better. Their children, had they all lived, are approaching their early fifties today. The condition of their children still affected Chicago today, but at one point, their teenage years never escaped the focus of the world.

## ‘It’s A Community Thing’

*“You are not just foot soldiers in the Black Kings... You are foot soldiers in the community.”*

-Ex-gangster Lenny Duster to Black Kings’ teens, 1990<sup>135</sup>

In July 1966, Chicago’s temperature soared above one hundred degrees for four days straight.<sup>136</sup> Chicagoans in the west side slums found the heat unbearable. Many tenements lacked running water for bathing and windows for ventilation. For refreshment, community members opened several fire hydrants.<sup>137</sup> Children played in the pools of water. After only a few hours, the violence that ensued surprised the nation. For three nights, looting and arson terrorized the west side, specifically the black communities that made up a seven-mile large slum area.<sup>138</sup> Police clashed with identifiable gang members, resulting in the deaths of two Black men and police officers with gunshot wounds. Such violence and destruction commanded the national guard to halt the devastation.<sup>139</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. arrived to engage the leaders of the three “youth gangs” involved. King held a meeting with 15 leaders of the Cobras, Vice Lords, and Roman Saints. They conferred in King’s apartment for nearly five hours after three tumultuous nights. Aged 20 to 30, the gang leaders expressed deep grievances with Mayor Richard J. Daley’s “oppressive” treatment towards Black communities. The young men, many whose parents migrated from the

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<sup>135</sup> Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets*. New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2008, 77.

<sup>136</sup> "Chicago Weather in 1966," Extreme Weather Watch, accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.extremeweatherwatch.com/cities/chicago/year-1966>.

<sup>137</sup> Donald Janson. "Chicago Calmer As Gangs Agree to End Violence." *New York Times (1923-)*, Jul 17, 1966. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/historical-newspapers/chicago-calmer-as-gangs-agree-end-violence/docview/116908122/se-2>.

<sup>138</sup> Janson, "Chicago Calmer."

<sup>139</sup> Janson, "Chicago Calmer."

South, articulated their discontent to King. Reverend Andrew J. Young, executive director of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), relayed the content and progress of the meeting to news sources.

The gang members shared their wide concerns about economic security and political empowerment. At a time when Black unemployment registered at 25 percent, the men stressed a "desperate need for jobs."<sup>140</sup> Without stable incomes, they had no access to financial institutions. They did not want Black people to be pawns, relying on patronage to the Daley political machine. In addition, "police intimidation and harassment" towards Black Chicagoans was excessive. It came down to "the whole question of self-respect and dignity."<sup>141</sup> The men agreed to exercise nonviolence practices in the coming weeks as long as Daley committed to his promises to King. Daley conceded to "seek" funds for local swimming pools and a committee to "investigate police tactics." Both of which allocated no resources to solve the communities' basic needs: inadequate housing and the concentration of a specific racial group in poverty.

In this sequence of events, gangs demonstrated their power as a social group capable of political engagement and violence. These characteristics of gangs would not disappear. However, the degree to which gangs came to represent violence and the destruction of childhood were inextricably tied to Chicago's projects, historically the densest concentration of poor and disenfranchised Black people. The development of gangs became the central focus of researchers and journalists in the later eighties when violent deaths and drugs, like heroin and crack cocaine, ran rampant. This chapter will analyze the role of gangs over time to reflect their correlation with

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<sup>140</sup> Janson, "Chicago Calmer."

<sup>141</sup> Janson, "Chicago Calmer."

the project's further entrenchment into poverty and isolation. Alongside news coverage, sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh famously investigated the gangs of Taylor Homes to piece together the effects and causes of poor Black people, which, of course, belonged to the projects. His work in *American Project* and *Gang Leader for a Day* provided dimension to the lives and stories of gang members and their communities. These works added to the mainstream discourse of black ghettos within public housing's long history of perpetuating segregation of Black Americans. This conclusion could not be more obvious from the question that began Venkatesh's research in 1989: "How does it feel to be black and poor?"<sup>142</sup>

## Gang Leader for A Day

In 1989, Venkatesh began his involvement with the Black Kings (BKs) in Robert Taylor Homes. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, Venkatesh enlisted to understand the condition of young Black poor men for better social policy. His quest to interact with those men of the projects turned into an expose on the life of a gang member. For Venkatesh to present an accurate picture of their lives, he decided to join the BKs at least for a little while. He published the culmination of his involvement with the BKs as *Gang Leader for a Day* (2000). Regarded as one of the best attempts to capture "another day in the ghetto," Venkatesh's best depiction could amount to nothing beyond the perspective of an outsider looking in.<sup>143</sup>

Venkatesh did not aim to report findings on gang members. However, when he wandered into Lake Park Projects, searching for young men to answer his guiding question, "how does it feel to be Black and poor," the reality of young men in the projects became clear. His

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<sup>142</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, xiv.



questionnaire had several options: very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, very good. When Venkatesh asked the first group of men, who approached him with suspicion, a man responded laughing, “You got to be f— kidding me.”<sup>144</sup> Venkatesh tried to explain his purpose in approaching the men, but these gang members had no patience for this intrusion. They waited for their leader, J.T. Upon grabbing Venkatesh’s clipboard, J.T. stated, “I’m not *black*.” “Well, then, how does it feel to be *African American* and poor?” J.T. clarified, “I’m not African American either. I’m a n—r.” He explained, “N—r are the ones who live in this building...*African Americans* live in the suburbs African Americans wear ties to work. N—rs can’t find no work.”<sup>145</sup> J.T. seemed disappointed with the survey, but not at surveyor, Venkatesh noted. J.T. warned more than suggested, “With people like us, you should hang out, get to know what they do, how they do it. No one is going to answer questions like that. You need to understand how young people live on the streets.”<sup>146</sup> The men had their own identity, one shared among their group, where witnessing would be the only form of understanding. With that, Venkatesh returned to Lake Park to find out.

J.T. looked at Venkatesh’s survey again. He took an early interest in Venkatesh, curious as to what he wanted to find. He suggested the projects are dangerous to the unfamiliar. J.T. once again interrogated the methodology of surveyors, asking what other neighborhoods would be visited and why talking to people was not preferable. After sharing the current interests of the sociology field, J.T. said the last thing Venkatesh expected: “I had a few sociology classes...in college. Hated that s—.”<sup>147</sup> J.T. graduated from college after receiving an athletic scholarship.

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<sup>144</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 14.

<sup>145</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 15.

<sup>146</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 21.

<sup>147</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 19.

He came from the south side neighborhood around Lake Park projects. He loved studying history and politics, and he worked for a mid-sized corporation downtown in sales. The promotion of his less skilled white peers discouraged him. After two years, he returned to the projects to join gang life. Most gang members were not like J.T. Most people in the projects were not like J.T. They did not have any credentials that gave them access to the formal economy. Yet, J.T. found the explicit racial prejudices of the formal economy less than desirable.

J.T. wondered what sociologists thought about gangs and inner-city poverty. Venkatesh explained some sociologists believed in a “culture of poverty” in which poor Black people did not work because they did not value employment as much as other ethnic groups.<sup>148</sup> Like many other theories, this culture undeniably passed from generation to generation. J.T. pointed, “So you want me to take pride in the job, and you’re only paying me minimum wage? It don’t sound like you think much about the job yourself?”<sup>149</sup> J.T.’s counterargument coincided with the critiques of many sociologists. He understood the harsh reality of the world, both as an insider and an outsider. In the ghetto, J.T. controlled his own life.

Venkatesh’s exchanges with J.T. and acquaintances enlightened his conception of the young men in gangs. For instance, the first men Venkatesh encountered charged him, interrogating his affiliation. They assumed Venkatesh belonged to one of their rival Mexican gangs. Although by the men’s use of “speaking” Mexican, they may have been referencing gangs of other Hispanic identities. To Venkatesh’s surprise, some black and Mexican gangs had alliances whereas some were rivals. Venkatesh learned more as he sat through their

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<sup>148</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 28.

<sup>149</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 28.

conversations. He recalled their “sexual conquests, the best way to smoke a marijuana cigarette, school teaches they’d like to have sex with, the rising cost of clothing,” but most intriguing to Venkatesh, “where they would go when their high-rise building was torn down.”<sup>150</sup> According to the University of Chicago’s records, the city did not plan to eliminate Lake Park Homes as a public housing project. The men were right. The CHA planned to build townhouses and complexes in its place.

Venkatesh expected the men’s conversations to include “sex, power, and money,” but the gang clearly possessed accurate and valuable information about life in the projects. With their power, they considered themselves a force for good in the face of Lake Park’s privatization. For the squatters who had nowhere else to go, the gang pirated electricity for them. J.T. said the gang joined the other residents in protest of the demolition.<sup>151</sup> And, of course, the gang had an interest in keeping their hideout and selling location intact. If the city demolished the building, they would have to fight to gain control of a new territory. By this point, the gang became the manager and the tenant of the building, containing the cycle of gang membership within the project.

J.T. and his followers at Lake Park were one of many groups belonging to the BK. Soon enough, J.T. brought Venkatesh to the BKs’ setup at Robert Taylor Homes. Ten times bigger than Lake Park with twenty-eight high-rises packed within the two mile “State Street” corridor. Built in 1962, Robert Taylor housed 27,000 people in its sixteen story buildings. J.T., calculated as always, indicated the seriousness of their position in Robert Taylor. “You open your mouth

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<sup>150</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 17.

<sup>151</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 19.

today, and that's it—we're through. Okay?"<sup>152</sup> For the first time since the day he met J.T., Venkatesh remembered exactly what he was doing: "tagging along with the leader of a major crack-selling gang."<sup>153</sup> Like everyone, Venkatesh heard of Robert Taylor, and J.T.'s warning only heightened the anticipation.

When they arrived, the community welcomed J.T. Children and tenant patrol came up to greet him with hugs. Tenants gathered outside, playing music and smoking. Compared to the nearly abandoned Lake Park Homes, Robert Taylor seemed to contain far more life than what papers suggested. "Congo Hilton," "Hellhole," and "Fatherless World" stood out among the headlines, but to J.T. it was home. He grew up there, and everyone wanted him to return even if he was a part of the BKs.

The community's affection for its gang members puzzled Venkatesh. Even Ms. Mae, J.T.'s mother, expressed her sadness for young mothers and the "tragedy" of youth violence.<sup>154</sup> When J.T. invited Venkatesh to a post-tournament party for the BKs, Venkatesh asked why the community would attend the party. "It's a community thing," he said.<sup>155</sup> The BKs paid for the entire party, catering food, music, and drinks. Some of the tenants played even if they were not a part of the gang. Several hundred people filled up the courtyard between the buildings. Even the leaders of the other gangs offered their congratulations. Simultaneously, pride and patronage shaped the relationship between tenants and the gangs.

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<sup>152</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 30.

<sup>153</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 30

<sup>154</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 40.

<sup>155</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 41.

Over time, Venkatesh understood the full extent of the politics of Robert Taylor. The bureaucratic nature of the CHA created a resource vacuum for gangs to fill, and they could do it cheaper and faster. Gangs included everyone in their economy that was Robert Taylor. The tenants demanded services and protections that only the gang could supply, and in return, the gang could profit from providing the smallest of services. Gangs constructed levels of trust between them and the tenants, something the CHA failed to do, which was demonstrative by their participation in gang operations.

J.T. and the BKs rented out vacant apartments to squatters and the homeless. They charged daily rates and screened squatters who wished for extended stays. Of course, a delegate managed this system. C-Note, a twenty-year resident, took a small percentage of the daily profits for his role in maintaining order among the boarders.<sup>156</sup> Venkatesh and J.T. came through an apartment on the sixteenth floor. Its pungent smell of vomit, urine, and burned crack filled the dark room. On the floor were several mattresses, some empty and some not. “This is where the squatters keep their food,” J.T. said of the padlocked refrigerators in the corner.<sup>157</sup> Instead of CHA employees sending the fridges to repair, they sold them to the gangs. The BKs allowed the homeless to congregate in their stairwells too so long as they obeyed the gang’s orders. On their tour through a stairwell, Venkatesh saw J.T. address everyone. Business ran smoothly, and J.T. appreciated the business of the CHA.

J.T. relied on the Tenant Patrol for business too. They assisted the elderly and the homeless. The gang allowed squatters and the homeless to congregate in the stairwells.<sup>158</sup> If there

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<sup>156</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 50.

<sup>157</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 50.

<sup>158</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 48.

were issues, Tenant Patrol contacted J.T. to reduce the presence of law enforcement. Ms. Easley, one of the twelve patrollers, found a man in his vomit by the incinerator. For Easley's help and compliance, J.T. gave her money for the after-school program she ran. He called it a "give-and-take" that kept the peace.<sup>159</sup> Easley used J.T. for protection although gangs were not her first choice for safety. She, like everyone else, accepted her role in benefiting from this way of life.

Gangs effectively replaced the functional and formal organization that the CHA failed to provide. However, both the gangs and the CHA protected individuals to the extent that they provided valuable patronage. This left vulnerable teenagers at the mercy of the gang's and the CHA's rules. Venkatesh observed how both remained bound by the circumstances of Robert Taylor.

Teenagers played an important role in the gang. "Shorties" escorted Venkatesh everywhere and ran errands, working their way into the favor and respect of older members. Shorties emulated the behavior and lifestyle of their leaders without knowing much of anything about them. They were key to the occupation and expansion of territory, often being at the "front lines" of gun battles. Leaders like J.T. and even those above him, like lieutenants, captains, and certainly the "Board of Directors," never carried substantial amounts of cash, drugs, or weapons. The shorties prepared to do the dirty work, they were expendable and yet the success of the gang depended on their allegiance. J.T. observed the dangerous behavior of the youth: "They mostly just beat the s— out of each other in high school or at parties."<sup>160</sup> J.T. experienced a life outside

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<sup>159</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 49.

<sup>160</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 42.

of the projects and the gang. For many of his young followers, he only ever showed them how to live in the gang.

J.T.'s motivation with the teenagers became clearer after the year. He needed them to expand his power and enforce the gang's authority, not only in Robert Taylor but in the surrounding communities. J.T. made the shorties participate in life-skills workshops to learn manners and how to vote. J.T. knew that a better image meant less local interference with his business. If business grew large enough, J.T. envisioned his gang returning to the "glory days of the 1960s" when gangs worked with the community to advocate for change.<sup>161</sup> This was a different time, though. J.T. allowed and trained his gang to injure, harass, and extort locals. The gang prioritized the wealth and power of the gang, not the community. J.T.'s understanding of "bettering" the community directly conflicted with that of his mother's values.

## J.T.'s Mother

Ms. Mae sat down with Venkatesh to share the story of her life, and thus, the beginning of J.T.'s.

Ms. Mae embodied the sureness of a mother as she proudly spoke of her humble beginnings in Arkansas:

Mother said there was no life for me down there no more. She said, 'Go see your auntie in Chicago, get yourself a man and a job, and don't turn around.' And I didn't. I raised six children in Chicago. Never looked back.<sup>162</sup>

Again, like most women, Ms. Mae came here during the Great Depression in search for a better living than being a sharecropper in the South. Ms. Mae kept her kitchen clear. In her late fifties,

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<sup>161</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 75

<sup>162</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 43.

she always wore an apron and fixed her guests a plate. She pushed J.T. to go to college. She valued the dedication of her son to finish his studies, but she never commented on his role in the gang. Ms. Mae seemed to have accepted the role of her son and those of other sons based on her conceptions of community.

Ms. Mae despised the mischaracterizations of her community. She worked, she raised her children as a widow, and she established relations with her neighbors. When Venkatesh offered to pay her back for his dinner, she said, “don’t pity us, don’t pardon us, and don’t hold us to a lower standard than you hold yourself up to.”<sup>163</sup> Ms. Mae demonstrated the gratitude but also self-sufficiency that Black woman wanted and needed to embody. With pride and care, Ms. Mae made clear to Venkatesh:

We live in a *community*, understand? Not the *projects*—I hate that word. We live in a *community*. We need a helping hand now and then, but who doesn’t?...My son says you’re writing about his life—well, you may want to write about this community, and how we help each other.”<sup>164</sup>

Ms. Mae felt the power of homeplace because she believed in it. The significance of her statement was so that outsiders understand her too. She is the mother of a gang member, and yet she understands, better than anyone, the power of creating a homeplace.

## Political & Popular Origins

Venkatesh’s decade-long works captured a rare intimacy about life in Robert Taylor. Newspapers struggled to capture the depth and intimacy of Venkatesh's decade-long works. However, newspapers had the immediate power in delivering the conditions of the projects to the

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<sup>163</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 42.

<sup>164</sup> Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*, 43.



entire city. In their attempt to capture the condition of the projects, they relied solely on centering the violence perpetrated by gang members. Articles across all major newspapers (*Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, local *Chicago Defender*, etc.) provided testimonies and critiques to chart the development of gangs, but the use of suggestive headlines seemed inescapable. The general framing of gangs as some superhuman occurrence in society further isolated their existence and role in Chicago instead of recognizing them as a symptom of the creation and deterioration of the projects.<sup>165</sup>

In the earlier days of “supergangs,” communities worked with gangs regularly. However, the relationship deteriorated after increased youth involvement and violent crimes. An important but equally complicated component of this relationship is the involvement of Chicago’s police department. The strength of relationships between the Black community fluctuated with the police department and thus, to certain extents, residents considered gangs part of the community.

In 1970, the events at the Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) illustrated the dynamics of police, gangs, and the larger Black community.<sup>166</sup> The Kenwood-Oakland neighborhood boundaries, like those of West side neighborhoods, outlined a four-square-mile black ghetto. At a meeting, an exchange between Reverend Curtis E. Burrell and 23-year-old Alphonso Small turned violent. Rev. Burrell recently fired Small from his \$8,000 a year position at KOCO because he did not meet the responsibilities. However, Small’s affiliation with the Black P. Stone Nation seemed to be a pattern of contentions. The Stone Nation typically

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<sup>165</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 131.

<sup>166</sup> Ward, Francis. "Chicago Gangs--Opinion Now on Police Side: Public Backs Police Theory." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Aug 13, 1970. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chicago-gangs-opinion-now-on-police-side/docview/156527250/se-2>.

retained a cordial relationship with Rev. Burrell, and pressures from white investors in the development of the neighborhood. KOCO is responsible for organizing the development of the Kenwood-Oakland area, which holds valuable lakeshore property and the Lake Park projects.

The *Los Angeles Times* covered the events leading to the conflict between KOCO and the Stone Nation. The break between the two parties indicated the struggle between the emergent philosophies on “coping” with youth gangs: the police theory and the social work “cooptation” theory.<sup>167</sup> The police theory suggested that gangs were inherently criminal, ignoring opportunities to reform themselves. The social work theory recognized gangs as a site to “re-channel” energies for political movement. KOCO worked with the latter approach in the two years prior because of critical moments of Black solidarity in Chicago. The article explained:

Up to now, whoever supported the police was regarded as antigang. And whoever supported the gang was thought to be antipolice. Public sentiment, particularly among blacks, tended to favor the police when gang crime seemed to be on the rise and shifted to the gangs when police brutality, corruption or malpractice were issues of deep public concern.<sup>168</sup>

The Black community of Chicago remembered police involvement in the recent murder of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark and the riots of July 1966. In the crossfire of the west side riots, a pregnant 14-year-old and an elderly man died. The relationship between the Black community and police fluctuated during these critical years of gang expansion and community building.

From the outside, racial and territorial markers differentiated gangs, but each gang operated through specific methods. For instance, that same article estimated that 10,000 people

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<sup>167</sup> Ward, "Chicago Gangs--Opinion."

<sup>168</sup> Ward, "Chicago Gangs--Opinion."

belonged to the Stones Nation. Jeff Fort, a 23-year-old, led the Stones. The Stones' rivals included the Black Disciples. In major parts of Chicago, Latin gangs claimed territory. The Conservative Vice Lords were always one of the major gangs. However, the Vice Lords claimed they abstained from participating in gang warfare. Instead, they operated half-dozen small businesses. Gangs did not always use violence to establish their power.

The KOCO-Stones feud continued the gang's loss of power after a split from Operation Breadbasket. Breadbasket functioned as the economic arm of the SCLC. Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, national director of Breadbasket, collaborated with the Stones to march for human and civil rights campaigns. The dissolution of his relationship and the three major gangs (Stones, Vice Lords, and Disciples) occurred when they attempted to extort \$100,000 from him. Although Rev. Jackson never admitted it, he supported Rev. Burrell's divorce from the Stones.

Despite this fracture within the Black community at the time, Rev. Jackson and Rev. Burrell proposed a new alternative to cope with the community's violence. They suggested:

To develop a rationale which would condemn all kinds of violence within Black communities – by gangs, police, white merchants, city agencies or anybody else. This, they hope, could become a third alternative to attract both blacks and whites. They believe gangs could be held accountable for criminal acts, and still be given the option of community involvement.<sup>169</sup>

The third alternative, hoping to bridge the gap between anti-gang and anti-police positions, demonstrated the fluid and adaptable nature of gangs for communities. The article also posed a blunt question for its white suburban readership: "How can white society condemn youth gangs when they are the products of poverty-stricken and powerless ghettos erected and perpetuated by

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<sup>169</sup> Ward, "Chicago Gangs--Opinion."

the same white, racist society?”<sup>170</sup> However, the article’s title, “Public Backs Police Theory on Teen Gangs,” failed to allude to the dynamics of gangs and communities that it presented in the article. These stories undeniably shaped the perspective of white suburban readership, creating a dissonance between them and those who lived in the city.

In *American Project*, Venkatesh argued the incessant coverage of the “newest rampant outlaw capitalist, the drug-trafficking gang member,” unfairly situated gangs as a random occurrence in society.<sup>171</sup> In his time at Taylor Homes, Venkatesh learned of the close relationship that each Black community held with local gangs. There, the Black Kings (BKs) inhabited Taylor Homes. Of course, this happened over time. The BKs, like many gangs, began as a small, local group of youth engaged in “petty delinquency.”<sup>172</sup> However, the unique confinement of young Black men to the ghettos blossomed into a unique site for collective action, although not nearly considered organized, as demonstrated by riots in the latter half of the 1960s.

Simultaneously, the civil rights movement brought structural modes for the project’s political voice. With a new tenant-management system, the Local Advisory Council (LAC) hoped to strengthen the tenants’ relationship with the city’s political leaders. The keys to Taylor Homes’ success were its security of material resources for households and then trusting each other to create a safe living environment. Again, access to employment opportunities became crucial. Black people with access to education joined the middle- and upper-classes. However, those without education “grossly over-represented low-skill, low-paying jobs” in industrial and

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<sup>170</sup> Ward, “Chicago Gangs--Opinion.”

<sup>171</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 131.

<sup>172</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 133.

manufacturing trades.<sup>173</sup> Black unemployment consistently measured two to three times more than that of white counterparts.<sup>174</sup> Thus, residents chose to supplant their income (and welfare payments) with underground trades. “Everybody had their little hustle going on,” “it was the good life, even if we were living in the projects,” tenants recalled of their time in the seventies.<sup>175</sup> Harmless as first, the burgeoning reliance on illegitimate income came to define the residents’ source of power and the police’s target for control.

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, relationships between Black communities and law enforcement developed partnerships to perpetuate the democratic political machine. Officers directed underground commerce to power brokers in the ghettos. However, the police were not required to reciprocate their duty of protection to all Black communities. A tenant described policing in Taylor Homes throughout the 60s and 70s:

It was hard out there in The Life, a Darwinian jungle, and you had to be stone cold to survive. You had to be prepared to kill if it came to that. You had to understand that the police didn’t care who killed who in the ghetto, long as they were both black; the police just let the one on the ground die and bust the one still standing...[If] you kept it in the neighborhood, brother against brother, you weren’t going to do more than five, six years in the joint anyway.<sup>176</sup>

With these attitudes circulating throughout the decade, the opinion that the public backed police theory seemed less certain. Residents from the same project, not necessarily the same building, experienced wildly different interactions with the police. Those encounters became centered between young men and police as gangs and drugs controlled the vital underground economy.

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<sup>173</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 67.

<sup>174</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 67.

<sup>175</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 66

<sup>176</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 69.

According to Venkatesh, neither poverty nor drugs led were the sole to the proliferation of gangs. The sixties began a long pattern of mass incarceration among Black youth (see Table 1). Within prisons, staff utilized the existing organizational nature of gangs to maintain order.<sup>177</sup> Out of this structure, the BKs developed a brotherhood with direction in their activities. Unfortunately, when men reentered society, they found the seventies' depressed economy and few options to join the formal workforce. They turned to the drug-economy that their imprisoned counterparts used to generate income. Researchers termed this web of networks between street gangs and their incarcerated members "supergangs."<sup>178</sup>

Year	Prison Population Total	Prison Population Rate (per 100,000 of national population)
1940	264,834	201
1950	264,620	176
1960	346,015	193
1970	328,020	161
1980	503,586	220
1985	744,208	311
1990	1,148,702	457
1995	1,585,586	592
2000	1,937,482	683

Table 1. Prison Population Trend in United States ("Prison Population Trend Up to 2000, United States," World Prison Brief, <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/ united-states-america>).

<sup>177</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 133.

<sup>178</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 134.

The nature of supergangs reinforced the superhuman aspect of gangs. Many feared the encroachment of such lifestyles (and by extension, certain people) in their own cities. In Milwaukee, John Hagedorn at the Milwaukee Gang Research Project observed his city's "People and Folks" gangs in his book of the same name. However, Hagedorn deconstructed the idea of Chicago's supergangs' "contagion" to other cities. Instead, Milwaukee's gangs began the same way. Teens aged 13-16 transformed their breakdancing teams into identifiable "People" and "Folks." The possibility of gangs crossing municipal boundaries scared the white, suburban public. Hagedorn urged readers to understand the origin of gangs, not as criminals but as a result of neglectful and disenfranchising policy.<sup>179</sup> Venkatesh's contextualization of supergangs argued for the same understanding of the processes that led to the prominence of gangs even before the crack cocaine economy.

The arrival of crack cocaine coincided with the BKs newfound position as the dominant force in Taylor Homes. Black street gangs, in specific, exercised an "entrepreneurial" attitude concerning the crack cocaine trade. Through controlling specific buildings in Taylor Homes, the BKs expanded their market's territory. The pervasive drug trade began to involve Black youth. Many teenagers joined the gang as members and younger children became targets for involvement. The use of children became the utmost concern of the community. Remembering their roots as a "Black brotherhood," the gang believed they contributed positively to the economic security of the projects. Their long history reflected the collective struggles of Black residents. Elderly tenants remembered their action during civil rights movements, especially

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<sup>179</sup> Anne Campbell. "Gangs, Supergangs and Kids on the Corner," *New York Times* (1923-), Feb 05, 1989. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gangs-supergangs-kids-on-corner/docview/110210660/se-2>.

from the notable gangs (Blackstone Rangers, the East Side Disciples, and the Vice Lords).<sup>180</sup> For instance, the tension between gangs and police illustrated the relationship between the Black community and police. Even in their most notorious form, the community recognized the BKs not as a “foreign invader but as a distortion of collective youth energies that carried the potential for social change.”<sup>181</sup> However beneficial gangs seemed in past events, they evolved into the project’s strongest and most impenetrable force.

The CHA failed to maintain its properties as gangs moved in. Gangs like the BKs occupied empty apartments and lobbies to conduct business. Increasingly desperate for security in public spaces, the LAC tried to persuade the CHA to provide personnel.<sup>182</sup> Instead of acting on tenant’s suggestions, the CHA provided security that gangs often paid to look the other way. At the time, CHA chairman Vincent Lane admitted the effectiveness of his security force as a “dead fly” in the face of the power of gangs.<sup>183</sup> Tenants saw the summer of 1988 as a turning point for the community. In broad daylight, BK members beat up Maurice Wilson, an older man who “owed” the gang protection money, in broad daylight. After that, residents could not explain the conditions of the projects or where to look for help. Kelly Davis, Wilson’s LAC representative, said “we was fighting each other, fighting the CHA, fighting the gangs. It ain’t never been the same since.”<sup>184</sup> The loss of community control led to high crime rates, deaths, and the end of projects as a habitable place to live. The loss of community equated the loss of homeplace.

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<sup>180</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 139.

<sup>181</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 139.

<sup>182</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 142.

<sup>183</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 142.

<sup>184</sup> Venkatesh, *American Project*, 144.



The mainstream media captured the nature of gang activity in the projects, extreme in violence and power. Overtime, gangs fulfilled the superhuman titles set before them, controlling nearly every building in most projects. Writer Alex Kotlowitz dubbed them “lords of the slums,” referring to the Black Gangster Disciples Nation’s (BGDN) takeover of Ogden Courts, Taylor Homes, and Stateway Gardens housing developments.<sup>185</sup> In those projects, the BGDN used similar tactics to gain control. They took over people’s apartments, particularly preying on single mothers with sons in the gang.<sup>186</sup> Gangs’ blatant violence against tenants, like the case of Maurice Wilson, persisted and depleted the little trust left.

In Black communities, city authorities failed to cooperate to solve gang violence and occupation. In 1991, there were 686 murders by September.<sup>187</sup> By the end of the year, murders were expected to surpass the 1974 high of 970. Calling the situation “out of control,” Mothers Against Gangs saw the issue as “pitting aldermen against aldermen and community leaders against the police superintendent.”<sup>188</sup> Again, the loss of trust and the inability to locate the source of the gangs’ power incapacitated actions from the outside. Mayor Richard M. Daley promised to add 600 more police officers to the force, which historically never produced results. Superintendent LeRoy Martin reiterated at a city council hearing, “You can give me 2,000 police officers, and you can see them walking and talking. But until you start addressing the root

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<sup>185</sup> Alex Kotlowitz. "Lords of the Slums: Chicago Street Gangs Treat Public Housing as Private Fortresses." *Wall Street Journal* 212, Sep 30, 1988, 1. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/lords-slums-chicago-street-gangs-treat-public/docview/59485268/se-2>.

<sup>186</sup> Kotlowitz, "Lords of the Slums."

<sup>187</sup> Isabel Wilkerson. "Crack Hits Chicago, Along with a Wave of Killing." *New York Times* (1923-), Sep 24, 1991. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/historical-newspapers/crack-hits-chicago-along-with-wave-killing/docview/108680059/se-2>.

<sup>188</sup> Wilkerson, "Crack Hits Chicago."

causes, we'll be living with this high crime."<sup>189</sup> For the years to come, murders would continue to rise, and the leaders of gangs eluded the law, protected by the isolation of the projects.

Tenants and the CHA struggled to find solutions to overcome the power of gangs since they used the projects as protection as much as a battlefield. With the entrance of crack cocaine into the drug trade, more young men relied on the informal economy to make money. The processes by which gangs controlled the drug market and occupied the projects among other concentrated Black communities occurred rapidly over the course of twenty years. This development attracted journalists but also researchers determined to analyze and find their solutions from the outside. Of course, these experiments provided no immediate relief to tenants or gang members, but they demonstrated the national awareness of the condition of Chicago's neglected.

## The Impact of Gang Life

Throughout the late 80s and 90s, the federal government and outside researchers conducted studies on Chicago's gangs. The homicide rates climbed to the highest in the nation, and the reckless murders of children caught in the crossfire of gangs made headlines. To suggest policy, studies analyzed the landscape of Chicago's gangs, which centered around employment opportunities for those most at risk: young men and teenage boys. The formal reports illustrated a bleak picture of life for the residents of public housing and the young men of Chicago as early as the eighties and as late as the year 2001.

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<sup>189</sup> Wilkerson, "Crack Hits Chicago."

The CHA became one of the earliest proponents of maintaining records on gangs, particularly in terms of expanding its tenant management programs. The Metropolitan Planning Council conducted studies on the CHA Rehabilitation and Reinvestment.<sup>190</sup> In 1986, the CHA created a gang task force unit to cultivate a fluid but cooperative relationship with gangs. Gangs became a support system as well as the ruling system, making it difficult for tenants to resist and for outsiders (government agencies) to eradicate them with force. In addition, gang life transcended the projects and permeated the boundaries of school. Thus, tenant leaders attempted to incorporate gangs back into leadership. However, as seen in the development of the BKs, the gang's organizational structure overcame that of the tenants' organization.

An in-depth study by Venkatesh and Steven Levitt surveyed young males from the projects in 1991 to determine the long-term effects of gang participation. Ten years later, the study captured the economic conditions of 105 men who were between 17-26 in 1991. They all lived in the same building, which was all Black. The census tract containing the building averaged a ten times greater homicide rate than the national average at one hundred per 100,000 residents.<sup>191</sup> Venkatesh and Levitt achieved their survey results by locating 90 participants. The findings about the men were not entirely surprising. In 1991, the average age of affiliated men was 20.9, 90 percent of all men lived with only their mothers, and the average grade-level completion was 11.6. None completed any amount of post-secondary education. Despite three fourths of the men being employed in the legitimate sector, the average annual income was

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<sup>190</sup> Tenant Management: The Challenge and the Possibilities, May 1986, HD7288.78.U52 C486 1986 Oversize, Abakanowicz Research Center, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>191</sup> Levitt, Steven, D., and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh. 2001. "Growing Up in the Projects: The Economic Lives of a Cohort of Men Who Came of Age in Chicago Public Housing." *American Economic Review*, 91 (2): 79-84. DOI: 10.1257/aer.91.2.79, 80.

\$23,000. Active gang members had much less chance of legitimate sector employment and were three times more likely to have no source of income after the elapsed ten years. Yet, gang affiliated men, whom community members reported as strong, likable, and loyal generated more money illegally than those who were not. Venkatesh observed that the legitimate economy chose not to absorb men with those qualities because of their educational shortcomings. The study overwhelmingly illuminated impoverishment long after men aged out of active gang life. Gang involvement resulted in a lack of generational stability and wealth; however, it was merely another factor in the extensive list of obstacles for Chicago's Black youth in the projects.

J.T. and his fellow gang members expressed many of the outcomes that this study proved. J.T. illustrated, in fact, that an education allowed for participation in the formal economy. Of course, J.T would find himself exposed to the greater systems of white oppression outside of the projects. The rejection of young men from society resulted in the return to the safety of the gang. In this sense, J.T. reclaimed what he could in the homeplace of the projects. Unfortunately, the spiraling violence of gangs would prevent children from experiencing that sense of safety in the projects.

## ‘You Gotta Fight’

*If you take a kid from a suburban area, no matter what race, and you take a kid from a ghetto area, who sees the things that people do to survive—I mean raw things: steal, shoot, kill, shoot drugs to get a high; and the kid in the suburban area who has people who live in nice homes, washrooms work, doesn't have to worry about anyone breaking in all the time, not hearing shooting every day. If you put those two together, you'll see a dramatic difference. The ghetto kid's going to be hostile and gangster-like. He'll be more angry. He'll get more frustrated. And the suburban kid will be sensitive and talk his way out of things. He'll be more skillful at things like how to get a job. He'll be more into his books.*

—LeAlan Jones, *Our America*, 1997<sup>192</sup>

*A society can be fairly judged by how it treats its children. Caring for and guiding them to maturity is its most essential work, for they are the means by which it survives. By this measure, something has gone terribly wrong in our own community.*

—Jack Fuller, *Chicago Tribune*, 1992<sup>193</sup>

When many low-income parents looked to their children, they found reasons to make the projects home. The hopes of parents and their children were not so different in that way; both wanted a community of which they were proud. However, during the eighties, the projects deteriorated physically and socially. Children seemed to suffer the most though their pain went unnoticed by the wider public. Once children became unfortunate victims of gang violence, juvenile crime, and impoverished living, the media grasped onto these moments as the dominant narratives of life in the projects.

In 1991, journalist Alex Kotlowitz published a book on the lives of brothers, Pharaoh and Lafayette. They had spent their whole life in Horner, but they wanted to leave. The conditions worsened for the residents and the headlines worried the public. To find the truth about the projects' conditions, the public dove into the personal stories of children and the residents they knew. Another popular book written by David Isay and two boys, LeAlan and Lloyd, showed the

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<sup>192</sup> Jones, LeAlan, Lloyd Newman, David Isay, and John Anthony Brooks. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. New York: Scribner, 1997, 41-43.

<sup>193</sup> Robert Blau, “Editors' Question: Do We Fail Our Children?,” *Nieman Reports* (Winter 1998), 51.

condition only several years later. The children agreed to give the authors intimate, “or insider,” access to their lives and homes to report on government inaction that left a wide range of actors responsible. These books reveal the complicated picture of growing up in Chicago’s projects and the clarity, multidimensional personality, and intelligence of each boy.

The combination of accessible media and the worsening conditions of the projects allowed for the world to understand the projects’ children. However, their childhood of the nineties was inseparable from the violence that dominated headlines. The books and newspaper chronicled children’s daily encounter with violence. Both a cause and effect for political action, Kotlowitz’s book, Isay’s book, and the *Tribune* series demonstrated the miniscule change of such participation by the projects’ youngest citizens. Most importantly, these works emphasized one part of growing up in the projects: losing one’s childhood and innocence. In both books, the main subjects of the book worried about dying or getting with the wrong people. All four boys featured feared gang affiliation at one point. The author made you root for each of them “to be the one” and choose differently.

Children’s experiences and deaths called attention to the unlivable conditions of the projects. While the newspaper’s series, the books, and radio programs illustrated true narratives about life in the project, readers had to parse between the violence to see how the daily struggle connected to the city’s larger navigation of dismantling residential segregation. In this tension between home and the city’s policy agendas, the voice of the community became siloed to individuals (adults, mothers, children) instead of looking at the whole family to create policy responses. Even the role of the child came under review for the effectiveness of communicating a picture of the projects.

When Kotlowitz asked their mother, LaJoe Rivers, for permission to follow the boys, she agreed. She understood the importance of her boys' lives, but she warned, "but you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children."<sup>194</sup> The book followed the boys for two years, chronicling their daily encounters with violence and, their resistance to gang and criminal involvement. Kotlowitz contended that despite the overwhelming amount of violence, the book is above all else, a story of friendship and coming of age. This chapter will analyze what the "above all else" is and its effect on the smallest member of the community: the child.

### *There Are No Children Here*

In 1985, Alex Kotlowitz first met the Rivers brothers, Lafayette and Pharaoh.<sup>195</sup> *Chicago* magazine assigned Kotlowitz to interview a dozen families on child poverty in the projects. Lafayette and his big brother Pharaoh were two of many children captured by *Chicago's* photographer for the assignment, and that had been where Kotlowitz first noticed Lafayette before. Kotlowitz described him: "Despite the youthful attire, he looked like an old man. There seemed bottled up inside him a lifetime's worth of horrors. His face revealed a restless loneliness."<sup>196</sup> During the short, three-hour interview, with Lafayette, Kotlowitz felt unnerved by what he heard. Kotlowitz had trouble believing it at all.<sup>197</sup> The boys understood what the rest of their life could (not would) look like. Kotlowitz asked Lafayette what he wanted to be when he grew up: "If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver," he told me. *If*, not *when*. At the age of ten, Lafayette wasn't sure he'd make it to adulthood." Lafayette's life compelled Kotlowitz to return. Two years later, on assignment from *The Wall Street Journal*, Kotlowitz went back to the Henry

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<sup>194</sup> Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 1991, x.

<sup>195</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children*, ix.

<sup>196</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children*, x.

<sup>197</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children*, x.

Horner Homes. He befriended Lafayette and Pharaoh, developing a relationship for nearly three years with them before he decided to publish *There Are No Children Here*.

Pharaoh called Horner Homes “the graveyard.”<sup>198</sup> In 1987, when Kotlowitz first started shadowing the boys, they experienced the regular occurrences of summertime life in “Hornets”. On his twelfth birthday, Lafayette danced with his nine-year-old cousin Dede on their way to buy \$8.00 headphones with his birthday money. Suddenly, gunfire rained over the open sidewalks. Lafayette held Dede down, taming her instinct to run back towards home. Lafayette knew running into open gunfire got you killed, so they crawled through the dirt back home. Only fifty cents of his birthday money remained in his pockets.<sup>199</sup> Three days later, gunfire opened as the boys, their mother, and their three sisters, headed for home. LaJoe and Lafayette hurried everyone inside as they watched the young gunmen with pistols and a submachine gun disappear through their house windows.<sup>200</sup> Children frantically ran when they heard the gunfire, allowing themselves more vulnerable to the flying bullets. Police already at the projects ducked for cover, thinking they were the targets. When a reporter asked the CPD office for records of the shootout, there were not any. Thankfully, there were not deaths, but only then, there would have been a police report or investigation for arrests.<sup>201</sup> During the warm months, schools, front yards, and even playgrounds became dead zones. Just the summer before, a girl was shot in the leg after a thirty-minute shootout ripped through a playground. Pharaoh hid in a pile of garbage behind a trash can and Lafayette brought one of his sisters to safety.<sup>202</sup> Schools, front yards, back yards, and playgrounds were dead zones during the summer. No one liked the summertime Hornets.

LaJoe Rivers, a mother of eight, felt the impending death of her children as the shootings increased. That summer she started paying \$80 a month for burial insurance for all five of her youngest:

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<sup>198</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children*, 8.

<sup>199</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 9.

<sup>200</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 17.

<sup>201</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 18.

<sup>202</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 40.



Lafayette, Pharaoh, and the four-year-old triplets.<sup>203</sup> LaJoe worried that her children might join the five Horner children dead that year, only a fraction of the fifty-seven across the city. LaJoe remembered she did not always feel this despair about the fate of her children. At one time, she had been as confident as her parents to provide their children with a safe upbringing in Horner Homes.

In 1956, LaJoe's family moved into Horner Homes in its first days.<sup>204</sup> Her father, Roy Anderson, came from Arkansas and her mother, Leila Mae, from West Virginia. For a long time, the Andersons and their thirteen children lived above a Baptist church. Despite its pipe's freezing in the winter, they enjoyed their five-bedroom apartment. When the Illinois Institute of Technology expanded its campus, the city prepared to demolish their home. Their first option was the projects.<sup>205</sup> At the time, LaJoe and her siblings only saw the beauty of the homes. They could not understand the cheap construction, geopolitics of its location, and the controversial style of its construction. Soon enough, LaJoe's family had felt the loss of family members so common in the projects. An unknown person strangled one of LaJoe's sisters to death in the bathtub. Upon hearing the news, LaJoe's oldest brother, on leave from service, suffered a fatal heart attack. Finally, her father died of bone cancer in 1982. LaJoe remained hopeful that such tragedies would not repeat themselves. Unfortunately, LaJoe distanced herself only so far from her previous life. She raised her eight children only down the hallway from where her family once lived.

LaJoe's confidence to protect her children waned, particularly as gangs eyed them for recruitment. Her third child, Terence, already served time in juvenile detention. LaJoe's attention slipped away from Terence as she had more children. She grew impatient with his "clinginess."<sup>206</sup> Then, suddenly, when he was ten, Terence left. LaJoe did not see him for three months. During that time, local drug dealer Charles enlisted Terence as his drug runner. Charles paid Terence almost \$200 per day. At only eleven years old, Terence knew how to shoot a .45 caliber revolver. He wore it on his waistband.

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<sup>203</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 17.

<sup>204</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 20.

<sup>205</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 21.

<sup>206</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 84.

When LaJoe confronted Charles, she said “I want my son back.” Charles informed her, “Terence is my son. He belongs to me.”<sup>207</sup> Even when police returned him home, Terence ran back to Charles. Paul tried to deter Charles too, and yet Terence kept disappearing. From a distance, Terence sent his brothers and his mother money when he could. To Kotlowitz, “LaJoe and Paul lost Terence to the neighborhood.”<sup>208</sup> While Terence’s involvements remained a mystery to his brothers, Lafayette and Pharaoh continued to witness the loss of others in their lives, like their friends, especially with the rise of gang violence.

The Vice Lords gained control of their building (1920 Washington) in the early eighties. Calvin “Bird Leg” Robinson, a close and slightly older friend of Lafayette, quickly became active with the Vice Lords.<sup>209</sup> Once a caretaker of stray dogs, Bird Leg found belonging with the Vice Lords. He lived on the west end of the projects where the Disciples gang held control. At age fourteen, Bird Leg stopped attending school to borrow guns to shoot at Disciples’ members for fun. Living in a building in Disciples territory, Bird Leg endured daily beatings to leave his home. Despite his mother’s relocation of their family, Bird Leg continued to travel back to the Vice Lords territory at Horner Homes.

Disciples members shot Bird Leg twice before the day he died. A week after the hospital discharged him for a gunshot to the shoulder, Bird Leg returned to Horner against his mother’s wishes. Young Disciples members taunted him as he watched his friends play baseball. Bird Leg told his sister, who begged him to follow her inside a building, “I’m gonna kill some of these punks today or they’re gonna kill me.”<sup>210</sup> 24-year-old Disciples’ member Willie Elliott shot Bird Leg in the chest. Lafayette heard of Bird Leg’s midday death as residents began to clamor around his body. Their friend James went to look but not Lafayette. “He had already seen enough,” Kotlowitz said of Lafayette, who could not seem to find the strength to look at his dead fifteen-year-old friend.<sup>211</sup> At Bird Leg’s funeral, the song “Lean on Me”

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<sup>207</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 85.

<sup>208</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 86.

<sup>209</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 43.

<sup>210</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 46.

<sup>211</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 47.

moved Pharaoh to tears and Lafayette cried on the inside. The loss of their friend deeply troubled the boys who hoped for peace and most importantly quiet.

The end of summer neared, and Pharaoh prepared for school. A nineteen-day Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike, the longest ever in Chicago Public School (CPS) history, prolonged Pharaoh's return to the classroom.<sup>212</sup> Despite his speech impediment, which had become a great hindrance since the beginning of the summer, Pharaoh loved to participate in class. His fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Barone, expressed her fondness of Pharaoh's perseverance through his stutter. At Henry Suder Elementary, Pharaoh stood out as a student. He read at the level of third grade and six months, which was only two months behind the national state standard.<sup>213</sup> His classmates averaged a reading level a year and two months behind. With a principal that cared and a teacher as attentive as Mrs. Barone, Pharaoh enjoyed his academic successes.

Lafayette, hardened by Bird Leg's death and the responsibility of his four younger siblings, missed school for a variety of reasons. In the previous school year, he missed thirty-five days and averaged a D- grade. He repeated a grade already. Lafayette took pride in Pharaoh's accomplishments, but he feared that Pharaoh could not stand up for himself—a crucial survival defense.<sup>214</sup> Pharaoh's newest friendship with Rickey, an aggressive eleven-year-old from school, worried Lafayette. Lafayette's confidant at school, Mrs. Everage, saw him as a sensitive and observant older brother who wanted to help his siblings. Lafayette thought hitting and insulting Pharaoh would prepare him for the outside world. In an altercation, their molding personalities showed:

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<sup>212</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 63.

<sup>213</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 63.

<sup>214</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 75.

‘You gotta fight,’ Lafayette would tell him. ‘I ain’t gonna be there all the time to fight for you. C’mon. C’mon. Hit me’... ‘It ain’t right,’ Pharaoh said to Lafayette. ‘Why’s people fighting people?’ ‘That’s stupid,’ Lafayette countered.<sup>215</sup> Lafayette understood the worsening situation of the family. Pharaoh, younger however, decidedly yearned for peace in their family and in the world.

The fall and winter of 1988 brought important decisions for the two boys. One day, Lafayette, Pharaoh, and Rickey went to a video store. The owner caught Lafayette and Rickey shoplifting. The two walked away with a warning from the police.<sup>216</sup> The next week, however, an officer got physical with him. On game days, Lafayette and Pharaoh would try to scalp or get free tickets to see Michael Jordan and the Bulls. One night, Lafayette helped a traffic conductor wave in cars to open parking spots. He could make five to ten dollars in one night. A police officer told Lafayette and his friends to go home. Without remembering exactly what happened next, Lafayette’s friends recalled the officer grabbing his collar and pushing him on the ground, splashing into a puddle. The officer kicked Lafayette in the rear, and scorned, “Little punk, you ain’t supposed to be working here. These white people don’t have no money to give no n---rs.”<sup>217</sup> LaJoe ran out of the house to get Lafayette from the back of a squad car. The boys did not go back to the stadium for a while.

The boys reached the age where the world beyond Horner treated them differently. They were four years older than when they met Kotlowitz. The law labeled them shoplifters, dropouts, or runaways. Most of all, the police could call them criminals and whatever else they wanted to. The world saw them as outsiders even if they came from a mile down the road. Lafayette felt embarrassed in the world. He did not like to go places with his friends “‘cause I’m walking with

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<sup>215</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 76.

<sup>216</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 105.

<sup>217</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 160.

a whole lot of dirty kids. They know we come from the projects, and they think we wanna start something.”<sup>218</sup> While it seemed like Lafayette knew what the world thought of him and how it would treat him, Pharaoh, as Lafayette predicted, did not. Now ten, Pharaoh asked his mother, “Do all black people live in projects? Do all black people be poor?” The question begged for an answer *why*. He came to his own conclusion: “the police probably don’t like black children or something. The white polices don’t like the black children. That’s what I believe.”<sup>219</sup>

LaJoe knew relationships with the police were difficult. She recalled the shootout after the murder of two brothers, John Soto and Michael Soto, from 1969.<sup>220</sup> Two months later, the state’s attorney authorized home raids on Black Panther Party leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, and killed them. LaJoe never understood why the police never apologized for such brutal and unprovoked violence. She personally knew individual police officers who had offered Lafayette a ride and told the kids to stay in school.<sup>221</sup> Now, after Lafayette’s dehumanizing experience with the police, she worried how the boys would express their distrust of law enforcement institutions as they killed more of their friends.

In early March of 1989, Craig Davis prepared to play a music set at the upcoming Boy’s Club spring talent show. Lafayette and Pharaoh were waiting for him. Craig and his friends walked from his uncle’s house to another to get turntables for his performance. At eight at night, two Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) officers stopped the boys. Craig ran, avoiding another encounter with the law after police accused him of stealing cookies five months prior. Twenty-three-year-old ATF officer Richard Marianos chased after Craig. Craig outran him

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<sup>218</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 151.

<sup>219</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 161.

<sup>220</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 164

<sup>221</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 165.

until Mariano's partner, Francis Higgins, brought the car around. Mariano successfully pinned Craig against a wall in an alley near his uncle's house. After he unholstered his pistol, Mariano claimed that after a struggle, his firearm accidentally fired. Neighbors immediately ran to the crime scene where they berated the officers for killing unnecessarily, violently, and repeatedly.<sup>222</sup> Craig's vitals never registered at the hospital; doctors pronounced him dead at 8:48pm.

Relying on the officers' testimony, a *Chicago Sun-Times* article defamed Craig Davis. The paragraph-long feature captured Craig as "a reputed gang member."<sup>223</sup> According to the article, the officers approached Craig to "interview" him about illegal firearms trafficking when Craig grabbed the officer, instigating the deadly scuffle. Kotlowitz noted an important detail regarding the "accidental discharge." A medical examiner's report found "soot staining within the wound," which indicated that the barrel of the gun pressed directly against the victim.<sup>224</sup> The article spanned a mere three sentences and did not include the medical examiner's notes or the community's outcries.

Hundreds of family friends and community members crowded at the A.R. Leak Funeral Homes, a historical Black-owned funeral home.<sup>225</sup> Lafayette remembered the summer nights dancing to Craig's music and took refuge in the back hallway, silently holding back tears. In the weeks that followed, no one found closure for Craig's murder, especially Lafayette. Lafayette became depressed. He never spoke of Craig's death. He went to the floor above their apartment to sit

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<sup>222</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 197.

<sup>223</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 198.

<sup>224</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 196.

<sup>225</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 204.

with Craig's girlfriend to read Craig's poems. Lafayette cleaned the house and increasingly ordered his siblings to join him. They found him irritable and increasingly meaner. Lafayette found himself in a dark place, contemplating what to make of his life with all the death around him. When semi-automatic gunfire erupted, he no longer moved to find cover in his home.<sup>226</sup> He began to ask friends about if they thought about ending their own lives. He constantly told his mother how tired he was. LaJoe recognized this sentiment:

Terence used to tell me how tired he is, and I always ask him this because I made a mistake with Terence once. Terence used to tell me he was tired, but I used to think he was tired from being tired and I'd say, 'go lay down.' But Terence didn't mean that. Terence meant he was tired with what was going on.<sup>227</sup>

Pharaoh now feared for his brother's involvement with gangs now that he was of age. With Lafayette's self-isolation, LaJoe felt distance grow between them.

Lafayette's tiredness illustrated the power of a homeplace and what its absence led to in the projects. Homeplace intended to be refuge from the oppressive systems of the world of which Lafayette knew well.<sup>228</sup> hooks stated homeplace provided a foundation to, "we can regain lost perspective, give life new meaning."<sup>229</sup> However, if anything, the projects and their constant interweaving forces made it difficult for mothers to conserve their energy for their children and for their children to conserve energy or themselves. Unfortunately, Lafayette's estrangement from a feeling of homeplace would not return.

Lafayette struggled to look towards a better future after seeing Terence still in jail. After an entire year, Judge Mahan now heard his case for alleged three counts of armed robbery. Audrey Natcone, his public defender, believed Terence's innocence and tried to reduce the years

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<sup>226</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 216.

<sup>227</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 216.

<sup>228</sup> 387.

<sup>229</sup> 389.

offered in the plea bargain.<sup>230</sup> Terence wanted less than eight, and yet, Audrey could only argue for that instead of ten or a devastating 14 years if they went to trial. After consulting LaJoe, Terence agreed to eight years. He took his sentence the same day Chicago elected Richard J. Daley as mayor. LaJoe, bothered by this happenstance, thought the neighborhood's children, like Terence, might be saved had politicians really cared.<sup>231</sup> She could not rationalize any part of the situation.

The juvenile system overflowed during the middle of eighties. There were more arrests for minor offenses and sentences increased. Lafayette would be one of the next targets. Lafayette and his friend, Curtis, returned to the stadium to see the Bulls' players walk in. Instead, cops arrested Lafayette among four others for breaking and entering a parked catering truck. Cops picked them up while they ran back to Horner.<sup>232</sup> In just one year, this was Lafayette's third involvement with law enforcement. LaJoe and Lafayette returned to the same courthouse they left Terence in.

Whatever the case, Kotlowitz described how Lafayette and LaJoe felt invisible at the courthouse. They first appeared in front of Mr. Smith for their initial hearing. Here, Mr. Smith had the power to decide Lafayette should not be tried. He lectured them about the strategy the boys allegedly used to rob the truck. Lafayette dissociated in his chair. Mr. Smith concluded by handing LaJoe a complaint copy. They waited four hours to appear before a judge. Without looking at Lafayette, Judge Robert E. Woolridge rattled off the same questions as Mr. Smith:

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<sup>230</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 231

<sup>231</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 235

<sup>232</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 268.



When were you born? Who was your father? When did you see him last?<sup>233</sup> He handed them a trial date for September. LaJoe noticed that this date differed from the other four Horner boys. After she told the deputy sheriff, he instructed them to return to the judge. These events followed:

LaJoe explained the situation to the judge. Judge Woolridge looked up from his papers. “What’s the name again?” he asked of Lafayette, who had been before him only minutes earlier. “Lafayette Rivers.”

The judge looked bewildered. “Did we have a case by that name?” Someone in the courtroom stifled a giggle. Three minutes had passed and he didn’t even remember Lafayette. LaJoe felt as if no one cared...No one saw them or cared enough to treat them like human beings.<sup>234</sup>

LaJoe was right, and they went home. A day later, the family received a letter from Terence.

Again, LaJoe promised the boys they would leave Horner. Only this time, she said it would be when Terence got out.

They returned to the courthouse over a month later on September 29. LaJoe and Lafayette joined the other four boys and their respective guardians, two mothers, a father, and a seventeen-year-old uncle, in a room with their public defender. Anne Rhodes, appearing indifferent, actually enjoyed her job and gave all her attention to the boys with the little time she had. The boys could not tell. Anne Rhodes, handling all five cases, came back with a plea offer thirty minutes after their meeting. The truck owner would settle for \$100 from each of the families. All five guardians immediately denied the offer, including LaJoe who could not afford to lose one fifth of her monthly income. Anne Rhodes had five minutes to prepare for their trial of which was the same day. Anne Rhodes recalled feeling optimistic when Judge Julia Dempsey, known to be compassionate for children, oversaw the trial. However, the children seemed to meet the same intolerance from her as they had from everyone else.

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<sup>233</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 273.

<sup>234</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 274.

Lafayette did not testify on the stand. Only three of the boys did. Andrea Muchin, a new state's attorney, questioned the boys and proceeded with uncertainty that all five were guilty. Both Anne Rhodes and Andrea Muchin were surprised when Judge Dempsey entered a "finding of delinquency" against all five boys. The judge's reasoning: "I think they are really a big threat to the public...out there breaking into cars that are parked."<sup>235</sup> Lafayette asked what it all meant and if his mother could do anything. She said no. Another court date was set, and they returned to Horner. At last, Pharaoh concluded their two-year story with a hug to his brother.

At the book's beginning, Kotlowitz claimed "above all else" this was a story about friendship. However, when "all else" included dodging bullets in the living room and mourning classmates sometimes weekly, the story became one of survival. The book's eventual subtitle, "The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America," depicted such an unbelievable life for the boys, their families, and their community at large. The book addressed more than the brothers' relationship. It became about the world they lived in. Despite Kotlowitz's personal emotional and financial efforts to give the boys' opportunity, he only stayed with them for two years. He watched them distance themselves from each other and the world when their mother did. The national attention could not affect much of anything either. The public rooted for the boys to make "the right choices" when they could, but those aspirational thoughts did not translate to tangible investments in their home, schools, and community.

Decades later, the Rivers brothers still caught the attention of journalists. Kotlowitz's earnest attempts to change the boys' future, which he often treated like sons, could not outweigh the structural failures they encountered everyday growing up. In 2011, the *Chicago Tribune*

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<sup>235</sup> Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 297.

followed up with the brothers, then 36 and 33.<sup>236</sup> Pharaoh, “the inquisitive younger brother,” was paroled the previous year for a drug-related conviction. In May of 2013, Pharaoh began his sentence of 45 months for receiving money on behalf of his stepbrother’s heroin deal, which cost him 14 years. Even then, Kotlowitz wrote the judge, asking him to “acknowledge the trials he faced, and the potential he possesses.”<sup>237</sup> The same sentiments about the boy’s untapped and unsupported potential stayed with them into adulthood.

The same could be said for Lafayette, cast as the “reserved older brother.” Last reported in 2011, Lafayette lived on the South Side and worked for a laundromat. After previously convicted for individual charges for drugs, drunk-driving, and handgun possession, he was on parole. Lafayette spoke about how the book complicated his young life. Him and Pharaoh joined Kotlowitz on book tours, but their family remained poor. LaJoe suffered a mental breakdown after its publication. However, after everything, Lafayette credited Kotlowitz for “[helping] him enjoy being a kid, even for a short time...I was always the child who had seen too much.”<sup>238</sup> Upon their own reflection, the boys showed gratitude for their time with Kotlowitz, but their lives in their entirety, past and future, begged the question if the book, if the knowledge of their lives, made any difference.

### *Our America*

Only several years later, David Isay embarked on a similar journey as Kotlowitz to find answers for Chicago’s impoverished youth. Isay ventured to the historically black public housing project Ida B. Wells Homes. He located two children, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, to record their

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<sup>236</sup> "Subject of ‘There Are No Children Here,’ Hopes to Use Prison Time to Write, Reflect," *Chicago Tribune*, 2011 & 2013, [https://btc.instructure.com/files/78307427/download?download\\_frd=1](https://btc.instructure.com/files/78307427/download?download_frd=1).

<sup>237</sup> "Subject of ‘There Are No Children Here,’ Hopes," *Chicago Tribune*.

<sup>238</sup> "Subject of ‘There Are No Children Here’ Hopes," *Chicago Tribune*.

lives for one week for a National Public Radio (NPR) segment.<sup>239</sup> This first collaboration between them resulted in the nationally acclaimed documentary, *Ghetto Life 101*. About three years later, LeAlan called Isay about the death of Eric Morse. A ten- and eleven-year old dropped five-year-old Eric from a fourteenth story window in a Wells building.<sup>240</sup> LeAlan and Lloyd documented the community's reaction to Eric's death. With Kotlowitz's work as an inspiration to this project, Isay's mission for these projects held much of the same spirit. "It has been my intention to act as the vehicle through which the voices of young people growing up in poverty might reach a larger public. It's my hope that this work might begin to tear some holes in these fences, allowing the rest of the country to meet a few of the people who live behind them."<sup>241</sup> Of course, the discourse behind their project could not be separated from the larger story of Chicago's public housing. This was about the boys, their friends, and to continue Isay's metaphor, the fences separating those in public housing and those not.

The team of Isay and the boys culminated their nearly three years of recording life in the Wells Homes during the same time. Their finished publication, *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (1997), detailed life in the projects of Wells in the middle of the 1990s. This project explicitly stated its intentions to rectify the political wrongs of the times. Dr. Cornel West provided the preface beginning with an exclamative sentence: "How rare it is to get behind the pervasive stereotypes of young black men and revel in their complex humanity!"<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Jones, LeAlan, Lloyd Newman, David Isay, and John Anthony Brooks. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. New York: Scribner, 1997, 18.

<sup>240</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 20.

<sup>241</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 22.

<sup>242</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 11.



Figure 6. LeAlan Jones (left) and Lloyd Newman by John Brooks. (Jones, LeAlan, Lloyd Newman, David Isay, and John Anthony Brooks. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. New York: Scribner, 1997, 28).

He shared an anecdote from sitting with President Clinton's staffers two years prior to discuss a speech on urban youth. When he asked the staffers if the President, or if anyone in the room, had talked to young Black teenagers, not one person said yes. West put into simple words:

And I thought to myself: Is not a democracy a process that highlights engaging, listening, and responding to the very people who are affected by the public policies enacted by the powerful? Would it not have been more difficult for President Clinton to sign a vicious and punitive welfare bill if he had sat and talked with the vulnerable children punished by it?<sup>243</sup>

The content of the book gave the public another story to listen to, and the boys were able to express their own feelings about their lives.

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<sup>243</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 12.

LeAlan and Lloyd hit record in 1993. LeAlan was thirteen and Lloyd was fourteen. Their friendship began in first grade, “that’s seven years of our life!” LeAlan exclaimed.<sup>244</sup> Lloyd admitted they only started *really* hanging out three years ago (emphasis in original). Lloyd had to tell LeAlan when he should walk home to his house around the corner from the projects. They took turns describing the summertime:

They used to shoot a lot..It was dangerous, but it was fun..We used to play It. Then when you hear bullet shots you would duck..And run in the house..And look outside. Go outside again, then POP! POP! POP!..It’s like running the marathon!<sup>245</sup>

Then, they introduced themselves to the listeners. LeAlan illustrated Lloyd’s Martian-like head and skinny stature. Lloyd countered with LeAlan’s large belly and his beaver teeth, earning him “Bucky Rogers.”<sup>246</sup> They know their academic strengths and equally share everything, including the experience of Wells.

In an interview with their elementary school principal, Ms. Margaret A. Tolson, Lloyd, and LeAlan talked about their eighth-grade class’s future Lloyd eventually got to the inevitable question: “What do you think we’ll be when we grow up?” Ms. Tolson responded: “LeAlan will be a politician. Lloyd, I think you’ll be behind the scenes-probably a businessman and a millionaire and I’ll have to come borrow money from you in my old age.”<sup>247</sup> Then, Lloyd continued: “What do you think about the people in eighth grade? What will they become in life?” Ms. Tolson replied with clear confidence: “Well, if they’re true to form for Donoghue, they will become politicians, lawyers, judges, doctors, secretaries, teachers in the classrooms at Donoghue. They will become expert workmen, technicians-most anything that they want to become.” She answered Lloyd’s last question: “Mrs. Tolson, what percentage of the students do

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<sup>244</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 29.

<sup>245</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 31.

<sup>246</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 31.

<sup>247</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 40.

you think are going to fall down?” with the same confidence: “How many are not going to make it? I’d say maybe about five to six percent.”<sup>248</sup> The principal previously shared the occurrence of two drive-by shootings in one month. Children younger than Lloyd and LeAlan understood the reality of their futures, which violence could cut short at any time.



Figure 7. Ms. Margaret A. Tolson, principle at Donoghue Elementary (Jones, LeAlan, Lloyd Newman, David Isay, and John Anthony Brooks. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. New York: Scribner, 1997, 38).

Yet, at their young ages, Lloyd and LeAlan understood the importance of school and to be “something.” Their raw conversations recorded their insistence to persevere and help others do it too. LeAlan ran into his friend George, who had missed school the past three weeks. LeAlan found him selling drugs on the corner. LeAlan asked, “How are you gonna be something if you don’t go to school?” George dismissed the importance of school, citing schools cannot teach boys like them how to live. Then, the conversation revealed the anger both boys held with

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<sup>248</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 41.

the truth of the matter. LeAlan snapped: “You ain’t learning s— out here. I bet I’m gonna see your a— twenty-five years from now begging for a quarter so you could get a drink!” George, with no hesitation, agreed with their principal: “I ain’t gonna be alive in ten years because I’ll be selling my drugs and they’re gonna pop [me]. No one’s gonna be alive in twenty more years!”<sup>249</sup> Before George turned his back to walk away, LeAlan protested he would be alive, he knew he would. No matter how much despair filled their friends, the boys expressed concern for their peers and themselves. They wanted better. Lloyd and LeAlan shared their passions with community members, young and old, who tried to remain pillars of stability despite the violence.

LeAlan’s grandmother shared her story. She began living in Wells 40 years ago. The roads were surrounded by trees, people had flowers in the nice big yards, and there were businesses. People liked to travel to the area. Then, over time, she described the change “day by day, year by year” as the high rises dwarfed the smaller, two floor units.<sup>250</sup> One of her eight children, Alan, died from Hodgkin’s disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system. Her second loss of another son, Baby Lee, happened after his friend stabbed him in the femoral artery. LeAlan, asking curious and tough questions as ever, posed to his grandmother: “why do you think some of your kids got involved in drugs and alcohol?” She responded, “Because they wanted to. And then peer pressure. And I guess they liked it, so they kept on doing it.” She asserted, “I think they each had a right to live their life the way they chose.”<sup>251</sup> LeAlan’s mother is no exception to this statement. His grandmother did not blame “Tootchie,” LeAlan’s mother, for not having a father for her children. Diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder and then bipolar, the state threatened

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<sup>249</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 45.

<sup>250</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 52.

<sup>251</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 53.



to take the kids away from Tootchie unless her mother took custody.<sup>252</sup> They live together, Tootchie, Grandma, LeAlan, and his two sisters. Despite not knowing a father, LeAlan said he had all he needed.

Next, LeAlan interviewed his sister, Janell. Janelle had a two-year-old named Jhery “Muckie” Marquis Jones. LeAlan criticized his sister’s path: “A lot of times the girl who people say, ‘This is going to be the kid that makes it,’ is the first one to have babies.”<sup>253</sup> LeAlan worried about her recent hospitalization due to drinking E&J (a type of brandy). LeAlan did not leave his concerns out of the interview either. He asked Janell openly if she liked to drink “a lot” and smoke marijuana. Having denied his accusations, Janell asserted her love for her baby.<sup>254</sup> LeAlan continued to ask about Muckie and his father. Janell met his father when she dated a teammate of his, Jermaine. Janell counted Jermaine among her friends Yuk, Slick, Meatball, Cheezy, Vell, Shawn, and Kenny, all who died throughout the years.<sup>255</sup> She estimated at least another ten too. Janell was seventeen.

When it came to their mothers, LeAlan and Lloyd loved them. Tootchie used to live in Horner Homes. One day the boys went to visit the Bulls’ stadium and they went past Horner.<sup>256</sup> Surely on that day, LeAlan and Lloyd walked past the home of Pharaoh and Lafayette. Lloyd’s mother died in 1991; he just turned twelve. She was thirty-five. Lloyd still had his two brothers, Michael, and Lindell, and his three sisters, Sophia, Precious, and Erica. In an interview with Sophia, LeAlan asked how their mother died. Sophia explained their mother stopped eating and started drinking heavily in a state of grief. Sophia remembered the series of the events:

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<sup>252</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 54.

<sup>253</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 59.

<sup>254</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 61.

<sup>255</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 62.

<sup>256</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 63.

I told my cousin to call the ambulance... And they said [“her stomach hurts”] wasn’t a good enough reason for them to come...I went downstairs and I saw vomit coming out...and I ran for help. She was still breathing. We called the ambulance again, but there was a shooting right outside the door here, and the ambulance was fixing to drive off without my mother. My sister was crying, “My mother’s still in there!” But the ambulance went anyway.

The police told Sophia her mother died shortly after they arrived at the hospital. Sophia initially expressed anger towards her mother’s alcoholism, which caused cirrhosis of her liver. Their father Michael “Chill” Williams, struggled with alcohol abuse too. However, Sophia found strength in her new responsibility for her younger siblings. They still celebrated their mother’s birthday.

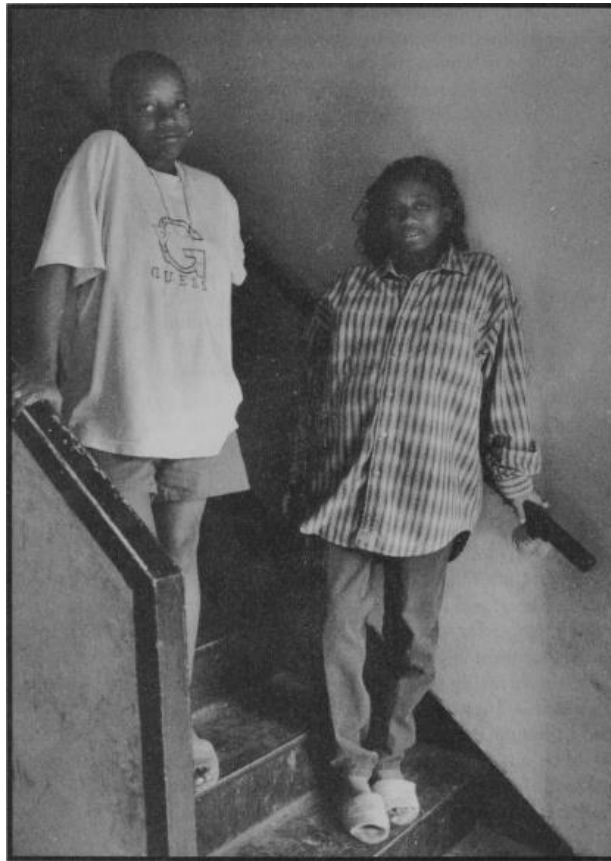


Figure 8. Precious (left) and Sophia Newman by John Brooks (Jones, LeAlan, Lloyd Newman, David Isay, and John Anthony Brooks. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. New York: Scribner, 1997, 68).

Months after the death of Eric Morse, the boys began recording again. The story of the murder circulated quickly. Johnny and Tyrone invited Eric and his eight-year-old brother, Derrick, to see their clubhouse. They pulled apart the boards from apartment 1405 on the fourteenth floor of Darrow Homes, one of four high rises in Wells. Eric told his mother Johnny and Tyrone asked him to steal candy for them.<sup>257</sup> When they opened the apartment, Johnny and Tyrone held Eric out the window in retaliation. Derrick pulled him inside. The boys did it again. Derrick attempted to pull him back in, and Tyrone bit his hand. Eric fell fourteen stories. Derrick ran down, hoping to catch him. Eric died on impact.

The boys went to the scene of the crime first. 3833 South Langley, according to LeAlan, was the best of the four high rises. Yet, he estimated three or four people lived on the fourteenth floor. They used the stairs because the elevator was broken. They passed by a boarded-up apartment and that indicated someone lived there.<sup>258</sup> One day, William Sewell, a fourteenth-floor resident, came out. He had three kids aged thirty-three. He described how his children's lives differed from his childhood: "I don't let them go out. I got to keep them in the house, and that's detrimental for young people. The kids in this building deserve a chance: not being around drugs, being able to go to different places and see different things in life."<sup>259</sup> Annie Smith, who lived in the apartment below the crime scene, agreed that she kept her kids inside too.<sup>260</sup> Smith hoped that Eric's death would finally bring the necessary help Wells' families needed before something worse happened.<sup>261</sup> The devastation of something "worse" than Eric's murder showed the imagination that reality had provided residents.

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<sup>257</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 89.

<sup>258</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 91.

<sup>259</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 95

<sup>260</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 97.

<sup>261</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 99.

In fact, Eric's death drew attention because of his age and the age of the assailants. None of the children were above the age of twelve. This was not, however, the first-time people pushed people to their deaths at Wells. Two young men told LeAlan and Lloyd about this instance. They recalled gangbangers enacting such a crime, pushing a janitor and another man down an elevator shaft to their deaths.<sup>262</sup> The men, like the boys, were distraught over the violent nature of Johnny and Tyrone. In a moment of reflection, LeAlan found bewilderment in the reality of childhood at the projects. He was not alone. The boys found chairperson of the CHA, Vincent Lane, outside 3833 South Langley. Lane agreed with the boys, "Absolutely not. I don't want my kids growing up here. I don't want *any* kids growing up here the way it is today."<sup>263</sup>

When Lane joined the CHA in 1988, he believed he could change the state of the projects, even the high rises. Having been envious of Wentworth Garden residents in his youth, Lane believed he could change the state of the projects, even the high-rises. In a front-page feature, the *Chicago Tribune* posed him above Cabrini-Green with the question: "Can This Man Save the CHA?"<sup>264</sup> After eight executive directors and five different chairman left over the past seven years, Lane promised tenants an opportunity for tenants to reclaim their homes.<sup>265</sup> Lane implemented "sweeps" to eradicate some of the estimated 50,000 living illegally in units, particularly gang hideouts where members lived.<sup>266</sup> Lane wanted to renovate and repurpose existing housing stock given the increasing homeless population and waiting lists for public

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<sup>262</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 103.

<sup>263</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 103.

<sup>264</sup> Vale, Lawrence J. *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities*. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 251.

<sup>265</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 250.

<sup>266</sup> William E. Schmidt, "Bold Plans for Curing Sick Housing," *New York Times*, Oct 11, 1988, Late Edition (East Coast), <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/bold-plans-curing-sick-housing/docview/426974124/se-2>.

housing. He refused to consider razing projects with a waiting list of 100,000.<sup>267</sup> Lane would install security measures over the years, but he understood the gravity of the problems as little changed over his years in service. From the fourteenth-floor view, Lane and the boys talked about the entrapment of children in the projects. To their right, Taylor Homes. To their left, Stateway Gardens. Below them, young people on the street with nowhere to go.<sup>268</sup> Lane explained the variety of issues that plagued Chicago's projects: the cheap high-rises, the "containment of blacks," the "stacking" of poor people, and the loss of role models—people who work and positive social programs.<sup>269</sup> "I don't know why society would be surprised at what happens in public housing today," Lane concluded.

Around the time they met Lane in 1995, they interviewed the supervising prosecutor for Eric's case, Kay Hanlon. Hanlon described the increase in violent crimes by children over her two years in Juvenile Court. "Most of the murders that I see are thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds killing each other with guns. Ten and eleven is pretty young," Hanlon admitted.<sup>270</sup> Unlike Tymeka, who LeAlan and Lloyd remembered from eighth grade, Hanlon believed that Johnny and Tyrone committed premeditated murder. Tymeka, an older friend of Johnny, the wildest of the two, claimed it must have been a freak accident because "an adult would do something like that, but not no children."<sup>271</sup> The circumstances of Johnny's life that Tymeka thought cultivated his misbehavior (drug-addicted abusive mother and incarcerated father) were the same ones that Hanlon thought exposed kids like Johnny to a greater knowledge of right and wrong.<sup>272</sup> Hanlon

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<sup>267</sup> Schmidt, "Bold Plans for Curing Sick Housing," *New York Times*.

<sup>268</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 105.

<sup>269</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 106.

<sup>270</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 113.

<sup>271</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 109.

<sup>272</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 111, 115.

pointed to the comprehensible scenario: “You know that when you throw someone out a fourteenth-floor window they’re going to die.”<sup>273</sup> None of the attorneys looked forward to the cases’ trial.

A floor above Hanlon’s office, the boys met the four-person public defender team for Johnny. They talked to Dave Hirschboeck, Peter Parry, Rick Hutt, and Dave McMahon. All four discussed an increase in the frequency and severity of the crimes in Juvenile Court. Hutt described the senselessness of it: “people pulling out guns over the smallest things and shooting—and not even shooting at somebody, just shooting in a general direction.”<sup>274</sup> All the lawyers acknowledged the metaphorical loss of direction that the boys they saw carried with them. LeAlan described the tears that came to eleven-year-old Isaac when they interviewed him. Despite what these boys experience, Hutt insisted that they are still little boys.

I’ve seen a kid sixteen years eight months, six foot one, been gang-banging for five years, carries a gun, his father’s incarcerated, his mother hasn’t seen him in months—and I’ve talked to that kid and within five minutes (not because I’m a great person, but just if you take the time) within *five minutes* I see a little boy...Every one of them—they’re all savable. Every one of them!<sup>275</sup>

Their interview with Local School Council president of Doolittle West, Suggs Miller, seemed to indicate that after breaking Johnny’s wall, he was sweet and kind.<sup>276</sup> However, Miller could not ignore Johnny’s home life that prepared for him to survive in the only way he knew—through violence.

Johnny and Tyrone had a long history of criminal activity, but most of it went unreported. In a disturbing interview with CHA police officers, Laurie Sabatini and Donnie Hixon, they detailed their frequent encounters (and warnings) between them and Johnny and Tyrone. The

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<sup>273</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 115.

<sup>274</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 117-118.

<sup>275</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 118-119.

<sup>276</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 122.

first time Sabatini and Hixon met the boys, they had them return stolen frozen pizza to the store. Next, they caught Tyrone ditching school. They would feed him and drop him off at school, but then they would run into him a couple hours later.<sup>277</sup> Sabatini and Hixon's tone contrasted starkly with regards to the boys' behavior. Sabatini said, "To be honest, I just think he's a bad seed."<sup>278</sup> Hixon interrupted, "but he was from a broken home too."<sup>279</sup> Tyrone's father abused his mother. Sabatini repeated, "I don't know why Tyrone did what he did, really." She continued to describe their first reactions to Eric's death with gall: "But it was funny—the day after Eric got thrown out the window, in roll call Hixon and I both said at the same time, 'I bet Tyrone and Johnny did it.' Didn't we?" Hixon answered, "We sure did. It was amazing. And sure enough, it was."<sup>280</sup> The officers' satisfaction with naming the killers correctly—and two children they knew—illustrated the colossal failure of another system for the project's children.

LeAlan and Lloyd included all the opportunities the officers had to intervene legally with the boys. What began as stolen food, Sabatini and Hixon admitted to finding the boys with guns and drugs a number too big to be recalled. Sabatini and Hixon found them shooting at dogs on their way to school. They did nothing. One time, they knew the boys brought a girl their age (between nine and eleven) to the vacant apartment they hung out in. The officers said the girl performed oral sex for the boys.<sup>281</sup> They did nothing. Hixon pardoned themselves, "we were trying to give them the benefit of the doubt."<sup>282</sup> LeAlan asked the officers if they would help Tyrone after the murder. Hixon said "yeah." Officer Sabatini elaborated her decisive "no" with: "There's not enough apologizing in the world. What they did to that baby I wouldn't do to a

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<sup>277</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 129.

<sup>278</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 131.

<sup>279</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 131

<sup>280</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 131.

<sup>281</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 133.

<sup>282</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 133.

roach. I hope that they both rot in hell.”<sup>283</sup> Given Sabatini’s response on Tyrone’s redemption, she better illustrated her rationale for increased youth crimes. Sabatini thought “stricter penalties for juveniles would be nice. We need to lock them up,” as she proceeded to list the crimes the boys committed prior.<sup>284</sup> They were all the ones she and Hixon let them off for.

The trial ended after one day. A jury found both boys guilty of first-degree murder. Before the death of Eric, Johnny and Tyrone faced a maximum punishment of probation and counseling for being under the age of thirteen. However, the Illinois legislature heard Sabatini’s suggestions. After Eric’s death and before their trial, bipartisan support changed the eligible age for juvenile prison from thirteen to ten.<sup>285</sup> A couple months later, Judge Carol Kelly sentenced Tyrone and Johnny, then 12 and 13, respectively, to juvenile prison. They were the nation’s youngest inmates, and they remained imprisoned until twenty-one.<sup>286</sup>

LeAlan and Lloyd’s segment on Eric’s death, *ReMorse* (which is the section title of the book), garnered national attention like their previous projects. Their work sustained the wave of public interest in the conditions of the projects. Most importantly, their interviews demonstrated a shared desire among the community: to do better for their family. Unfortunately, for most people, this entailed leaving the projects behind. LeAlan and Lloyd demonstrated that children understood and processed their circumstances. Their childhood experiences shaped their determination to go to college to leave the projects. They did not share and could not understand the nostalgia that many adults had for the projects. The projects were a place to leave, not stay and create home.

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<sup>283</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 133.

<sup>284</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 133.

<sup>285</sup> Don Terry, “Prison for Young Killers Renews Debate on Saving Society’s Lost,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/31/us/prison-for-young-killers-renews-debate-on-saving-society-s-lost.html>.

<sup>286</sup> Terry, “Prison for Young Killers Renews Debate on Saving Society’s Lost,” *New York Times*.



Eric's death transformed their lives and marked a continuation of violence that the Wells children endured. However, LeAlan and Lloyd questioned the impact of his death. Just a year after Eric's death, LeAlan was unsure if anyone remembered him.<sup>287</sup> While the nature of Eric's offenders disturbed the nation, the death of children was nothing new to the world outside the projects. In a sense, neither was it new to the residents of the projects, but they experienced an incessant period of mourning.

Prior to Eric's death, the story of Dantrell Davis rocked the nation. On his way to school, holding his mother's hand, a sniper shot seven-year-old Dantrell Davis in the head.<sup>288</sup> He lived in Cabrini-Green. It was nine in the morning. Dantrell's death evoked outrage at the local and national level. It brought attention to the violence of projects and led to the bleak future of the projects.

### 'The Shot that Brought Down the Project'<sup>289</sup>

Dantrell's death marked the 44<sup>th</sup> child murder that year. The *Chicago Tribune* counted his death in their series "Killing Our Children." Over the years of 1992 and 1993, the series counted and reported the weekly, and sometimes daily, murders of children under 15 years of age across Chicago. The series explained the details of the events, attributing many deaths to the increasingly fatal conditions of the projects. In accompaniment, the series featured editorials from journalists, lawyers, and scholars that attempted to confront what actionable steps could come from this initiative. None of them came from Cabrini-Green yet the For instance, Catherine

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<sup>287</sup> Jones & Newman, *Our America*, 153.

<sup>288</sup> John W. Fountain. "New Hopes, Old Fears: Shaky Peace at Cabrini A Year After Dantrell Died." *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 1993.

<sup>289</sup> Mike Dumke. "The Shot that Brought the Projects Down, Part One of Five." *Chicago Reader*, October 12, 2012, <https://chicagoreader.com/blogs/the-shot-that-brought-the-projects-down-part-one-of-five/>.

Ross, Vice Chair of the American Bar Association's Steering Committee on the Unmet Legal Needs of Children, urged a collective call to action to prevent the inevitable social decay that “our society” would face if government neglect continued towards those in the projects, specifically isolated and poor black communities.<sup>290</sup>

After reporting 62 child murders in 1992, the series ended after a year. To keep the project in view, the *Tribune* reprinted its dedication to “our” community many times over. The *Tribune* staff’s piece, “How to end the killing of our children,” signaled the public's deep awareness of the danger in the projects if not a complete understanding of its causes.<sup>291</sup> This initiative brought child murders to the forefront.

Four years after the *Tribune*’s series ended, the paper’s editor assessed the impact of the series. In an editorial piece, he asked, “Do We Fail Our Children?” Blau Robert Blau insisted Dantrell Davis’s death began a revolution in the newsroom. Before Dantrell’s death, Blau admitted the *Tribune* exercised indifference over the years about the “loaded nouns:” poverty, crime, and drugs. He admitted the paper’s desire to satisfy their growing white, suburban readership. “Killing Our Children” was an effort to rectify this. However, this series allowed the paper, its contributors, and the city to claim ownership for the projects’ children. While this well-intentioned effort provoked political voices, it reduced children’s belonging to vague, institutional interests. Yet, ambiguous responses, like calls to “end the killing of children,” failed to illuminate the scale of harm in their lives and in their communities. Quantifying deaths

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<sup>290</sup> Catherine J. Ross. "Who Speaks for the Children?" *Chicago Tribune (Pre-1997 Full Text)*, Dec 30, 1993. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/who-speaks-children-series-killing-our-this-is/docview/283637861/se-2>.

<sup>291</sup> “Editorial: How to End the Killing of Our Children,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 26, 1993 (reprinted January 25, 1994, page 92).

expressed the killing, but it did not amplify the creative perseverance by which children continued living.

Too often, the small actions of creating space for oneself, even as children, became obscured by their label of “the child who had seen too much.” Obviously, the lives (and deaths) of the children discussed in this chapter demonstrated an unacceptable amount of violence for youth. Yet, the city tolerated years of violence before Dantrell’s death and in the years before Eric’s death. Thus, the repeated framing of children’s experiences as calls to action demonstrated a cyclical pattern of societal acceptance for the conditions of the projects. At the individual level, however, it is critical to recognize how many small actions, like Lafayette sweeping his floor, resisted the cycle and sustained his homeplace. Those efforts, even by the smallest stakeholder, demonstrated opportunities to formulate sustainable solutions to break the cycle.

## Epilogue

Last fall, I had lunch with Brigitte Charlton-Vicenty, lifelong resident of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). “Notcha, but like Nicha,” she told me.<sup>292</sup> My college invited her to speak with students about her initiative, Inner City Green Team Economic & Environmental Development (ICGT). Frustrated with NYCHA’s absence of recycling, Brigitte committed herself to educating her fellow residents about their “Right to Recycle.” Years later, the housing authority supplied them with recycling and compost bins. They expanded their program with a green house and a community garden. When I asked her if she spent much time outdoors as the inspiration for the garden expansion, she laughed. Fair. She paused and told me she remembered an early memory. Sometimes her mother would take her in the car upstate and out of the city. “I never saw the foliage that way. I saw a living mural,” Brigitte’s eyes got wide as she spoke.<sup>293</sup> She wanted NYCHA, her home, to feel like that.

My conversation with Brigitte stayed in my mind as I talked with my Abuela and my mother about their life in public housing. It was hard for them to create community and to have peace within their house. I am not certain that my mother would call her specific apartment home, but she called Lathrop home often. The words of bell hooks resonated with the experiences that each woman I spoke to. “We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole.”<sup>294</sup> The individual efforts to achieve homeplace in Chicago’s public housing were best demonstrated in

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<sup>292</sup> Forte, Camille, and Brigitte Charlton-Vicenty. NYCHA. Personal, November 15, 2022.

<sup>293</sup> Charlton-Vicenty Interview, NYCHA. Personal, November 15, 2022.

<sup>294</sup> hooks, bell. "Homeplace (a site of resistance)." In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 41-49. Boston: South End Press, 1990. Reprinted by permission of South End Press. <https://libcom.org/article/homeplace-site-resistance>, 389.

the personal narratives of residents. Most importantly, Black women began homeplace in “project living” as we know of it today, which is critical to the premise that creating homeplace is radical, political, disruptive, and a form of resistance.

My mother left Lathrop in 1989 and never went back. She illustrated the circular process of when Black women, like Ms. Ma, came to Chicago and never looked back. But, Chicago allowed public housing to become a great experiment of welfare policy, residential segregation, and more at the expense of women’s attempt to create homeplace. Perhaps the final demolition of the projects illustrated the last step in permanently erasing a site for homeplace. Regardless of the demolition of the high-rises in their entirety, the resistance of homeplace is portable. However, the collective sense of belonging to that specific site is gone and that was harmful.

The narratives of this thesis demonstrated the variety of meanings that children, parents, and friends found life in the projects. Community did exist as residents simultaneously practiced small forms of resistance to give up in the harsh conditions of the projects. Despite the second forceful removal of Black Chicagoans from their homeplaces, their collective memory and their continued reproduction of their history keeps resistance alive. Chicago’s public housing residents have illustrated the importance of resilience and the power of the individual narrative to reframe the actors in history.

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