

## Chapter 1

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# Hunger Strike

## History, Community Struggle, and Political Gamesmanship

*September 6, 2005*

*Like most first days of school in Chicago, it was a hot day after the Labor Day holiday. Spirits were high as students descended on the brand-new campus, ready to go to class for the first time in a brand-new, \$73-million-dollar building equipped with an Olympic-sized swimming pool, two professional quality gymnasiums, computer corridors, and a collegiate-style library with bay windows and artistic steel structures adorning the entrance. Using the service entrance to enter the building, I was amazed that the structure was finally finished, with all the politics that go into the development of new schools in Chicago. Even though minor construction was still taking place as students were entering the building, the structure itself was testament to something much deeper—a process whereby lives were placed in harm's way for an equitable education for students in the neighborhoods of Little Village and North Lawndale.*

*I was surprised as I approached the building to see a couple of the former hunger strikers holding placards and signs. At the original planning of the opening of the high school, there was supposed to be a grandiose ceremony, attended by the mayor of the city and the CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Because they decided to attend an event at another school in the city, the first day at the building was without the fanfare of many “dog-and-pony” photo opportunities public officials are known for when anything is considered “new” or “innovative.” Nevertheless, there stood the community activists/residents holding the signs and passing out pamphlets. Because I had a meeting with a teacher, I wasn't able to read the signs or pamphlets. As the school day continued, I checked to see if the community residents were still around after the first period of classes.*

*It's always interesting how the rumor mill works. I asked what the "protest" was about, and no one really seemed to know. Because the vast majority of the people were familiar with the school and the process that made it a reality, many expressed surprise at the sight of the placards and pamphlets. Because the original plan was to have a ribbon-cutting ceremony with the hunger strikers in tow, it didn't make too much sense that community members would be staging a protest. As Rito (principal of the Social Justice High School), shrugged shoulders in the hallway about what was going on, we went about the day. However, I couldn't get it out of my mind: Why the signs and placards?*

*Like many experiences in teaching, the process of reflection can offer tangible solutions. Later in the day, while standing in a corridor of vending machines at the university where I teach, I ran into one of the hunger strikers. She and I were making small talk about the first day at the high school. "Oh, so you were there too?" she asked. When I replied yes, I also mentioned that I saw two of the huelgistas in the service drive holding a sign and passing out pamphlets. Before I could ask a question about what I perceived to be a protest, she informed me that, "We just wanted to greet families and remind them of why the school was built and of our availability to them if they had questions for us." She also told me that they wanted to develop a parent center that would be accessible to the parents of the students and the community at large. In my mind I was puzzled for about twenty seconds, and then it dawned on me: what I thought to be a protest was actually the huelgistas welcoming students and parents to the high school! By this time, while wallowing in my own ignorance, the importance of the work I originally set out to do would smack me in the face. Before assuming, one must listen. Only from these spaces will we gain understanding.*



The opening counterstory is representative of the stumbles and mistakes I've made during my personal journey in working with the collective of community members, teachers, families, and community organizations that were instrumental in creating SOJO. In order to make sense of the aforementioned complex, interwoven layers of race, place, and school, the following chapter seeks to provide context for the creation of the high school. Critical to this framing is the political and sociohistorical contexts of both neighborhoods, the initial story of the hunger strike, and the political economy of CPS. As an overarching theme, the influence of neoliberal urbanism is vital to understanding the current political moment in CPS and in the city writ large. Additionally, my own position as a researcher/educator is perpetually

questioned in a process where I participated in the development of mission, vision, school culture, and curriculum for a high school. From my perspective, the questioning of positionality is a good and necessary thing. Because researchers are traditionally trained to distance themselves from the “research site,” we fall victim to the false colonial notion of academic “objectivity” (Thuiwai-Smith, 2012). In the attempt to create research “from a distance,” we move further away from grasping with the “messiness” of human life. Fortunately and unfortunately for us, our lives are not perfect, clean, and ordered spaces—they are never objective. In this instance, these murky, contested, difficult, and affirming spaces pose unique challenges at any given moment in time.

It is from this perspective that I try to understand myself as a person working with young people and families in La Villita and North Lawndale. Positioned against mainstream media iterations of gang infestation, open-air drug markets, and despair in both communities, there is another story beneath the surface. At first glance, both communities are definitively unique. La Villita has a bustling business corridor and is one of the most densely populated communities in Chicago. North Lawndale, on the other hand, is one of the more sparsely populated communities in the city, at one time having more vacant lots than any other neighborhood in Chicago. Simultaneously, North Lawndale has the highest concentration of greystone buildings, which are some of the most highly coveted properties in the city due to their significance as present remnants of the turn-of-the-century Chicago school of architecture. However, in light of their distinct characteristics on the exterior, both communities share a historical and structural narrative as the community of Greater Lawndale. Deeply rooted in the ideology and practice of White supremacy/racism and neoliberalism, both communities rest firmly in the contradictions of community renewal and disinvestment. As ideology and practice, White supremacy/racism provides an alternate lens by which to assess issues and concerns in both spaces. Combined with the machinations of the neoliberal state, both communities have intimate relationships with particular forms of disinvestment, marginalization, and isolation. Although most visible in North Lawndale, White flight operated at a slower pace in La Villita due to initial attempts of inclusion by long-term White residents. Explained in detail throughout the following sections, the structural and ideological tropes of White supremacy/racism deeply impact each other, promoting aversion between members in both communities. To their credit, some residents of both communities understood this relationship and refused the engineered xenophobia between both neighborhoods outright. Nevertheless, despite many tension-filled moments throughout our

process on SOJO's design team, it is in the spirit of those forward-thinking community residents, that the high school was imagined.

### Interest Convergence in the City: Chicago as Metaphor for Neoliberal Urban Education "Reform"

Coined by legal scholar Derrick Bell (1930–2011), the concept of interest convergence has particular importance in relation to neoliberal urbanism and educational policy in Chicago. The idea that the larger mainstream White society will only accommodate racial equity when it is to their advantage is critical in understanding education and housing policy in Chicago (Bell 1980, 523). In Chicago, because advancements in racial justice have proved beneficial for a small population of middle-class and affluent African-American and Latino/a residents, the vast majority of said populations are still reeling from neoliberal housing and education policy in the city. Documented extensively in the works of Lipman (2003, 2004, 2011), Saltman (2007, 2009), and Fine and Fabricant (2012), Chicago has been a hotbed for educational "reforms." Where changes have been touted as positive, in actuality they have largely resulted in further marginalization of low-income, working-class communities of color throughout the city. It becomes important to frame the hunger strike and the subsequent formation of SOJO in the context of Chicago and neoliberal urbanism, as the city has been centered in the rhetoric of "competition," "value added," and "research driven" in relation to workforce development and education. As part of the politics of interruption, the members of the communities of North Lawndale and Little Village vehemently oppose the neoliberal turn in education. From the federal policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to its localized manifestation through Renaissance 2010, SOJO exists in a complex intersection of community demand, education policy, community development, and partisan politics. Where these types of entanglements are familiar to Chicago, the intersection deserves attention in order to understand the relationship between hypersegregation, neoliberal urbanism, and educational policy.

Rooted in the belief that free-market economies provide solutions to the vast majority of social concerns, neoliberal reform is centered in the rights of the individual coupled with the privatization of public goods. The market is understood as correct and without fault, resulting in the rationale for privatization of public goods for the purpose of cost-effectiveness and

the maximizing of profits. Through these machinations neoliberal policies “have succeeded in reshaping cities and urban policy discourses and have set in motion new forms of economic, social, and spatial inequality, marginality and exclusion” (Lipman 2011, 26). For low-income families of color, this often results in a rhetorical charge that the market can solve the vast majority of political, economic, and social issues. Because these resources are falsely positioned as available to all, low-income, working-class families of color are often blamed for not accessing said resources.

This manifestation is glaringly evident in Chicago. Centered in the 1995 educational policy shift resulting in mayoral control of CPS, the mayor currently has sole authority in appointing the school board, which is responsible for final approval of school-related issues (e.g., financial matters, curricular shifts, contract procurement, approval of new schools, etc). In addition to the ability to appoint members of the school board, the mayor has the ability to overturn any decision made by the board. Facilitated under the twenty-two-year mayoral tenure of Richard J. Daley, the city has laid a blueprint for numerous cities in the United States desiring to centralize control of its school system. In that time frame, the number of educators on the school board has decreased significantly. Currently the board membership consists largely of people from business, legal, and philanthropic sectors. This fosters a reciprocal relationship between the board and the mayor’s office as board members are usually individuals or employees of entities who have contributed significantly to the mayor’s reelection campaign.

Deeply rooted in neoliberal ideology and rhetoric, this facilitated convergence of housing and educational policies. With Chicago’s attempt to market itself as a global city, housing has been paired with education as key components in the city’s development, while attracting international investment from tourism and business ventures. Dating back to 1971, mayor Richard J. Daley (father of Richard M.) spearheaded a policy and planning initiative known as the Chicago 21 Plan, targeting twenty-one wards (geographic and political districts) for redevelopment. Considered as part of the last wave of urban renewal strategies, the Chicago 21 Plan should be understood as the blueprint for neoliberal reform in the city.

Fast-forwarding forty-plus years to the present, actions by the mayor and other state agencies to secure corporate contributions via free-market strategies has become the norm not only locally, but nationally and internationally. Sections of the Chicago model of reform have been duplicated in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Houston. Officials from all three cities

have come to Chicago to study mayoral control (of the school board) and how to connect education and business with the intent to foster long-term development. Internationally Chicago has been cited for its improvements in business, housing, and education. As a central hub for global finance, informational technological advancements, and management for systems of production, Chicago has fashioned itself as a viable competitor for investment from transnational global firms in business, industry, and entertainment (Smith and Stovall, 2008).

Through a collaborative of business interests known as the Commercial Club of Chicago, its Civic Committee developed a 2003 report known as "Left Behind." Included in this report was the notion that students in the United States were falling behind internationally in reading, math, and science. Their suggested solution was to retool the public educational landscape by infusing "innovation" from the business sector. Said innovations would be for the purposes of strengthening the US workforce and returning the US economy to supremacy in the global marketplace. The people best suited for this direction were those who possessed an intimate knowledge of free-market strategies to boost competition among education providers (Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, 2003). Key to this strategy is the idea that competition is best to boost academic performance. Under free-market capitalism the belief is that if one school is performing well, it will push others to improve due to the interests of both institutions for students. Contrary to this understanding is the fact that each school serves a different set of students requiring a unique set of resources germane to that particular population. The market-based competition strategy becomes ridiculous and absurd when accounting for the unique needs of students in a particular school.

Nevertheless, the city moved forward with the policy and rolled out a plan in the summer of 2004 called Renaissance 2010. Discussed in detail in chapter 3, the idea promoted to the public was to implement the suggestions of the Civic Committee. In Chicago and other large urban centers in the United States for now and the foreseeable future, public education is intimately connected to market-driven neoliberal urbanism. Discussed in detail in the next sections, this reality was inescapable in our duration on the design team. SOJO, as a neighborhood public school, exists in perpetually contested space as a school that comes into existence during the height of the Plan for Transformation and Renaissance 2010. As the two policies converge, they provide the backdrop for the historical undergirding of the politics of interruption in creating a neighborhood high school.

### Greater Lawndale in Context: La Villita (South Lawndale) and North Lawndale

Chicago, as a city hypersegregated by race and class, contains many adjacent neighborhoods that have strict, understood, physical and psychological boundaries that limit interactions between different racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups. Despite the adjacent relationship and similar economic narratives, there are situations where the physical, psychic, and historical boundaries prohibit residents from traveling outside of their demarcated space. Language, race, culture, and geography continue to expand the complexities of space in both neighborhoods to this day. However, there have been intentional moments of engagement, from the election of Harold Washington in 1983, the creation of the Independent Political Organization (IPO) in 1981, and numerous conjoined efforts for accessible transportation and community development in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century (i.e., the development of the Pink Line rail system that services both communities). The creation of the high school should be included in the continuum of such developments.

Often relegated to the historical memory of long-term Chicago residents, the neighborhoods of South Lawndale/Little Village (La Villita) and North Lawndale were at one time known as the Community of Greater Lawndale. The monikers of North and South come in later years as the two communities began to divide geographically and ethnically. Until the mid-1940s North Lawndale remained primarily populated by the descendants of Jewish families largely from Russia while the South remained a stronghold for residents of Hungarian, Ukrainian, and Czech heritage. Over the years, demographic shifts precipitated by deindustrialization and urban sprawl (particularly suburbanization and White flight) resulted in marginalization and isolation for both communities. Because it was not as heavily affected by the 1968 riots after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, South Lawndale's racial transition was slower, but in the end, both communities became predominantly communities of color. Despite the slower rate of transition for South Lawndale, the overarching narrative of both communities is similar. However, the realities of neighborhood transition and subsequent development have manifested themselves differently in both spaces.

Simultaneously, the two communities are continually pegged as largely poverty-stricken and devoid of concerned residents. Never to discount the challenges faced by members of both communities (i.e., poverty, illicit drug trade proliferation, street organization (gang) tensions, police brutality,

disinvestment, destabilization, marginalization, isolation, etc.), more nuanced accounts of community dynamics are critical in locating critical undercurrents of resistance and struggle. On closer review, both communities have been ravaged by policies rooted in a logic of disposability. As critical infrastructure has either been removed or is significantly difficult to access in both communities, many residents are relegated to matrix of survival-mode, making it difficult to move beyond immediate needs. Returning to neoliberal rhetoric, the city has access to a population that is disposable, meaning it can be instantly replaced due to the extreme difficulty in securing quality of life concerns (i.e., housing and schools). With few alternatives, the hope is that a rotating door of new residents will not be able to organize due to the immediate difficulties of making it through the day.

Fortunately history has provided another narrative. It is from these struggles that communities galvanize their efforts to pose new alternatives with the intent of changing their conditions. Significant factions in La Villita and North Lawndale have been diligent in their resistance to state violence in the form of housing discrimination, inequitable education, low-wage employment, and access to health care. Although organizing in both communities has largely occurred separately, the brief moments of collaborative community organizing between both communities provide the counternarrative to commonplace rhetoric of disposability through blight and abandonment.

Recognizing explicit challenges in both communities, there is another layer that pairs and separates both communities. Although not the focus of this book, the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) plays a significant role in the development of the high school. Deeply centered in two community development corporations and one philanthropic organization, all three were instrumental to the school's development. Nevertheless, there are internal and external contradictions that are important to the history and future of both neighborhoods. The Little Village Community Development Corporation (LVCDC), the Lawndale Community Development Corporation (LCDC) and the Steans Family Foundation were instrumental in the early organization and development of the design teams and the subsequent creation of the high school. LVCDC and LCDC, as community development corporations operate as a hub for community initiatives that are centered in community needs, often training and employing community residents as facilitators of the various initiatives. While not "corporations" in the traditional sense, they are outgrowth of the advent of community organizations originally centered in housing and commercial development. As a outgrowth of the Ford Foundation's 1960 Gray Areas Program, the Federal



Government's Special Impact Program, and the 1966 amendment to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, CDCs are loosely defined as organizations that are "private, non-profit development organizations, serve low and moderate income people and their communities, have a community-based board and have completed at least one unit of housing or one commercial or industrial development project" (National Congress of Community Economic Development in Liou and Smith, 1996, 2). Both organizations, developed to address community needs, find themselves in a particular daily internal struggle. Because the two establishments are heavily supported by philanthropic organizations, the fact of perpetually shifting funding priorities has the potential to place them at the behest of their funders. In both instances, program coordinators and executive directors find themselves in the perpetual grind of attempting to secure multiyear grants that may or may not be centered in the needs of the community.

The Steans Family Foundation, as a philanthropic organization that focuses specifically on North Lawndale, operates from a different perspective. Harrison Steans made his money with a corporation that bought banks and later founded the Financial Investments Corporation of Chicago, specializing in venture capital and real estate. He also founded North Lawndale College Prep in 1998 and has a daughter who sits on the board (Fortin 1998). As a grant-awarding organization, they define themselves as "investors" in North Lawndale, "interested in creating the highest possible levels of human gain for the limited dollars we have available" ([www.steansfamily-foundation.org/principles.shtml](http://www.steansfamily-foundation.org/principles.shtml)). Again, the free-market neoliberal rhetoric is important, as many Steans awardees in education are charter schools. This becomes important because charters are viewed as contributors to educational "innovation" in relation to their results-based strategies. At the same time, included in their awardees are other local organizations that are engaged in work with some of the most marginalized members of the community of North Lawndale. Organizationally, these tensions are both racialized and classed. The Steans family is a wealthy White family from an affluent Chicago suburb. One hundred percent of their grantees serve students of color (primarily African-American) in North Lawndale. Similar to philanthropist Julius Rosenwald in the development of rural schools and historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the early twentieth century, the Steans foundation are similar White architects of Black education, in that their efforts may be charitably motivated, but are not centered in creating self-sufficient communities (Watkins, 2004). Instead, their grant-making is still an act of benevolence, disallowing grantees to ask and answer deeper questions about their conditions and how to change them.

At the same time, there are scores of North Lawndale residents who would defend the work of the Steans Family Foundation. Some feel that if not for their efforts, many of the programs centered in community uplift would not exist. As a structural issue, I cannot discount their agency and navigational skills that allow them the ability to develop concrete analysis of their condition while moving to improve it. For these reasons, I do not posit that the founders of the Steans Foundation are inherently bad people. Instead, I see their efforts as reflective of a misinformed, missionary mentality based in market-driven strategies. Business models of education are problematic in that winners and losers are often predetermined. If we have schools that focus on college admission as the sole model of success, rationales are created to dismiss those who are not thought to be a “fit.” This returns us back to the colonizer rationale of “we know what’s best for you.” Because this is incorrect, it would be egregious to write a story absent of these tensions. The NPIC does not evoke a linear, causal relationship between the organization, its grantees, and the communities they serve. Because the tensions are layered and complex, the responsibility of the Critical Race Scholar is to name the contestation outright, with a commitment to unpack the contradictions for the purpose of improving future work. In relation to SOJO, certain staff members of the Steans Foundation, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation through the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI), were instrumental to the design team in our process and beyond opening day.

Coupling the relationship of community development corporations to the NPIC, LVCDC, and LCDC share a connection through the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), which has been instrumental in various initiatives in North Lawndale and La Villita. Adding education to the original tropes of housing and commercial development, the efforts of LISC are funded by major national philanthropic organizations (e.g., the Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, McCormick Foundation, etc.) and corporate sponsors (e.g., J. P. Morgan Chase Bank). Where the corporate relationships are not guaranteed to devalue the work that is happening on the ground with communities, they can be influential regarding the direction and limitation of the community engagement. Deepening the contradictions, in the process of creating design teams, several key members of the creation of the high school process were unable to continue with the process due to lack of funding. Discussed in future chapters, the NPIC relationship, in the case of LVCDC and LCDC, is indicative of an uneven relationship that has resulted in both contested constraint and tangible com-

munity development. Throughout my involvement on the design team and into the life of SOJO, these contestations are ever present.

### La Villita: Transition, Struggle, and Community Stability

Originally conceptualized as a subdivision of suburban Cicero by real estate developers Alden C. Millard and Edwin Decker in 1871, as an area for affluent families, Lawndale soon shifted to a predominantly working-class community by the turn of the century. As the West side of the city became the hub of early twentieth century industry for Chicago and the Midwest region, affluent German and Irish descended residents were replaced by Czech, Polish, German, and Hungarian immigrants seeking work in the industrial sector (Magallon 2009, 9).

For years, South Lawndale (then known as Lawndale/Crawford) became a desired community, as the neighborhood of Pilsen contained overcrowded tenement apartments populated with first-generation Eastern European immigrants. As well-paying factory and city employment became available for the sons and daughters of the first generation, families began to move south and purchased smaller, single-family brick homes that were reflective of the community's working-class ilk. Large factories like Western Electric and International Harvester employed thousands of residents, creating a staple of secure employment for two generations of families. Additionally, the business corridor on Twenty-Sixth Street provided opportunities for families who sought to branch out from factory jobs into entrepreneurial ventures. This created a vibrant, working-class community that was able to maintain itself and continue the tradition of Chicago as a "city of neighborhoods." Missing from this narrative, however, was the residential segregation of the city that contained thousands of African-Americans on the South Side of the city. Although their migration west to North Lawndale would soon follow, the peaceful imagery of early- to mid-twentieth-century South Lawndale as Eastern European ethnic enclave is a popular narrative in Chicago lore. However, the Eastern European iteration of the story only provides a partial view into the layered complexities of the neighborhood.

Although the community is largely thought to be a space that made a smooth transition from White Eastern European residents to a predominantly Latino/a enclave, the shift reveals deeper contestation. By the 1950s, Latino/a families began to locate in South Lawndale in small numbers in the northeastern portion of the neighborhood. Thought of as a natural

extension of Pilsen (the adjacent community to the North and East), these families also had members who were able to secure employment or embark on entrepreneurial ventures in the city. Pilsen, also making a transition from Eastern European to Latino/a (predominantly Mexican) was densely populated and had little room for new residents at the time. Additionally, the neighborhood directly to the North of Pilsen (Little Italy) had a growing number of Latino/a families by the late 1950s (Fernandez, 2012). By the mid-1960s, these families were displaced by the building of the University of Illinois at Chicago East Campus, razing thousands of homes in favor of university buildings. Many of these displaced families sought refuge in South Lawndale, as second- and third-generation Whites who could afford it were moving out of the neighborhood for larger homes in newly sprawling suburbs to the North and West. Because the numbers were relatively small at first, Latino/a families were able to move into Lawndale with minimal infractions. In fact, there were attempts at inclusion that were relatively successful as the name “Little Village” was coined by president Richard Dolejs of the Twenty-Sixth Street Community Council reflect immigrant families from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Ukraine, and Mexico. The idea was that families with roots in the aforementioned countries were most familiar with smaller towns or “villages” (Magallon 2010, 91).

By the same token, the inclusion of Latino/a families was largely rooted in the Twenty-Sixth Street Council’s attempt to disassociate themselves from the African-American neighborhood of North Lawndale. This slowly began the divide between Latino/a and African-American residents, largely fueled by racial animus from the descendants of Eastern Europeans. As North Lawndale was given the nickname “Slumdale” by White residents in the early ’60s, there was fear that South Lawndale would succumb to the same conditions as their northern neighbors. Latino/a residents, firmly established in the northeast corner of the community, were positioned as hard-working families who had come quietly to the neighborhood. Despite their “deserving” status granted by ethnic Whites, this was a shrouded attempt to preserve established businesses on Twenty-Sixth Street. For these reasons, community stabilization became critical. In order to do so, it became critically important to establish relationships with the newly growing community of Latino/a residents. Despite the initial delay of White flight, the combination of the draw of the suburbs coupled with the fear of the encroachment of new African-American residents to the North, changed the community for good. As these families slowly left the neighborhood, their businesses went with them. However, instead of the buildings lying dormant, enterprising Latino/a residents purchased or leased many of the storefronts and replaced

existing establishments with taquerias, *carnecerias*, *supermercados*, *botanicas*, and restaurants from Northern and Central Mexican states. Still known by many as Little Village, many residents have adopted the nickname “La Villita,” to reflect the culture of its current population (*ibid.*). Shrouded in the veneer of cultural tourism and historical nostalgia, the retail corridor of Twenty-Sixth Street in La Villita is currently positioned as a tourist destination for visitors to Chicago. Due to its insular and densely populated corridors, Twenty-Sixth Street is the second-highest-grossing retail district in the city of Chicago (Magallon 2009, 10).

At the same time, the community remains a hub for immigrant families that may not reap the benefits of the economic virility of Twenty-Sixth Street. Internally, this has created a partial rift. While the majority of the community would be considered working class/low income, there are small sections of the community that have middle-class enclaves. Largely fueled by the aforementioned economic gains by a slight number of residents, these have made for divisions in the community regarding education, housing, and city services. Specifically in education, this has created tensions as to what type of schools best serve community members. As there is a significant push locally and nationally for charter schools, organizations like the United Neighborhood Organization have championed the proliferation of charters to address the shortfalls of CPS in providing quality education for working-class and low-income Latino/a families. Complicating matters further, as some residents gained financial stability, they also moved to adjacent suburban communities, further depleting the community’s tax base. The neighboring suburbs of Cicero, Stickney, and Berwyn, like La Villita, have shifted from predominantly White to Latino/a. In light of these factors, there continues to be concerted efforts to address the needs of community residents in La Villita.

### North Lawndale: Containment, Destabilization, and the Will to Fight

Rapidly dwindling numbers of North Lawndale residents and even fewer Chicagoans remember the community as a thriving, robust port of entry for Russian Jews. Instead, the common narrative filling popular news outlets is one of blight and neglect. At the same time, in opposition to the commonplace narrative, it is important to understand the dynamics of North Lawndale as imbued in a larger story of racial animus, deindustrialization, disinvestment, exploitation, and active resistance through community

organizing. In recognition of these factors, it is also important to understand North Lawndale structurally. From a structural perspective, we can conclude that “slum” conditions are not an inherent occurrence. Rather, they are intimately connected to the political, social, and economic moments, through individual and collective actions that contribute to a neighborhood’s decline. Resisting this narrative, the history of community organizing in North Lawndale sheds a different light on the community. Instead of a neighborhood that experienced decline completely at the behest of its new residents, it was a space targeted for containment and marginalization by the state (the “state” in this instance being the city of Chicago).

Annexed by the city in 1889, North Lawndale was originally an extension of the township of Cicero. Marked as an industrial area, international companies established plants that served as the economic engine for the community until the mid-twentieth century. With the influx of factories to the community, none was more influential than the World Headquarters of the Sears & Roebuck Company. With an expansive footprint on the community, headquarters provided workers with a community center, health clinic, parks and recreation services, and athletic fields (Lane et al. 2007, 4).

The golden years of North Lawndale’s economic boon (1900–1950) were also a period of intense population growth, as the community’s population doubled from 1910 to 1920 and added an additional 18,000 residents by 1930 (Lane et al., 5). In the decade of 1950–1960, however, many factories began to downsize while some relocated to other areas in the city and suburbs. During the same time period, the population almost shifted completely from 90 percent Jewish in 1950 to 91 percent African-American by 1965. Sears & Roebuck Co. followed suit, relocating their operations to the suburbs, with the North Lawndale World Headquarters center officially shutting its doors by 1987. By the mid-1950s, African-American residents began to descend on the community as restrictive covenants on home ownership and rentals were lifted throughout the city. Coming in on the tail end of the second stint of the Great Migration, the influx of this new group of residents were also largely from the South. Paired with residents from the South Side of the city, the abundance of housing stock presented new opportunities for families in a neighborhood that was steadily depopulating. At the same time, with the departure of large industry came significant unemployment, creating significant decreases in social and economic infrastructure (Lane et al., 6).

Deepening the socioeconomic challenges to the community was the predatory lending practice of contract sales. Due to the ability to gain steady factory employment in the community or in one of the nearby

collar suburbs, some African-American migrants to North Lawndale were able to purchase homes. However, these purchases were dubious, due to the exploitative nature of contract sales. Similar to the housing bubble of the early twentieth-first century, with the advent of Adjustable Rate Mortgages (ARM) and other dubious financial instruments like credit default swaps, contract sales were in the same vein. Masterfully explained by Satter in her account for the struggle for fair housing throughout Chicago's West Side, this practice was the amalgamation of racist exclusion from the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), the City of Chicago, and the Mortgage Lenders Association.

Because Blacks were excluded from conventional sources of mortgage financing, they were forced to buy on contract. But installment land contracts (or "articles of agreement for warranty deed," as they were technically called) left buyers . . . in a highly vulnerable position. Like homeowners, they were responsible for insurance and upkeep—but like renters they could be thrown out if they missed a payment. While it cost from \$100 to \$300 to instigate foreclosure proceedings against those defaulting on a mortgage, a forcible entry and detainer (that is, eviction) action against a contract buyer cost only \$4.50. Worst of all, evictions in Illinois were extraordinarily difficult to challenge in court. (Satter 2009, 57)

The process of renting apartments was no better. With the decline of large industry in the neighborhood, housing stock was turned over to slumlords who did little to nothing in terms of upkeep and repairs. Unlike South Lawndale, Jewish residents in the first decade of the twentieth century built large, multiunit apartment buildings to address overcrowding, as families rapidly populated the neighborhood. As these families moved to suburbs and other parts of the city, some saw seized on money-making opportunities. If they could "flip" some apartment buildings (buy them and sell them after one year to make a profit), it would also leave them money to buy other properties and rent them out as income property. Because the neighborhood remained overcrowded with the surge of Black families, rents were inflated due to limited housing options for poor residents and the lack of public housing stock in the community. These factors enabled slumlords to charge exorbitant prices for rent while refusing to tend to basic maintenance and upkeep. As apartment buildings remained in disrepair, vermin infestations, and other health concerns became rampant. Further contributing to the

mainstream narrative of blight and neglect is the idea that the community never recovered from the 1968 riots in protest of Dr. King's assassination. While this is partially accurate, under closer examination, predating King's arrival in 1966, factors contributing to disinvestment and community destabilization were firmly in play. Noting the rapid economic decline of North Lawndale beginning in the mid-1950s, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) targeted the neighborhood as part of its "Northern campaign" (Satter 2009, 172). As King and members of the SCLC were amazed at the issues facing North Lawndale, they observed the proliferation of contract sales in the purchasing of homes (180).

Again, the common narrative is one of residential neglect mainly perpetrated by community residents. On the contrary, the story remains complex and varied. North Lawndale, as a community of new Black migrants, was blamed for a process of blight that they neither started nor were assisted by the city in changing. Instead, state sanctioned practices of isolation and marginalization, buttressed by substandard education, proximal access to low-wage service sector employment, and predatory lending practices in home purchases and apartment rentals were central in keeping African-American residents of North Lawndale in survival mode. Because rents and mortgages were essentially unaffordable, residents with jobs often had to take up multiple employment just to keep up with rent and mortgage payments. This makes for little time to engage in upkeep and maintenance of housing stock. Coupled with a second stint of outward migration beginning in the 1970s, the community had little time to recover. Captured succinctly by Klinenberg in his description of the 1995 heat wave that ravaged the community, similar conditions prevailed for almost twenty years later.

With few jobs, stores or other public amenities to attract them to the area and a depleted infrastructure after the 1968 riots, the more mobile North Lawndale residents fled the area—almost as quickly as the local Jewish population had a few decades before. Between 1970 and 1990, roughly one-half migrated outward, leaving behind empty homes as well as the neighbors who were either committed or condemned to stay. (Klinenberg 2002, 95)

Discussed in detail later in this chapter, neoliberalism rests the burden of the condition of a community as primarily the fault of the individual. Embedded in the rhetoric of "if the community really cared, then they would take charge of the situation," this common trope deserves to be challenged as historically false and damaging. As its historic Jewish population



left for greener pastures in other parts of the city and sprawling suburbs, Black residents of North Lawndale were immersed in a community that left minimal access to infrastructure and employment. The process continues to this day as residents and organizations in the area have had little time to engage in individual and collective healing from the trauma of long-term disinvestment and community upheaval.

Over the last sixty years Lawndale has experienced two out-migrations of human and physical resources. In addition to the out-migration of Jewish families in the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, there was a second outward migration of African-American residents in the early 1980s to mid-1990s, who left for more desirable neighborhoods. Despite the colossal costs to the community, there are still efforts aimed at reinvigoration and stability. At the same time, it is incorrect to position North Lawndale residents as hapless victims. Historically and to this day there are numerous organizations that have dedicated themselves to the development and further improvement of the community. From the Contract Buyers of Lawndale (CBL) in the late 1960s to the North Lawndale News, to the Lawndale Christian Development Organization developed in 1987, despite challenging circumstances, they have been attempts to develop infrastructure throughout the community. Beginning with the Contract Buyers League in the late 1960s and early '70s, and efforts to address school overcrowding in the '80s, these moments of organizing have been riddled with infrastructure deterioration and massive disinvestment.

Imbedded in this process and deeply critical to the development of the high school was previously mentioned Lawndale Christian Development Corporation (LCDC). Started as the extension of a Lawndale Christian Church in 1987, its expansion to a community development corporation has centered itself in education, housing, employment, and health care. When community development corporations became the darlings of the philanthropic sector in the early 2000s, LCDC was able to capitalize on this moment while building infrastructure along the Ogden corridor (one of the two major thoroughfares in the neighborhood). Devastated by the '68 riots, Ogden Avenue laid barren for years, with few business outlets and even fewer homes. As the church settled on Ogden, one of the goals was to positively affect development on the corridor. Over the last twenty years this has resulted in a bustling section on Ogden that spans over half a mile on both sides of the street. Housed in their development are a café, a health care center, an early childhood training center, several rooms available to the community for rentals, a partnership with a local restaurant, several community centers with exercise facilities, a senior citizens center,

and a employment center. Paired with housing development in housing with city-assisted greystone preservation, and new housing development, there has been a concerted effort to address some of the definitive issues in the neighborhood.

In addition to organizations like LCDC, the Homan Square organization is the outgrowth of a public partnership between business, city, and community interests. Located on the site of the former world headquarters for Sears, Roebuck & Company, the development features apartments, townhomes, a retail strip mall anchored by a grocery store and a cinema, a charter school, and community center. Originally thought to be the linchpin in the redevelopment effort in North Lawndale, the effort was welcomed by the community. However the issue is still one of access, in that to qualify for housing in Homan Square, one must be “lease compliant” and have no felonies or history of drug abuse. As a beautification effort, it serves as a section of the community that has the potential for access, but could also be viewed with disdain as this is yet another attempt to exclude those who have been historically excluded from access to housing, health care and gainful employment.

One of the more controversial developments in North Lawndale since the late 1990s has been the proliferation of charter schools. Originally, positioned in the community to address historic disinvestment in schools by CPS, they were originally envisioned as a viable tool for educational process in the neighborhood. Before the wide-scale proliferation of charters in Illinois and throughout the country, North Lawndale housed some of the first charters in the city, beginning with North Lawndale College Prep (NCLP). Envisioned in the original version of the concept that allowed for teacher innovation, student agency, and family input, charters were originally thought to provide a pathway to viable educational options for the community. As this vision was short-lived nationally, it had an even shorter shelf life in Chicago. Nevertheless, the tide of charters took hold in the neighborhood, resulting in the depopulation of neighborhood public schools in the area. The groundswell of community support was rooted in the fact that educational options for Black youth in North Lawndale were slim due to nearly six decades of disinvestment from CPS. Similar to the situation in New Orleans, the remaining families are sold the idea that “you’ve had sixty-plus years of madness, so let us provide you with something new” (Buras 2009). However, coupled with this backstory is the fact that many of the charter developments were not equipped to address the expressed needs of the community. Using the neoliberal marketplace ideology of students and parents as “customers,” this ideology has resulted in hyperreliance on high-stakes standardized test

scores as the sole purveyor of educational achievement (Fine and Fabricant, 2011). One prominent national educational management organization (EMO), KIPP Inc. had a school in North Lawndale that closed its doors in the late 2000s. NCLP has expanded to the former Collins high school, while another charter has opened its doors in the former Mason elementary school, once an anchor to the North Lawndale community.

The public-private partnership between CPS and local community organizations were envisioned as key to developing sustainable educational models that addressed student needs through relevant curriculum. As test scores on standardized tests are no real sign of educational attainment or improvement, the suspension rates and expulsion rates for charters and CPS schools are similar, with charters surpassing CPS schools in expulsions and suspensions (Ahmed-Ullah and Richards 2014).

### Resisting the Machine: Community Organizing and Electoral Politics in North Lawndale and La Villita

From the struggle to develop bilingual education programs in CPS, to securing Latino/a representation in City Hall and the Illinois Legislature, to supporting the election of Chicago's first African-American mayor, La Villita has a rich history of community activism. For the myriad reasons, the events leading to the hunger strike beginning on May 13, 2001 should be included in the trajectory of community activism, amid the politically charged realities of Chicago. Often left to the memory of community members, there has been a recent surge of scholarship regarding community struggle for quality education in Chicago (Danns 2004, Lipman 2011, Kartemquin Films, 2014). Almost thirty years prior to the hunger strike, the neighboring Latino/a community to the northeast of La Villita known as Pilsen engaged in a community struggle to build what is now Benito Juarez High School (Cortez 2008, 24). In the late 1960s, African-American residents in North Lawndale engaged in community struggle to get Black studies classes at Farragut High School and to create Collins Community High School in the early 1980s.

At the same time, competing political and community interests in La Villita are critical to the discussion of school creation. Internally and

externally, competing interests at the neighborhood level create instances where the purpose of education is perpetually in question. For some, there is a push to make sure that education is the tool for assimilation, making sure that Latino/a families have access to an “American Dream.” For others, education is the tool to make informed decisions on your life, while seeking to improve the conditions of your community at the collective and individual level. While many would argue the fact that there is overlap in both stances, the differences are fundamental as various factions position themselves as “authentic” voices for the Latino/a community.

All of these tensions are visible in the struggle for community power. Because the majority of political power in Chicago is centralized in the mayor’s office, many local officials (in this case aldermen) feel it is in their best interest to acquiesce to the whims of the mayor. Although the modus operandi of many elected officials in Chicago’s fifty aldermanic wards, the twenty-second ward (home to La Villita) operates as a hotbed of resistance to the mayor’s demands. Simultaneously, it is not a sanguine resistance by community members under the same ideological banner. Instead, there are those who still side with “the machine” and those who choose to oppose it, citing structural and ideological differences with the mayor’s office. These ideological differences come to a head when questions of community infrastructure (particularly housing, education, and employment) are at play. Nevertheless, opposition to traditional machine politics has made the twenty-second ward an outlier over the last thirty-plus years. Despite encroaching internal and external pressures to comply, the hunger strike is an extension of consistent resistance to the will of the mayor’s office.

As the community shifted racially from White to Latino/a, members of the community began to notice disinvestment from the mayor’s office. Known locally and nationally as “the machine,” Chicago is steeped in a decades-long history of democratic power-wielding that specifically rests power at the mayor’s bequest. Throughout my time on the design team, understanding electoral and community politics of La Villita were vital to my personal political education. Gaining a deeper understanding of the struggle for community control allowed for me to navigate through the perpetually shifting contexts at the individual, organizational, and electoral level.

Rooted in the activism of the Independent Political Organization (IPO) under the leadership of Rudy Lozano (1951–1983), Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, and Linda Coronado, Little Village residents saw it necessary to break ties with the political machine of Chicago. Under Richard J. Daley’s terms as mayor in the city, La Villita witnessed the removal or tapering of critical central infrastructure (street cleaning, street light repair, garbage