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*Cuando nosotros vivíamos...:  
Stories of Displacement  
and Settlement  
in Puerto Rican Chicago*

MARIXSA ALICEA

*1828 Carpenter Street: My first home and the  
home of many members of my extended family.*



*Opposite page: Mami and Papi's wedding day.  
Just two weeks after my mother arrived in  
Indiana. April 25, 1953.*

I have lived in Chicago's West Town and Humboldt Park community for most of my life. Over the past 35 years I've witnessed how this area gradually became a Puerto Rican community, and more recently, how it has been gentrified. In 1975, my parents were one of the few people in the neighborhood that could afford to buy a small bungalow. Although the house needed many repairs, my parents, siblings, and I were proud to at least have our own home. It was soon after we moved into our house that I started hearing rumors from neighbors that developers were taking an interest in the area because of its proximity to Chicago's downtown, and to major modes of transportation, such as the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) train lines and expressways. As a result, young, white, middle-class residents began to move into the

ral succession of groups. According to this perspective, in residential areas, one ethnic group succeeds another when the latter achieves economic success and leaves. This way of characterizing the processes



*Tio Pablo & Carmen's wedding day. Northwest Indiana, 1950's.*

of displacement and gentrification was poignantly brought to my attention when I read a newspaper article that described how a long-time resident and activist, Zenaida Lopez, received an anonymous letter after she and other residents in the community had met to discuss the gentrification and the subsequent displacement of long-time residents of the Humboldt Park and West Town communities. "Just as some of you displaced the European immigrants and non-Latino folks whose neighborhood Humboldt Park used to be, it's time to move on.... Deal with it," so declares the letter, whose author claimed to be a former Humboldt Park resi-

U.S. and our intracity migration patterns, I wish to show how the residential settlement patterns of Puerto Ricans in Chicago has been characterized not by a natural process of succession, but rather by extreme forms of domination and exclusion because of our racial and ethnic identity. In addition, like Puerto Ricans in other parts of the country, we have been victims of employer abuses, labor segmentation, and low wages. We have also been negatively impacted by global processes that result in the decline of good-paying jobs and affordable housing. My own lived experiences and those of my immediate and extended family tells me that the patterns of settlement and the displacement we have been subjected to are defined not by a natural process of succession but rather by the ongoing oppression.

The racism that others and I experienced during the initial years of settlement and now, during the process of gentrification that West Town and Humboldt Park are undergoing, has a way of cutting through and exposing even further our fragile sense of place and claim to space and place. It is another way we reexperience the "pain of loss, [and] the loneliness of change" (Martin and Mohanty 1986:202). But the struggles our community has engaged in against discrimination and gentrification communicate our "unrelenting... desire for home, for security, for protection—and not only the



desire for them, but the expectation of a right to these things" (Martin and Mohanty 1986:202). Knowing it is a right, our parents and those of us who were born in the U.S. have taken possession of these environments and created community.

Often when my parents and other elders in our community preface their migration stories with the phrase, "*Cuando nosotros viviamos...*," what typically follows are accounts of the many inequities and injustices they and many others in the community experienced. Yet they also spoke of the courageous ways in which they forged and created home. Here are my family's stories of "*Cuando viviamos en la...*"

#### **Mi Familia: Migration and Settlement in Chicago**

It was 1950 when my father left San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico, and his plane landed in Chicago's Midway Airport—Chicago's only airport at the time. Located in the city's Southwest side, this airport served both the Chicago and Northwest Indiana area, where my father first went to live and work. Like many Puerto Rican men, my father was lured to the United States by the promise of finding a good-paying job. He chose to migrate



*Mami with a baby cousin shortly after her arrival in Indiana Harbor, Indiana.*

to northwest Indiana; relatives recruited him to the area by telling him that he could find a good job and that they would give him a place to stay. At least, my father did find a job, which paid him well, at the Inland Steel mills in Hammond.

My mother, who had grown up just half-a-mile from where my father lived, in Barrio Cerro Gordo, came to the U.S. to

marry my father. They had courted one another while in Puerto Rico, but it was through their love letters that they came to the decision to marry. Gender inequities and the dehumanizing treatment of women partially explained my mother's migration to the U.S. Like many other Puerto Rican women, she saw her marriage and her migration to the United States as a way to escape the gender oppression she experienced.





*Mami and my older sister in the late 50's  
in one of Chicago's public parks.*

care of children, either her siblings or her nephews who had been left in Puerto Rico by her older sisters, who had migrated to the U.S. She also hated that her father rarely let her leave the house and that she was under his constant surveillance.

After living in Indiana for two years, my father developed a stomach ulcer and left his job at the steel mills. He returned to Puerto Rico, hoping he would get better. The lack of jobs in Puerto Rico, however, forced my parents to return to the U.S., now with my older sister in hand. Unable to return to his former job at Inland Steel, my father began working in the train yards and railroads near and around northwest Indiana. When my father was laid off from his job with the railroads, my parents made the decision to move to Chicago, where my dad started working in a factory that laminated tabletops.

In Chicago, my parents first lived on 63rd Street on the southeast side of the city, where a small group of Puerto Ricans lived. In the late 1950s and early

community, who lived in small clusters in various neighborhoods throughout the city. Initial groups of Puerto Rican migrants could be found on the North Side in areas such as the Near North side, Lincoln Park, Uptown, Logan Square, the Near West side, Humboldt Park, and West Town. Other groups settled in the city's South Side—in West and East Garfield Park, Pilsen, the University of Illinois area, Hyde Park, and Woodlawn. Puerto Ricans were allowed in these areas because of vacancies

created by disinvestment and the movements of white Anglo-Americans and European groups to the suburbs.

The first wave of Puerto Rican migrants in Chicago, often lived in run-down, dilapidated rental units such as cheap hotels, old coach houses, single-room-occupancy units, boarding houses, and other apartments. Building owners, seeking to maximize profits, turned many apartment buildings and large mansions into rooming houses, kitchenettes, and other often illegal converted spaces for rent. Paid very little and facing the high cost of rental units, many Puerto Rican





*Carpenter Street in the Pilsen neighborhood, one of several neighborhoods where small clusters of Puerto Ricans lived in the 1950's and 1960's.*

families were forced to live in overcrowded conditions.

There are numerous stories of my relatives' "cuando vivian en la sesentitres" (when they lived on Sixty-third) tales. They told about getting lost on their way to and from work and about the many people migrating from Puerto Rico who moved

near them. Later my parents were able to save up enough money to buy a three-room flat on Carpenter Street in the Pilsen neighborhood, just south of the downtown area. Eventually, the entire building came to be inhabited by our relatives. Cousins, siblings, and *compadres* rented from my father. My parents recall,

though, that this was not always an easy living situation. Extended family members often tell stories of how difficult times were when they lived on Carpenter Street. There was one time when everyone who lived in the building, including my father, had lost their job because they were laid off. My mother has told me countless times that to get through this crisis the





*Photo of Mami (Ana Alicea Flores) sent to my papi after he migrated to the States.*

send my older sister to the grocery store to redeem them for money. Knowing how difficult it was for those who had recently arrived to find and keep jobs that paid decent wages, my parents could not find it in their heart to charge rent to members of their extended families and eventually sold the building.

Over the years, although my parents did face difficult economic times, my family and I clearly had some privileges over others. After several years of unsteady employment, my father was able to find a job as janitor in a factory, where he worked for over 30 years before he retired with a pension. My mother always worked either in small local factories in our neighborhood or as a babysitter taking care of the neighborhood children whose mothers worked outside the home.

Shortly after I was born and after my

stantly in and out of our house. They needed a temporary place to stay until they could find their own housing, and it seemed there was always someone sleeping on our couch, on a cot, or on the floor of our apartment.

Highway construction throughout the city, urban renewal programs in the Near North side, the gentrification of Lincoln Park, as well as the expansion of the University of Illinois, displaced many Puerto Ricans from their initial communities of settlement. In addition, outnumbered by blacks, Puerto Ricans left Woodlawn and East and West Garfield Park. It was in the 1960s, then, that Puerto Ricans concentrated along Division Street, in the West Town and Humboldt Park communities just a couple of miles northwest of the Chicago's downtown area. Unable to secure white tenants, landlords in this area reluctantly rented to Puerto Ricans.

When my family and I first moved into the West Town/Humboldt Park area, it was largely a Polish community. The Poles had established numerous churches, Catholic schools, and hospitals, as well as civic, cultural, and financial institutions in the neighborhood. Many Polish-owned restaurants and several Polish-language newspaper offices lined Division Street and Ashland Avenue. The headquarter of the Polish Roman Catholic Union—one of the community's largest civic and





financial institutions—is still in West Town and houses a Polish museum of history and art. So large was the West Town area's Polish community that at its peak only Warsaw, Poland, had a larger concentration of Polish residents.

The discrimination that Puerto Ricans experienced throughout the United States always has always had its own particular expression. For those of us living in Chicago's Humboldt Park and West Town communities, we experienced overt and direct discrimination from Polish, Ukrainians, and other European immigrants who lived in this area. I recall vividly many incidents of discrimination that I and a lot of Puerto Rican residents experienced in the hands of many of the white European residents.

As a child I was constantly being yelled at by white Anglo-Americans and European immigrants for sitting on their front steps, walking on their grass, or just simply coming too close to their house. They saw us through a racist lens, which presented images of us as wild, dirty, and dumb children who had to be controlled. This constant surveillance and the arrogant sense of entitlement that older European residents exhibited when yelling at us about where we could and could not be were aimed at putting us "in our place." Given how young we were, these almost daily occurrences produced a deep sense of shame within us; at times, we believed that we were not supposed to be where we were.

The mass exodus of Polish and other European immigrants and whites from the neighborhood in response to the large numbers of Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups arriving in West Town and Humboldt Park in the 1950s and 1960s

community, and what were already old, dilapidated, and rundown buildings soon deteriorated even further. Instead of blaming landlords for the increasing decay of the neighborhood, European immigrants who had once lived in the area and others in the city blamed us for not taking care of the neighborhood. Landlords' disinvestment from the neighborhood and the city's neglect of the area, coupled with the problems Puerto Ricans faced securing jobs that paid well, meant that gangs, drugs, violence, and poverty proliferated in our community. So pervasive was violent gang activity, that in the



*Papi (Manuel Alicea) shortly after his arrival in Indian Harbor, Indiana. 1950's.*

late 1960s and early 1970s, Cortez Street, the first street I lived on in West Town, was renamed "Little Vietnam" by community residents.

During the 1970s, the arson fires that took over the West Town and Humboldt Park area reflected landlords' and investors' disinvestment from the community. By the end of the 1970s, there had been so many arson fires along Division Street that the area looked much like the pictures of the wartorn and bombed-out cities of Europe from World War II.





suspected that owners themselves would have gang members set fire to their buildings to collect insurance. It was cheaper to collect insurance money than it was to remodel old and dilapidated buildings. Some owners abandoned their properties to avoid paying taxes on buildings that yielded little income given their deteriorated condition.

But despite the lack of investment by others, Puerto Ricans who arrived in the area set out to create a life and community for themselves. We forged our way into existing institutions and created some of our own. For example, arriving at a time when it would have been difficult to build our own churches because there were already many churches in the neighborhood and because we lacked the support of the Catholic Church, we were



forced to create a place for ourselves in existing churches. In fact, in 1969, at the age of nine, I participated in my first march to protest the discrimination we were experiencing from people at one of the local churches where we attended mass. At Holy Trinity, as in many other churches throughout the city, our Spanish-speaking congregation was forced to hold mass in the basement of the church. I imagine that the excuse given to us was that the main church had too many Polish and English masses and that there was no room in the schedule for us to have our Spanish mass. Strongly disliked by the Polish parishioners of the Church, the Latino priest who had been

who worked at St. Boniface were white, but they had all studied Spanish in Latin America and were much more open to having a diverse congregation.

The incident that finally pushed us over the edge was when we were accused of being messy and dirty because we had left the basement church full of papers and pamphlets from a Holy Week procession that we had organized with some of the local Spanish-speaking congregations. I recall the Sunday when Father Martinez explained to us that the Pastor and priest of the church were more upset about the mess we had left the Church in than they were excited about our having organized such a successful event. We had a group that was scheduled to return to the church after the procession to clean up, but apparently some of the church priests had seen the condition in which the church had been left before the clean-up crew could return from the procession. Parishoners at Holy Trinity felt a strong sense of entitlement to the church because it was a Polish religious community, and because they were the ones who had built the church—as well as many others in the city. To the many white European immigrants in the neighborhood, we were outsiders, and despite sharing a similar faith, they did not believe we had right to be there.

I vividly recall the Sunday morning we marched from Holy Trinity to St.



*Holy Trinity Church*

Boniface to attend mass—it was the first time that my family and I were able to attend a Spanish mass that was held in the main church area as opposed to a basement chapel. At the time I did not fully understand the exact political and defiant nature of our actions, yet I knew this was one time we were fighting back against the discrimination we had so strongly experienced from many of the white European residents of the community. Since then, the Chicago Archdiocese has closed St. Boniface, despite its large vibrant Latino congregation, claiming financial reasons and the high concentration of churches



in the area. Perhaps not surprisingly, the three historically Polish churches within three to five blocks from St. Boniface remain open.

Not everyone who worked for the Catholic Church acted unjustly toward us. The team of priests and religious sisters who worked at St. Boniface and other churches and schools in the area showed solidarity with our community. Besides attending to our spiritual needs, they advocated on our behalf within the church and city, and made room for us by incorporating some of our cultural practices and traditions. Further, recognizing that we had few priests from Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries who spoke Spanish, they identified and nurtured leadership from within our community. In addition, while there were many teachers and sisters who discriminated against me and my fellow Puerto Rican classmates in the high school I attended, there were just as many who sought to provide us with a quality education and who nurtured our spiritual



*Northwestern Settlement House*

and emotional development.

The settlement houses in the neighborhood that had once worked to help in the resettlement process of European immigrants were another set of institutions in which Chicago Puerto Ricans attempted to establish themselves. We made use of their medical, social, and recreational services. I recall, for example, how before my father secured a job with medical benefits, my mother would take us to the free medical clinic at the Northwestern Settlement House. Volunteer tutors also provided their services for free. Erie House, another settlement house in the neighborhood, provided dental care. Yet these places, often staffed by white Anglo-Europeans, rarely felt comfortable and inviting for my family and me. Clinic doctors seemed disengaged and uninterested in helping us.

Besides making use of existing institutions, we also continued to create those of our own. By the 1970s, there were at least two theaters in the area—El San Juan Theater on Division Street and the Royal Theater on Milwaukee Avenue. On Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, the theaters showed Spanish movies; weekday evenings were dedicated to providing local talent an opportunity to perform



league were sent to play against a championship team in Puerto Rico, these weekend games were electric with excitement as each team held on to the hope of winning a free trip to the Island.

It seemed that at least once a month, dances and live performances by Puerto Rican musicians such as Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe performed at the Aragon Ballroom and attracted many teenagers in our community. Too young to attend these events myself, I recall many weekends when my older sister and her peers flocked to the dance clubs to hear the newest singers of *salsa*, a still relatively new music. For neighborhood festivities, *salsa* bands such as Tipica Leal 79, organ-

munity out of Lincoln Park and Old Town and the Division Street Riots fundamentally changed the nature of Puerto Rican community organizations. These events politicized the community and led to the development of institutions that cultivated a more radical consciousness among Puerto Rican youth.

Too young to participate in these struggles myself, I was only vaguely aware of them. My peers and I were the first to benefit from the changes taking place and the new institutions and organizations emerging in our community. For example, as a young adolescent, I participated in one of the first state-funded bilingual programs in the country. Although I was fluent in English and could speak Spanish, I wanted to learn how to read and write Spanish, so with my parent's consent I transferred to the bilingual program at our school.

I recall vividly the day that I was escorted by the school's vice principle to my new 5th-grade bilingual classroom. It was a day that started out with my having a lot of quiet nervous energy about the prospects of a new beginning,

but which ended with the realization that I could accomplish much more than my previous teachers and my prior education had ever led me to believe. As we waited outside our classroom door, I could hear that not only was the teacher speaking Spanish, she was doing so in the manner in which my family and I spoke it at home. The sounds of her voice shattered separations I was not consciously aware existed between my home and school life. When our teacher came to the door to greet us, it was clear to me from the way she spoke and from her physical features



*My cousins & uncles and their friends made up the Chicago baseball team. In 1977, the team won the Roberto Clemente League Championship and an all expense paid trip to Puerto Rico.*

ized by Carlos (Caribe) Ruiz, performed. Furthermore, organizations such as "Caballeros de San Juan" and "El Congreso Puertorriqueño," as well as hometown clubs, continued to serve the social, financial, and recreation needs of the first wave of Puerto Ricans.

The purpose of these institutions was to provide social services to the community. They were not about politicizing us. The 1960s saw a new era for the Puerto



*My sister's sixth birthday party with Mami and Papi and some of our relatives when we lived on Carpenter Street.*

until then, to the age of ten, I had thought that Puerto Ricans could only be janitors, factory workers, and babysitters since these were the only jobs people in our community held. At the end of the school day, I ran home from school eager to share with my parents this new insight and that I had a Puerto Rican teacher who spoke "Puerto Rican Spanish."

The bilingual program was an intimate learning environment I had never before experienced. In the segregated environment of my bilingual classroom, we had largely Puerto Rican teachers, who, similar to the African-American teachers of the segregated schools of the South, brought an ethic of care to their work. Our teachers—Ms. Velasquez, Ms.

Torres, Ms. Flores, Ms. Ruiz, and Ms. Oferá and others—nurtured our intellectual growth, and as bell hooks writes, taught us that "our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist" gender, race, and class oppression (hooks 1994:2). It was in these classrooms as a preadolescent that I became politicized. The program challenged every aspect of my

life. Here I learned about the nature of racism and identity, and about biculturalism. I also learned about the struggles of Puerto Ricans and began to define myself and develop an identity rooted in the history and struggles of our community.

My Puerto Rican teachers also taught me to think beyond the physical and psychic borders of our neighborhood and of the limits set by racist, classist, and sexist standards. I was encouraged to not only go on to high school but also to college. It was here, too, I learned that pursuing my education meant literally and figuratively seeing beyond the physical boundaries of our neighborhood. My teachers taught with conviction and with a sense of purpose and mission. In retrospect, it was in these bilingual classrooms that I learned

that education was not only a place where I acquired specific skills and existing information and knowledge, it was also where I learned that students should be viewed as "subjects acting in and on the world, not as passive recipients of information" (hooks



were still accountable to our family and community. I was encouraged to be a warrior who would both work to clarify my anger and be empowered by it.

These bilingual teachers also played a key role in defining a sense of place for our community. They helped in the settlement process, and in defining community, by contributing to our sense of belonging and rootedness. They were key in helping us claim a space for ourselves within the schools and in helping my parents and my fellow classmates and me realize that we had a right to these places. We witnessed their leadership not only when they organized major cultural events within the school, such as *parrandas* during the Christmas holiday season, but also when they fought at Parent Teacher Association Meetings to insure that our parents had a voice and that our rights would be respected.

By the 1970s, my peers and I also benefited from the work of previous generations of Puerto Ricans and community activists who founded organizations like Aspira. Unable to get the guidance coun-

seling I needed to pursue my goal of attending Northwestern University, I turned to Aspira and institutions such as the Human Services office of the City of Chicago, where people like Mr. Rivera and other first- and second-generation Puerto Ricans worked. In these organizations, counselors showed me how to complete college applications, fill out financial aid forms, and learn about scholarships for which I might be eligible. The Puerto Rican and other Latino counselors who worked in these institutions had succeeded in getting their college degrees and had, as Sandra Cisneros writes in *The House on Mango Street*, “remember[ed] to come back for the others. For the ones who cannot leave....”

The bilingual teachers and the counselors I encountered were more than teachers and counselors; they were cultural workers and healers “struggling against society to undo the damage of years of abuse” (Castellano 1995: 308). They sought to help us heal the “clear cut [and deep/profound] scars” of “internalized self-hatred and fear of [our] own







*Mural on the side of one of the buildings along Rockwell Street near Humboldt Park.*

creative passion that racism, sexism and colonialism had already carved into our young bodies and minds.” Even at the young age of 8, 9, and 10, before I entered the bilingual program, my classmates and I were “fragmented souls” (Castellano 1995: 309). We had grown too shy to speak up in class and had no passion for learning because we had heard the loud and clear message that we were not capable of learning. Little of what we were taught had any relevance to our lives or inspired us to want to learn. Like many others, I came into their classroom with a “deep sense of personal shame about everything,” especially for being brown

“conjurer, a magus with all [their] teaching card[s] up [their] sleeve, [for our teachers and counselors] to deal with our fragmented souls” and bring us back to life (Castellano 1995:309). Besides sharing with us their knowledge and enthusiasm of Puerto Rican history and culture, these bilingual teachers helped us to name, acknowledge, and go beyond the psychic pain of the constant discrimination that we experienced within the community at large and from teachers and students within our own school.

In addition to successful efforts to develop organizations like *Aspira* and the bilingual program I attended throughout

I grew up hearing about community struggles, about groups such as the “Young Lords” and “*los independentistas*,” and about our efforts to win local elections. I heard, too, about the riots on Division Street and the community advocates who argued for better health care services in the community, and who fought for the free clinic that now stands on the corner of Western and Division.

But, my parents, fearing these “radical” groups, forbade my brother, sister, and me from going anywhere near Division Street or Humboldt Park. Having grown up in the 1940s and 1950s and hearing about Puerto Rico’s progress under Luis Munoz Marin and the political ideology espoused by this leader, my parents came to believe, like many other Puerto Ricans of this era, that Puerto Rico was too small to sustain its people and would not survive as an independent country. In the midst of the Cold War, my parents and many others feared that if Puerto Rico were to gain its independence, it would be taken over by communists. The logic was that since Puerto Rico was too small to govern and sustain itself, it was best that the United States maintain control over us rather than the Soviet Union. Looming over their heads were the horror stories my parents heard on the radio and on television about Castro and life in a communist regime. These stories did not seem far fetched as my parents heard similar accounts from Cuban friends with whom they worked. These friends warned my parents of the evils of communism—food rationing and the loss of freedom. My parents also feared that if Puerto Rico were to become independent and then communist, they would not be able or willing to fulfill their dream of returning home. This fear of communism and Castro translated into my parents’ and their generation’s



*An older home along Cortez Street now stands next to a new condominium development.*

participation in radical community struggles, it was also their efforts to assert the moral superiority of our culture in contrast to that of the United States, which they perceived as degenerate. Claiming a morally superior culture over that of the U.S. was done to resist racist attitudes and definitions of our people as inferior. Like other first-generation immigrant groups, my parents maintained connections with homeland and U.S. ethnic communities by attempting to construct our U.S. home as an authentic and pure cultural space. Yet part of constructing this authentic cultural space required them to uphold traditional gender roles, and they expected my sister and me to do likewise. We were to uphold traditional gender roles in the name of the community’s cultural survival and nationalism. That is, we had to act as emblems of cultural authenticity and purity. This required that my parents control our autonomy, mobility, and personal decision-making; our labor; and our sexuality.

Because we were not “*muchachos de la calle*,” my mobility was restricted to a very small perimeter around our house—a perimeter that did not extend to the

which others subjected our community.

Like many other Puerto Ricans, I consider the Division Street area, especially the area near Western and California Avenues, to be the heart of the Puerto Rican community. Many Puerto Ricans live here, and stores in the area sell Puerto Rican food products and music, as well as clothing, religious products, and novelties that appeal to Puerto Ricans. Even before the creation of *Paseo Boricua*, this area was the site of many social, political, and cultural events. But for many Puerto Ricans, Division Street was not the focus of our daily lives and in fact was considered an area we should avoid. It was unfairly seen by my parents and many in the community as violent and dangerous, not only because of the large presence of gangs in the area, but also because it had been the site of the 1966 riots.

The riots of 1966 were not understood by all, and especially not by my parents, as a rallying and defining radical moment in our community. Rather, they were seen as another form of violence from which my parents had to protect us. My parents and many in the community considered the more radical groups, “*los independentistas*,” to be gangs, and “terrorist” groups. My

sister and I and my brother needed to be protected from them.

For my older sister, this period in our community’s history was difficult because she, like many other youth in the community, had to choose between our parents’ beliefs that these groups were terrorists who did not have Puerto Rico’s best interest in mind, and the beliefs of teachers and leaders who urged the youth to assume more radical positions and struggle for the independence of Puerto Rico. Northeastern Illinois University, located on the North side of Chicago, where my sister and many other Chicago Puerto Ricans attended college in the 1970s, became an important rallying point for community leaders who worked with community youth and exposed them to more radical ideas.

Many scholars and community leaders characterize the first wave of Puerto Rican immigrants and the organizations they created as operating out of an assimilationist perspective. Later generations, especially the second generation of Puerto Ricans that came of age in the 1960s, emerged with a more radical leadership and created organizations aimed at challenging existing institutions. My own



growing-up experience tells me, however, that this dichotomy is too simple for understanding the lives of the first- and second-generation Puerto Ricans of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, who struggled to create community and place for those who followed. It denies the many ways the first wave of immigrants fought against the racism and discrimination they experienced and how they sought not only to integrate into existing institutions but also to change them. My bilingual teachers, for example, who were immigrants and belonged to my parents' generation, were radical in their approach but also worked to accommodate us into existing institutions.

### The Gentrification Of West Town and Humboldt Park

The gentrification of Wicker Park—the section of West Town in which I grew up and lived up until a year ago—actually came rather slowly. Although Wicker Park has beautiful mansions from the turn of the century, the numerous apartment buildings in the area kept the first wave of yuppies out of Wicker Park. These professionals opted instead to buy small two-flat and single family homes in the northeastern section of West Town, which came to be known as Bucktown.

It is the language of colonialism that is often used to describe the process of gentrification. The image of “pioneers” conquering the untamed “wilderness” of urban life was and continues to be used to characterize the process of gentrification. For example, I recall reading one newspaper article from 1974, titled, “Two modern pioneers tame a bit of the urban wilderness.” This piece exemplifies some of the discourse surrounding the process of gentrification and the ways in which longtime residents of West Town/Wicker Park, many of whom are Puerto Rican,



*Dona Angelia & Don Jeno once lived in this now remodeled building. Dona Angelia used to cure ailing people who visited her with herbs and “sobos.”*

everyone—winos congregate on corners, kids break bottles and windows, dogs roam in packs, garbage overflows containers, and litter clutters streets.” But, the story goes on to say, the Boumenots and other romantically labeled urban pioneers “are finding it is possible to lead a relatively *genteel* life in the neighborhood known as Wicker Park” (*Chicago Tribune*, October 12, p. 3).

The ethnic diversity of the community is one of the qualities that real estate agents and middle-class residents who have already invested in the neighborhood use to “sell” the neighborhood to prospective home buyers. However, the ethnic diversity they cite in many of these articles dismisses much of the discrimination that Puerto Ricans and other groups



example, states, "A strong point of the area, on which the new and old residents agree is the racial and ethnic diversity of the neighborhood. Sure there's always a certain amount of rub between people in daily living. But somehow, this area became integrated, black and white and Spanish with a minimum of turmoil." Missing from these portrayals of the ethnic diversity in our community, and the changes it was undergoing, was the rage I felt when I saw people in our community forced to leave the neighborhood, or the ways in which Puerto Rican youth were harassed in the community because they were in the way of "community progress."

Part of the process of "selling" the community to more affluent individuals entails renaming the area. Disassociating the area from the official city name of West Town and Humboldt Park is important since residents have come to learn about these communities through the media, which often portrays only the dangerous and violent aspects. Thus realtors and those trying to promote the area often refer to it as Bucktown, East

Village, and Wicker Park. Rarely is Humboldt Park or West Town indicated in advertising for home sales and rentals. Signs for new condominiums in Humboldt Park's eastern border with West Town advertise the apartments as luxury living in West Bucktown, soothing newcomers' "racial fears." I do recall when the various sections of our community were being renamed. Plaques and banners barring these new names had to be affixed to buildings or hung from streetlights to educate residents and potential buyers and to demarcate the community as new and different from the larger neighborhood area.

In the early 1980s newly arrived white community residents formed the "Old Wicker Park Committee" (OWPC) and organized and sponsored "The Greening Festival." This event was carefully orchestrated by the Committee to attract other white middle-class people. By the time these Greening Festivals were taking place, I had moved from the neighborhood to Evanston, a small, fairly affluent town just north of Chicago, where I

*An older home along Cortez Street now stands next to a new condominium development.*





attended Northwestern University. I recall seeing Greening Festival flyers and posters in Evanston, but few in the community itself. Of course, the idea was to encourage affluent suburban residents to visit the neighborhood and possibly purchase newly remodeled homes, or take on the task of remodeling one of the run-down homes in the area. For a fee of 10 or 15 dollars—an amount that was beyond what poor long-time community residents could afford—participants of the Greening Festival could enter and see the beautiful gray-stone mansions that had been newly remodeled.

In the early phases of gentrification, besides the Greening Festival, leaders of the Old Wicker Park Committee promoted the neighborhood at downtown events like “City House” at Navy Pier. Because we lived right on Wicker Park Avenues, my family and I would receive the Committee’s newsletter. This is how they described the “City House” event:

Navy Pier’s “City House” Exposition was a tremendous success. How successful, you say? Well, it was like this—21 paid memberships were taken in during the 3 days as well as 120 guests signed in who wanted to know more about OWPC. Furthermore, [over 100] Greening Festival exhibition forms were issued to potential exhibitors. Certainly, one of the most rewarding facets of the whole exposition was that we were shown how much all of OWPC’s previous efforts to publicize Wicker Park have paid off. Many of our guest used phrases such as “I’ve heard a lot about the area...” or “I saw your exhibit at the Cultural Center and...” or “I’ve read about Wicker Park in the Tribune and ...” or “I saw your insert on Channel 9’s “This is My

Yesserri, folks—not only did we have the best exhibit entered by a community organization (as acclaimed by the officials of City House as well as our peers from other community groups), but we definitely had the busiest. Rarely was there a time when we weren’t two rows deep and five rows across in people interested in our neighborhood. All those years spent trying to put Wicker Park on the map really paid off.... Nowhere can it be said that the rebirth and growth of an inner-city neighborhood was not the direct response of the involvement of its habitants. The success of Wicker Park is the story of its habitants and the organization they formed—the Old Wicker Park Committee.

The Greening Festival and its logo, as well as the exhibit the Old Wicker Park Committee (OWPC) put together for “City House,” captured the spirit of a small turn-of-the-century town. Wrought-iron fences and horse-drawn carriages and other examples of quaint town life were the images new residents of Wicker Park drew upon to attract suburban and middle- and upper-middle-class residents. In fact, they added to the turn-of-the-century character by lobbying the city to install, along some of the main streets in the neighborhood, light poles that resembled the lanterns of the early 1900s. OWPC also tried to shift West Town’s image as a poor, gang- and drug-infested area to one that provided quality urban living in an old world environment by drawing upon the Wicker Park’s prosperous past, when the city’s wealthy European and Jewish retail merchants and bankers



*The facade of this building has been redone to resemble a "casita."*

Ms. Jan Lucas, docent at the Glessner House and member of the American Institute of Architects will be our guest speaker at the December general membership meeting. Ms. Lucas will be speaking of the Christmas customs of the Victorian era and will have with her a variety of toys, books, pictures, and Christmas decorations reminiscent of that time. Some of these will be available for purchase (Newsletter of the Old Wicker Park Committee, Circa 1980).

The newly arrived community activists also lobbied to have Wicker Park's train station remodeled in keeping with the station's original architectural design when it was built in the first three decades of the 1900s. Shortly after it was

train station, a new shopping center was named "Robey Station." Robey was the previous name of the train station in Wicker Park, on Damen Avenue (one of Wicker Park's main streets). By invoking the past, before the arrival of Puerto Ricans and other poor groups to the area, Wicker Park's new residents attempted to render those of us who had been living in the area and who were poor, invisible.

"Around the Coyote," an annual event where largely community artists, mostly white, open their studios to the public, is also meant to showcase Wicker Park and attract other white residents to the community. When it was first organized, this event capitalized on the high concentration of artists who lived in the neighborhood because it was affordable. In Bucktown, new middle-class residents have organized a yearly outdoor arts festival. The manner in which OWPC and other groups advertised these events and the ways they showcased particular homes or artwork clearly signaled that these activities were essentially for affluent whites only.

Fear of crime was definitely a concern for Wicker Park's new middle-class residents. Minutes my family received from one of the "Old Wicker Park" Committee meetings, for example, explain how Dr. Dan Lewis, a professor at the Center for Urban Studies at Northwestern University, came to speak to the group about real and perceived crime. The minutes state,

Dr. Lewis was one of the authors of a recently released study on the fear of crime. The study, which was done in 1977, surveyed four neighborhoods in Chicago, one of which was Wicker Park, three in San Francisco, and three in Philadelphia. Dr. Lewis



*One of the few single room occupancy units still left in Chicago.*

crime are shaped as much by the level of “incivilities” (such as graffiti and abandoned buildings) in a neighborhood as the actual level of crime.

Indeed, to minimize the concerns of crime, law enforcement is a key component in the gentrification processes.

On our block Theresa’s sons, Miguel, Sam, and Roberto, who were in gangs and who hung out on the front steps of their apartment building, played the loud music that scared Wicker Park’s new white residents. Theresa and her husband were actually good friends with my parents, and we saw their sons as kids in the neighborhood who we had seen grow up and who, because of the inequities in our system, were unable to fight off the pressure of joining a gang. My father, who used to buy them ice cream on Fridays after he got paid, knew that these were good kids who had just been brought up in a system that never gave them a chance. We didn’t like the gangs and the violence associated with

ters, nephews, nieces, or cousins. We had a quiet, tacit understanding and knowledge of the larger processes at work that led our youth to join gangs, and we also knew that not all the young people in our community were in gangs. Although we feared and disliked the violent gang activities, we knew how to navigate through the streets of the neighborhood and how to manage our relations with the young men and women in gangs.

New residents of the neighborhood, however, were not comfortable with the racial and social landscape of the community. To the new white middle-class residents, Miguel, Sam, and Roberto were “punks” who were up to no good. Because I interacted with our new neighbors concerning garbage collection, parking, and other block issues, new white residents of Wicker Park would periodically approach me to ask me questions with racist undertones about people in the community—something I resented. I knew they loathed the fact that they had to live next to “these youths”—after all, they had paid

in the neighborhood. They were not to sure where we fit into the shifting social, race, and class landscape of the community. On the one hand, we were long-time residents, poor and Puerto Rican; on the other hand, we did own our home.

In the last 15 to 20 years, Wicker Park has changed so dramatically that it hardly resembles the neighborhood in which I grew up. Where Lydia's Puerto Rican restaurant once stood there is now a new trendy restaurant. A once empty lot is now an outdoor eating area for a new Pub. Store fronts that had stood vacant for most of the 20 years that I lived in West Town now are fashionable and expensive clothing boutiques. Sushi bars and Starbucks coffee shops have replaced the neighborhood hot dog stands, diners, and mom-and-pop ethnic restaurants that served inexpensive food.

Many of the small factories in the area have been closed down or have moved. Some have moved to other locations in the city, but many more have moved to other places in the country and outside of the U.S. in search of a cheaper labor force and property costs. The closing of the Borg-Warner factory left Celia, a woman I had interviewed for a paper I was writing on *puertorriqueñas*, unem-

ployed and embittered. After working for over twenty years for the company, she and her husband were laid off. Zenith and other companies that built electronic parts and products once employed many of my relatives, but they have long since left the area. The Ludwig factory, famous for making drums and where my cousin Paul worked for over 10 years, is now a loft condominium building. Out of the decaying industrial cities and from the ashes of the arson fires of the 1970s, developers have attempted to create a utopian urban village.

Out of the and the decay that Chicago underwent as manufacturing industries left the area, developers created a utopian urban village that is now "up for sale." City workers with their sledge hammers have demolished and hauled away the blood-stained sidewalks that many of us use to walk on after nights of gang violence. New, now level sidewalks with not a crack in them make me think that I am not in the same neighborhood where I grew up. The only tree that once stood on Cortez Street and where men in our community congregated to play dominos or to talk is now dead. New trees on the block make Cortez Street the tree-lined, picturesque street I dreamed of one day living on as a child.

*Building that used to house the record player factory my mother worked in during the 1960's.*





*"Respect" our art, our communities, ourselves.*

But the new buildings, sidewalks, and trees of Cortez Street, and throughout the neighborhood, do not erase the haunting images of young men strung out from the many drugs that hit our streets in the 1960s and 1970s, or the morning I had to maneuver my second-hand bike around pools of blood. I can still see the Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans who had returned from the war crazy, hanging out on our street unable to find jobs. The condominium development that now stands at 1454 Cortez, my former address, doesn't efface the shot-up storefront of our building after gang members fired guns one 4th of July weekend. Despite the many changes, I still remember the unfinished attic above our apartment that served as my escape from the racism, sexism, and violence I experienced on a daily basis. It was in this unheated attic, with its exposed beams, that I imagined and dreamed of a safer world of possibilities. Through my childhood games, I planned

saved the day. Like the heroes on the "Bonanza" show and John Wayne, I pretended to fight the evil elements that surrounded me. By playing school and doctor, I practiced what I thought would be my only ticket out of the neighborhood—getting an education.

As the process of gentrification of our community took place, I could more clearly see the inequities of our government and economic systems. Previously the city cleaned the streets once only or twice a summer, but now it seemed they were cleaning them every three weeks or so. Once the new young white residents moved in, sidewalks that had been cracked and dangerous to walk on were repaired free of charge to homeowners. A dog area was built in Wicker Park at the request of new neighborhood residents. In addition, the local grammar school got a facelift.

The ease with which new residents could get politicians to make neighbor-

residents had faced as they lobbied for badly needed services and improvements to our infrastructure. For example, it took a long, hard battle by community leaders to get the city to repair the vaulted sidewalks in the neighborhood. During the first few decades of the 1900s, these vaults were used to store coal for heating homes. Because the vaults underneath many of the sidewalks along Division Street and other streets in the neighborhood were as much as 7 to 8 feet high, when the sidewalks cracked, they created gaping holes. Community residents would jam large garbage cans, sticks, or other large objects into these holes so that residents, especially children, would not fall down into them.

Property values in the community soared especially in the late 1990s. This was fortunate for families who owned homes, but devastating to renters. I saw the effects of this on my own extended family. Although Lisa, one of my cousins, works as an administrative assistant in Chicago's Children's Hospital and makes

more money than many people in our community, she found it difficult to find an affordable apartment after she decided to leave her husband. She wanted to live near relatives so that they could help her take care of her daughter, but apartments that once rented for 300 to 400 dollars a month now were going for 600 and 700 dollars a month. Forced to stay with various relatives for a while, Lisa's four-year-old daughter Savannah was confused about their constant movement and the many places they stayed; she asked her mother, "Mami, where is home?" Eventually Lisa did find an apartment that rented for less than \$500, but it was so roach-and rat-infested that she was forced to move for fear that Savannah might be hurt. She's now found a clean apartment near relatives and pays the maximum she can afford, \$600, but if there is another rent increase anytime soon, she thinks she will have to move again.

While renters were the first to be affected by the soaring property values, it's now the home owners who are feeling

# FOR RENT

2Br 2Ba w/ Jacuzzi - New Rehab - Hardwood Floors - Washer  
& Dryer in unit - 1 car garage \$1875<sup>00</sup>  
Ask For  
773-486-2527 Jan





*Photo of Papi sent to Mami in Puerto Rico before they married.*

the pinch. With the increase in property values has come increased property taxes. Thus, homeowners are finding that they are being taxed out of their property. In addition because houses in Wicker Park are generally over 100 years old, many long-time owners find the cost of maintaining and repairing their homes prohibitive and find it necessary to sell them. In our area, those who have been able to hold on to their properties are largely senior citizens who receive breaks in proper-

gangs and drugs diminished, competition among realtors eager to list houses intensified. This meant that my parents were constantly bombarded and even harassed with requests to sell their home. Realtors would leave note cards or drop by asking my father if he wanted to sell his home. One note card stated that

we are still attracting responsible individuals to Wicker Park, families who will add greatly to the

When my father showed me this card I got angry. I thought, there are responsible people who greatly add to the community already living here—US!

There have been and are groups such as the Wicker Park Neighborhood Council, the Spanish Coalition for Housing and the Bickerdike Redevelopment Corp., and Hispanic Housing and various Puerto Rican organizations and groups that have worked to fight the high cost of housing and the eviction of our long-time residents. These groups have worked to educate long-time residents about programs that will help them hold on to their properties, and have also educated residents about scare tactics realtors use to try to get homeowners to put their property up for sale. Alderman Billy Ocasio, working together with Puerto Rican community leaders, hopes to acquire empty city lots currently owned by developers with the intention of having affordable single family homes built for families who have been long-time residents of the area. Hispanic Housing, with government funding, also buys up property in the area and rents apartment units to low-income residents below the market price. These organizations, as well as ward and county politicians, have started to fight the property taxes hikes, but some Puerto Rican residents in the community contend that more was not done sooner.

In this issue of *Centro Journal* Nilda Flores describes how *Paseo Boricua*, *La Casita de Don Pedro*, and the two Puerto Rican flags that serve as gateway entries to Paseo comprise strategies Puerto Ricans use to claim space and resist the process of gentrification taking place in Chicago. However, changing the physical landscape of the com-

families do this; for example, some redesign the facade of their home to incorporate the decorative elements of homes in Puerto Rico.

In the summer time, car garages become the site of family gatherings—birthday parties, baptisms, father's day celebrations, etc. When residents move out their cars, clean up, decorate, and furnish their garages with tables and chairs, the spaces operate as a public-private place much like *marquecinas* in Puerto Rico. Some residents build balconies off of the side of their garage that faces the backyard, to make them resemble a casita.

Despite community efforts to resist the gentrification and although some Puerto Rican families have been able to remain in the West Town and Humboldt Park area, many more have had to move further west along Division Street, North Avenue, and Fullerton. Some second-generation Puerto Ricans have even been able to buy the single-family homes on the West Side that were once coveted by first-generation Puerto Ricans migrants. But as Puerto Ricans and other Latinos have moved into these areas, whites have left. Once again, white flight and the lack of investment by city government and private investors in new Puerto Rican neighborhoods leave our community with few resources to create and maintain safe, prosperous communities. Many here in the city talk about Chicago's renaissance and of the many beautification projects and infrastructural improvements the city government has completed; many of these, however, are not in the new areas of Puerto Rican settlement.

### Final Reflections

A couple of years ago, our next door neighbor John proposed to my father that we change the fence of our homes at the same time and that we purchase similar style fences so that we would have a uniform look. We had wanted to change our fence for some time, so we agreed to work together. John offered to find a contractor. John drew a detailed diagram of how we wanted our fences and was meticulous in detailing the measurements and style of the fence.

On the day that they laid the post for the fence, I was not at my parent's home. When I came home that evening to visit, I realized that the posts for the fence in between our house and John's had been laid further into our property than then where the former fence had been positioned. This meant that his front yard area was made larger and ours



smaller. As soon as I realized what had happened, I was angered. I knew he had done this intentionally. He was too meticulous and precise in his measurements and specifications for it to be a mistake. The sense of entitlement that John exhibited enraged me.

My father, who feared retaliation from our neighbors, asked that I let the matter go. This further angered me since I knew that my father asked this of me because he was scared. With all the gentrification going on in the neighborhood, he has seen his fellow Puerto Rican and Latino friends pushed out of their rental apartments. Although he knows he owns our home, he thinks that if he causes too much trouble with the new white residents in the neighborhood, our home will be taken away from us. He has been cheated enough times as a poor Puerto Rican, non-English speaking man to know that sometimes it doesn't matter if you own something, others can still take it away. He worries, for example, that some of our new neighbors will call city inspectors to come and check our home for building code violations. My father knows that city inspectors can easily demand that we make repairs that would cost far in excess what we could afford. To him, John is a real threat, and despite his astute observation that John is racist and arrogant and feels a sense of entitlement that far exceeds what is fair and just, my father is very nice to John.

The incident with John—the fear it produced in my father, and now the fence that stands between our house and John's—represents some of the pain associated with the process of gentrification that many of us in Humboldt Park and West Town feel. Like the U.S.-Mexican border that Gloria Anzaldua talks about, the process of gentrification creates a border—“una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again....” The borderland created through this process of gentrification is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transi-

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