

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the explanatory power of this course's three primary urban theories: the strength of community, the hope for change, and the power of structural inequality, is amplified when the themes are allowed to coexist. So, instead of selecting one explanatory angle, I will show that overlaying multiple urban narratives results in unique insights into the nature of Chicago and cities at large. Put another way, I believe that we miss much when we try to solve puzzles from just one piece, and learn more when we acknowledge that we still only have the pieces.

In order to answer the spirit of the prompt while pluralizing urban narratives, my analysis does two things. First, I identify how our three themes are expressed in course readings. I find that, though each story paints vastly different versions of Chicago, these discrepancies are more like a piece of music's variations on a theme than contradictory lab results. That is to say, variance within one theory enhances rather than weakens it. Secondly, I will sketch out the limits of a lone theme by placing each alongside its two counterparts. I chose this approach in order to avoid the pitfall described by Napong Rugkhapan: "We cannot call the city complex, diverse, layered, or multidimensional, and expect to understand it from one paradigmatic angle."¹ I find that, because of this class's interdisciplinary, mixed-methods nature, it is a particularly good starting point to rejecting the singular framework approach. The way we understand the world also determines how we go on to live in it; a broader imagination of Chicago and urban life is necessary in effectively designing for our futures.

The Hope for Change

The unassuming power of hope breathes through all of our course readings, though not in a vacuum from our other themes. Michelle Obama's autobiography, *Becoming*, is perhaps the most

¹ Rugkhapan, Napong, "Narratives in Urban Theory," 128.

explicit enumeration of the theme "the hope for change" – the title itself suggests that the book's overall narrative is one of transformation. Obama grew up in Chicago's South Side, in a neighborhood she describes as "in decline."² It is a place she grows to spend less time in, after matriculating as a Whitney Young student, a top-ranked magnet school an hour and half bus-ride away from her home. Though in the same city, it is an radically new environment for her, as it is only here, at this elite high-school, that Obama registers the "the apparatus of privilege and connection, [...] a network of half-hidden ladders and guide ropes that lay suspended overhead, ready to connect some but not all of us to the sky."³ This arc in *Becoming* ends with Obama triumphantly gaining the keys to access to this alien world of privilege after she is accepted to Princeton and leaves Chicago. Obama calls this first section "Becoming Me", and it is worth noting that, in order for Obama to achieve success, she must leave Chicago. In this case, the reward for years of "hoping" is escape– in order to "Become Me", Obama could not remain in Chicago. Here, Chicago is framed as the antithesis of change, with hope as the drive to leave it.

Our theme plays out similarly in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. In Cisneros' book, the titular Mango Street is, at its most basic level, a fictional depiction of Chicago's Humboldt Park, the largely Hispanic neighborhood that Cisneros grew up in.⁴ But, similar to in *Becoming*, Mango Street must be left behind: at the end of the book, protagonist Esperanza declares that "I am too strong for [Mango Street] to keep me here forever. One day I will go away."⁵ Cisneros' and Obama's take on the theme of the hope for change frame Chicago as inspiring hope and change through allowing its inhabitants to escape.

Meanwhile, Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, set in the late 1920's, is premised on the opposite situation, detailing the author's move from the South to Chicago. While a teenager living

² Obama, *Becoming*, 27.

³ Obama, *Becoming*, 58.

⁴ Herrera, "Sandra Cisneros."

⁵ Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, 187

in the South, *Black Boy's* protagonist "dreamed of going north [...] The North symbolized... all that I had not felt and seen [...] by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me."⁶

Wright's variation on our theme of hope for change is completely different from Obama's and Cisneros', in this case, Chicago is a beacon of opportunity, the place one strives for rather than flees from. Though, after actually moving there, our protagonist becomes disillusioned by his experiences in Chicago, reading Wright's *Black Boy* alongside *Becoming* and *The House on Mango Street* demonstrates that hope is contextual when it defines a city's mythos. Depending on who and where you are, what you believe in and why, the way you hope colors your experience of a city.

We've established that this theme, the hope for change, comes from stories expressing it in different, sometimes contradictory, ways. This conclusion by itself is rather vague and meaningless, and it is only through placing it alongside our array of other themes that we can derive further insight. For instance, the force of segregation radically influenced how Obama, Cisneros, and Wright expressed "hope" in their stories; in Obama's childhood neighborhood was 96 percent White in 1950 and 96% Black when she went to Princeton in 1981⁷. She personally witnessed the White flight phenomenon, the resulting economic drain, and the overall decay of her area. When Obama was in the seventh grade, the *Chicago Defender* described the decline of the Bryn Mawr neighborhood as going from a "one of the city's best public schools to a 'run down slum' governed by a 'ghetto mentality'."⁸ We have explicated the nature of Obama's "hope for change" in *Becoming*, but we can better understand it by also accounting for the power of structural inequality and community strength— the picture of Chicago as a black hole for opportunity was in part born by the institutional power of segregation, broader forces of White flight, and their histories.

The Strength of Community

⁶ Wright, *Black Boy*, 168

⁷ Obama, *Becoming*, 42.

⁸ Obama, *Becoming*, 43

It is only with the vantage point of history that we can now recognize how Chicago's many stories of community resilience would later come to radically reshape it— a theme reiterated upon over centuries of Chicago's history. For instance, in the 1880s, instead of folding under the weight of poor economic conditions and being underserved by existing banks, early immigrants created their own credit networks,⁹ enabling social advancement by virtue of community solidarity. The same force is illustrated in a more recent example, in which an alliance between South Side residents successfully fought the Chicago Public School systems' plan to eliminate the top-ranked National Teachers' Academy, a local high-performing elementary school¹⁰. However, though these two stories appear alike with the framework of community strength, there is, of course, much more to the story. As inherently social bodies, communities form and respond to the environment around them. Part of the power of community strength lies in the lasting changes they make to their cities, but this in turn changes the conditions in which future communities spawn.

For instance, in our first story about early Chicago immigrants is also the groundwork for Chicago's racial segregation. Historian Dominick Pacyga describes how Polish, Lithuanian, German, and Irish immigrant groups upgraded into the Bungalow Belt, from apartment to house, city center to city outskirts, all of which represented an accomplishment of the American Dream¹¹. But this sense of progress was partly premised off of the exclusion of others, which is particularly reflected in the "White Flight" phenomenon and instituting strict color lines. These groups all were able to gain social mobility by relying on their ethnic communities, but, as Pacyga writes, "White residents of all ethnic backgrounds generally agreed with the assumption that the presence of Black families meant a neighborhood's decline."¹²

⁹ Garb, *City of American Dreams*, 46.

¹⁰ Shaw, *Let the Little Light Shine*.

¹¹ Pacyga, *The Chicago Bungalow*.

¹² Ibid.

The first story of "strength of community" in turn activated and validated the forces of structural racism and segregation. It is impossible to understand why Chicago is as segregated as it is today without learning this history— and it also nuances our understanding of the second story of community strength. This story about the fight to save the NTA was chronicled in Kevin Shaw's 2022 documentary, *Let the Little Light Shine*, in which the title card tells viewers that, "In 2013, 49 elementary schools were closed in Chicago – the largest mass school closing in America [...] The majority of those closings occurred in Black and Latinx neighborhoods."¹³ This statistic is relevant because NTA's students are predominantly Black, with the school itself located in the 79% Black South Side neighborhood.¹⁴ However, these unbalanced demographics were not the product of chance, rather, they are a symptom of Chicago's tradition of segregation— which was in turn, the product of previous community actions.

Thus, the nature of the alliance between South Side residents is wholly different from Chicago's early immigrants. While community strength demonstrably has the power to fundamentally reshape cities, it is influenced by the communities it is situated in, what it is used for, and why it needed to be in the first place. As a result, a clearer picture of this theme requires us to seek stories about communities that contradict and sometimes harm each other. Furthermore, we cannot understand the history and continued work of Chicago's communities taking into account the legacy of Chicago's structural racism.

The Power of Structural Inequality

It is relatively easy to appreciate the impact of social structures over the long stretches of time, across broad demographic trends, with big data and large sample sizes. The task of describing the way ordinary individuals confront the minutiae of unjust systems is much more difficult, but is just as important, perhaps even more so. Upton Sinclair took on this challenge in *The Jungle* by

¹³ Shaw, *Let the Little Light Shine*.

¹⁴ Statistical Atlas, "Race and Ethnicity in South Chicago."

chronicling the nonfictional trials of fictional Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant hoping to eke out a life in America. Jurgis is thrust into a system actively seeking to exploit him, to which Jurgis can only respond by saying, "I will earn more money— I will work harder."¹⁵ For example, Jurgis is swindled by a real estate agent when he offers to sell Jurgis a house with a suspiciously affordable down payment and monthly rate. Jurgis later discovers that this is part of an ongoing scheme that had already devastated many before him, as the monthly rates carried heavy interest and landlords were free to evict tenants on the basis of missed payments. Jurgis attempts to turn to legal recourse, but the lawyer too is a part of the corrupt real estate system, and offers misleading advice.¹⁶ In the face of a vicious and unfair system, and the alternative being homelessness, members of Jurgis' family seek employment in intense, manual jobs, with no choice but to "earn more money and work harder."

The Jungle was published in 1906, but the systems Sinclair depicts have endured, continuing to stifle and oppress impoverished Chicagoans. However, changing environments alter the way that individuals are able to respond and resist. Alex Kotlowitz's 1991 book *There Are No Children Here* bears many similarities to *The Jungle*; both authors immersed themselves in their books' worlds before writing, making both semi-journalistic works that probe Chicago's systems of exploitation through one family. *There Are No Children Here* is about the Rivers family, (though primarily focused on brothers Lafayette and Pharoah) who live in the Chicago projects, specifically in the Governor Henry Horner Homes. Their living conditions are just as, and maybe even more so, squalid as Jurgis'—Kotlowitz describes the Horner homes as actively falling apart, ridden by illness, and bereft of any resources.¹⁷ However, the absence of basic human needs was not Horner Homes' biggest problem; intense gang violence made shootings a common occurrence, while both drug dealing and use ran rampant throughout. Like Jurgis and his family, the Rivers are locked in a vicious cycle of poverty and abandoned by the outside world.

¹⁵ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 21.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 26.

Structural violence is, at its core, a robbing of autonomy. Individuals cannot negotiate with social systems, it is a condition imposed by virtue of being born. Jurgis, and the class of Chicago immigrants he symbolizes, opted to "make more money and work harder." When reading *The Jungle*, the sense of labor thrums constantly in the background. Unfair and dangerous, work came to define many immigrants' experience of Chicago, with the hope of escaping the pattern of poverty and exploitation. This feeling is absent from *There Are No Children Here*.

At the time, the Horner Homes had a (at best) unemployment rate of 19%.¹⁸ Kotlowitz estimates that, between 1977 and 1987, Chicago had lost over a third of its manufacturing jobs.¹⁹ As has been shown, structural inequality and social systems at large fundamentally shape a Chicagoan's daily life. But globalization has swept away many Chicagoans', and Americans', capacity to adapt. The industries Jurgis and his family toil in— meatpacking, label-painting, sewing, canning— are all manufacturing jobs, and have all been outsourced to Southeast Asia and China since the late 1970s (and still are there today). For people with little to no education, social capital, and support systems, manufacturing jobs were the only way to "work hard and earn money." It is a path that no longer exists.

As is the case with every other theme, structural violence alone provides an incomplete picture of Chicago. For instance, the story of Jurgis being swindled into a one-sided housing contract is made even more poignant by the fact that Jurgis trusted the real estate agent based on the fact that he spoke Lithuanian.²⁰ Thus, Chicago's history of community aid, especially within immigrant ethnic groups, is crucial in understanding Jurgis' decision. This exemplifies how themes can coexist on top of each other: the strength of community provides context for Jurgis' decision and illustrates

¹⁸ Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 25.

¹⁹ Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 25.

²⁰ Sinclair, *The Jungle*.

the unsaid norms of immigrant societies. Additionally, it demonstrates the capacity for "community strength' to be perverted in structurally unjust environments.

The themes of the hope for change and structural inequality are similarly intertwined in the concluding chapters of *There Are No Children Here*, with Kotlowitz taking stock of improvements to the Rivers' life, some infrastructural like new paint jobs and appliances,, some economic, such as grant programs and resource centers.²¹ The varied symptoms of structural inequality manifested in a myriad of ways in the Horner Homes, but they were being worked on. These improvements are all facilitated by the (at the time) new Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), who have managed to decrease crime rates, build play structures, and even plant flower bushes.²² In this instance, hope is the project of many. Rather than at the scale of the individual– like Michelle Obama– these little changes function on a structural one, in which Chicago itself is subject to "becoming."

The epilogue of the *There Are New Children Here* is remarkably hopeful, bombarding the reader with description after description of new CHA policies. Readers are left with the overwhelming sense that the CHA really was, as their employees wore on their buttons, "I'm Part of the Solution."²³ The CHA team in the book would all resign three years after its publication, handing over leadership to the federal government in 1995. Despite an extensive range of policies– from stringent searches for illegal goods in CHA buildings and midnight basketball leagues²⁴, the tentative optimism in *There Are No Children Here's* epilogue would later sputter out. Housing Secretary at the time, Henry Cisneros, assessed that, "He [the CHA Chairman] has done a tremendous job. He's a visionary, but the problems facing that agency are just so vast."²⁵ This in turn begs the question: *How do we go about solving vast problems?*

²¹ Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*, 425.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Walsh, "U.S To take Over Chicago..."

²⁵ Terry, "Chicago Housing Agency..."

Designing for the Future

In 1973, Rittel and Webber described a fundamental flaw in the study of social problems: they have been classified with the problems of nature, engineering, and the sciences but they have completely different premises.²⁶ Social problems are different because they are not definable, singular, objective, or even meaningfully describable. Rittel and Webber argue that this is why humanity has failed to ever solve a social problem— because there is no way to determine what "solving" actually means. The same applies to cities, themselves multi-layered and complicated, and their problems even more so. That is not to say that Chicago's problems should not be solved, rather, our approach in addressing them needs to reflect its nature.

Differing urban theories, then, must be treated on equal terms. Furthermore, urban planners' must tackle problems knowing there is no one solution, that there isn't even a best one. As Rittel and Weber argue, it "makes no sense to talk about 'optimal solutions' to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first."²⁷ In this paper, I have processed Chicago's themes by pluralizing them, and have shown that disparate theories augment and further inform each other. I have also demonstrated that important aspects of the city and its people are obscured and missed under a universal framework. I believe that this kind of work is indispensable in expanding the possibilities for Chicago's future. It is as Rugkhaman claims: "An awareness of wider urban explanations can make for wider policy imagination for urban futures."²⁸

²⁶ Rittel, Webber, "Planning Problems are Wicked Problems."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rugkhaman, Napong, "Narratives in Urban Theory," 128.

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