“They Keep Us Moving All the While”:
The Politics of Migration in Black Chicago, 1935-1965

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Introduction

I have recently completed a dissertation, “Striving in Black Chicago: Migration, Work, and the Politics of Neighborhood Change, 1935-1965,” that explores black Chicagoans’ efforts to remake their local communities during the Second Great Migration. Other historians have described African American migration during and after World War II as a principal contributing factor in the making of the postwar ghetto and urban crisis. “Striving in Black Chicago” builds on those studies by showing that ordinary black Chicagoans’ everyday struggles to sustain neighborhoods and to break down racial barriers to employment helped define the opportunities and limits of urban life, as well as the politics of class, social status, gender, and space within the Black Metropolis.

My work pays particular attention to the evolution of African American neighborhoods and institutions during the changing contexts of the Depression, World War II, and the postwar urban upheaval caused by mass migration, slum clearance, white suburbanization, and the beginnings of deindustrialization. Historical interviews with black Chicagoans, block-level maps of neighborhood conditions, case studies of African Americans pushing the local and federal government to ensure racial equality in the housing and job markets, and a history of the Chicago Urban League in the postwar period show that black Chicagoans maintained a commitment to rebuild their communities in an era of rapid social change and deep racial inequality. A liberal vision prevailed that emphasized the preparation of workers for jobs in a changing employment market, economic development within black communities, and the creation of black political power. This vision motivated the black middle and working classes who built the
greatly expanded postwar Black Metropolis, and propelled an independent black political movement (which ultimately succeeded in electing Chicago’s first black mayor, Harold Washington, in 1983). Most importantly, black Chicagoans’ everyday efforts to sustain local communities and to break down employment discrimination were part of a much broader struggle to achieve independence and happiness in a city marked by racial exclusion and alienation.

Black Chicagoan Georgia Lawson had come to Chicago from the South in the late 1920s and had begun building a life for herself and her family. “I had money when I came [to Chicago],” Lawson told and interviewer, but she fell on hard times during the Depression. “[I] had a large rooming house, but I lost our life savings in the bank . . . and I am too old to ever accumulate anything.” In May 1938, she lived with her children in a small basement apartment at the rear of 3246 South Prairie Avenue in an area where “most of the houses . . . are dilapidated, and the streets need to be repaired. Rubbish of all kinds was scattered all over the place. Window panes were broken out.”

Nothing in Lawson’s life seemed stable. She kept her furniture “simple” -- she had only “a brown metal bed, two chairs, one rocker, a trunk, and a small round table” -- because, as Lawson said, “they keep us moving all the while.”

Lawson did not just accept these conditions and she was not content with appealing to her alderman or neighborhood club to improve the situation. She was president of the Citizens Non-partisan Organization (CNO). Founded in June 1936, the CNO had between eight hundred and nine hundred members who worked to keep relief stations open in the neighborhood; to secure old age pensions for their elderly neighbors; to lower rents; to limit landlords’ power of eviction; to “increase food budgets” for the
unemployed; and to bring more WPA jobs into the area. Although officially non-partisan, Lawson identified as a Republican and built her networks through Olivet Baptist Church, one of the original black Chicago churches.

Set back by the Depression, Lawson stepped into a position of public leadership -- she protested when “merchants on the South Side were getting fat off of the relief clients and giving them things no one else wanted to buy.” She personally went to Springfield to lobby Governor Henry Horner to provide more benefits and more jobs to her local community. And she tried to organize her neighbors to improve conditions in their part of the city.³ “It takes a mass coming together to do anything worthwhile,” she said at one CNO meeting, but, she continued, “I think the trouble with most of us is that we are afraid to die fighting for the things that we need and should have. . . . The most of us just make ourselves satisfied just to exist.”⁴

People like Lawson who worked to sustain local neighborhoods in the face of mass migration and urban renewal were part of an essential political narrative that has received less attention than the history of working-class black activists fighting for jobs and justice through those decades’ labor and civil rights movements.⁵ Historians have not given much credit to black Chicagoans who engaged in urban politics through neighborhood uplift and efforts to open jobs to black workers during and after World War II. Such efforts are often dismissed as historians turn instead to labor and civil rights organizing against the color line. In contrast, I argue that neighborhood and employment activism provided substantial benefits to black Chicagoans’ everyday quality of life and helped define the parameters of tensions between black liberalism and black self-determination that became central to the urban politics of the 1960s. In an era of urban
history otherwise defined by segregation and discrimination, black Chicagoans sought to make the city their own and in the process remade the Black Metropolis. In this paper, I will lay out the broad historiographical and political implications of my argument.

**Revisiting the Black Metropolis**

During the twentieth century, African Americans migrated from the South to Chicago in two waves -- first from the 1910s to 1929 and then from 1935 to 1970. Approximately 50,000 black southerners arrived to take advantage of World War I-era job opportunities between 1915 and 1918. Even greater numbers of black southerners moved to the city after the war, increasing Chicago’s black population from 44,103 to 233,903 between 1910 and 1930. Ninety-four percent of the population increase in those two decades -- just under 180,000 people -- resulted from southern migration. After coming to a nearly complete halt between 1929 and 1935, the migration picked up again between 1935 and 1940 when approximately 15,000 black southerners arrived in Chicago. What is known as the Second Great Migration began in earnest in 1942 when labor shortages and concerted protests and pressure against persistent employment discrimination began to open jobs for black workers in defense employment. Between 1942 and 1965, at least 425,000 African Americans moved to Chicago, and more than 536,000 moved to the entire Chicago metropolitan region. By 1970, black southerners in Chicago had created a Black Metropolis with over 1.2 million residents. On its own, black Chicago in 1970 would have been the seventh most populous city in the country, just behind Houston, Texas.

The Second Great Migration dwarfed any previous movement of working-class people to Chicago. When 25,000 black migrants moved into already overcrowded
neighborhoods in 1941 and early 1942, they set the stage for decades of migration into overcrowded and rapidly changing communities.\(^{13}\) Between 1940 and 1945, 60,000 to 70,000 African Americans migrated to Chicago and 166,000 total migrants came to the city between 1940 and 1950.\(^{14}\) The pace hardly let up for the next two decades. Every ten years between 1930 and 1970 about 110,000 black southerners -- the equivalent of the 1940 population of Gary, Indiana -- moved into the constricted area of black Chicago.\(^{15}\) The number of African Americans who arrived from the South during and after World War II was nearly double the number of all the Polish immigrants and their children who lived in Chicago in 1960.\(^{16}\) Between 1930 and 1970, approximately 500,000 black southerners moved to the city, a population nearly equal to the total white and black population of New Orleans in 1940, or the total 1940 population of Memphis, Nashville, and Shreveport combined.\(^{17}\) No ethnic group in Chicago had ever grown like this, and no other ethnic or racial group remained so conspicuously segregated or so obviously disadvantaged by discriminatory economic practices.

Historians have framed twentieth-century African American urban history in terms of segregation, social disorganization, and urban decline. Cast as a primary contributing process in the making of a black proletariat in segregated and declining cities, the Second Great Migration appears, in the words of historian Peter Gottlieb, as “a recourse, rather than a strategy, for individual and group betterment -- almost a movement of resignation and despair.”\(^{18}\) Black migrants generally found that the North was not all they had imagined. “My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies,” recalled Richard Wright, perhaps the most famous African-American migrant to the city.\(^{19}\) Wright’s words seem to haunt
the best studies of the great black migrations. “The dreams embodied in the Great Migration,” James R. Grossman concludes in his history of the First Great Migration to Chicago, “eventually collapsed under the weight of continued racial oppression and the failure of industrial capitalism to distribute its prosperity as widely as the migrants had expected.”

Studies that emphasize the racism and social problems that black migrants found in Chicago and other northern and western cities have allowed us measure the scale of the tragedy of racial and class inequality in American urban life. How else, as historian Adam Green has recently asked, can we appreciate black Chicago’s value as a cautionary tale, “warning of how societies can degenerate once jobs, education, services and resources are systematically divested[?] How else are we to reckon with the full cost of the cynicism informing the urban social contract today?”

But black Chicagoans themselves have often criticized observers who have focused on the troubles of black urban communities, obscuring the mix of strengths and hardship as well as the roles African Americans played in forging opportunities for work, education, and community in a hostile city. When, for example, the Chicago Tribune published a series of articles in 1985 on North Lawndale’s “underclass” as the “American Millstone,” local residents bitterly spoke out. The articles, Lawndale residents said, were “unbalanced.” They “showed only a small portion of the community and did great damage to individuals who are struggling to improve themselves. It made them feel hopeless.” Rosie Marz, a student in the high school equivalency program at Blessed Sacrament Church, went so far as to claim that the Tribune was “trying to motivate us to run so whites can come in and buy low and renovate.”

Similarly, a 1939 editorial in the Chicago Defender objected when the Chicago Plan Commission labeled much of the
black South Side “blighted.” “‘Blighted Area,’” the Defender exclaimed, “is [a] term fastened on Chicago’s great South Side. . . . by the business interests of Chicago’s Loop -- who get their information from charts and maps, and never visit the section.” The Defender warned its readers not to be seduced by the notion of complete blight in black neighborhoods. “That term should be stopped,” the editors declared, “and we must not be inveigled -- just the big idea -- into following suit. . . . ‘Blighted Area’ doesn’t need to apply any more to the South Side as a whole, than to many sections of the West and North Side we know about.”

One study -- John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber’s Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960 -- followed a black community’s transition into the post-World War II period while at the same time emphasizing the continued creativity and contingency of black migrants’ lives in the city. Bodnar, Simon, and Weber -- skilled practitioners of the “new social history” that they were -- concluded that “the somewhat narrow models of ethnic succession and mobility” could not capture the meaning of experiences on the ground. “The problem of merging newcomers from rural regions with an expanding, industrial city was so complex,” they wrote, “that the process turned on more than simply a one-dimensional factor, such as premigration culture, urban structure, or racial antipathies.” Such a conclusion required a quick qualification.

To say this is not to diminish the insidious nature of racism nor temper its pernicious impact. But racism, like traditional culture, did not operate in isolation. Families and workers from various backgrounds lived out their lives in response to multiple pressures exerted by tradition, discrimination, urban structure, and industrial employment. They acclimatized themselves to an industrial city amidst the interplay of all of these forces at specific times. Unless this intermeshing of forces is appreciated, a full understanding of dissimilar paths of adjustment is not possible.
In order to understand the limits of urban life, Bodnar, Simon, and Weber suggested, it is also necessary to examine ordinary people’s efforts to transcend those limits. Novelist and essayist Leon Forrest proposed a similar line of inquiry, characterizing black Chicago as a “hustler’s town” defined by residents’ efforts to improve their lives rather than by external forces such as segregation and discrimination - no matter how powerful those were. “Because we had the advantage of not being obsessed with the scholarly fact that we were disadvantaged (although we knew we were segregated),” he explained, “we developed certain advantageous schemes and strategies for survival and erected institutional support systems behind the walls of segregation. More than anything else we believed that the individual had to find something within himself, some talent, moxy [sic], intelligence, magical nerve, swiftly developed skill, education, knack, trade, or underground craft and energize it with the hustler’s drive.”26

“Behind the walls of segregation,” ordinary black Chicagoans’ everyday efforts to sustain neighborhoods and to break down the many barriers to employment by members of their communities helped defined the opportunities and limits of urban life, as well as the politics of class, social status, gender, and space within the Black Metropolis. By highlighting these struggles this study revises the maps, images, and stories we use to describe the mid-century history of black Chicago. Recognizing the profound obstacles to African Americans’ individual and collective progress, this study argues that black Chicagoans’ often unnoticed efforts to sustain their neighborhoods and to open jobs created a Black Metropolis on a truly metropolitan scale and, in the process, made their neighborhoods bases for social mobility as well as central players in mid-twentieth-century urban politics.27
The history of African American community building in the middle of the twentieth century is by no means a triumphant story, but it does challenge the historiography that focuses principally on the forces of segregation and urban decline. In addition to the histories of the “color line” and “the ghetto” this study adds an emphasis on the processes of black migration to Chicago, the neighborhoods black Chicagoans built, and their battles against employment discrimination. Striving for individual opportunities and collective racial progress the residents of the expanding Black Metropolis built a network of local communities stretching in an arc from the city’s western edge south and east across the Illinois-Indiana border. By the mid-1960s, as well, black Chicagoans had developed a fundamentally new political dynamic between black liberals seeking citywide alliances for electoral power and neighborhood-based movements black self-determination.

In a recent forum on “the second ghetto thesis,” Arnold Hirsch admits that “black institutions, politics, organizations, and ideology deserve far more attention” than he gave them in *Making of the Second Ghetto*. Yet Hirsch wonders how historians might add black actors to postwar urban history without blaming them for the decline of the city.  

This is “a complex and nuanced matter that cannot be easily resolved . . . [by] what may become the ritual incantation of ‘agency,’” writes Hirsch. If historians are going to examine African Americans’ influence on the making of the postwar city, he suggests, they must “identify the full panoply of conditioning forces – both internal and external to the black community.” In other words, this history requires a considered balance between what black city dwellers did and what they could and could not have done. Hirsch remains hesitant to hypothesize about the extent of ordinary black Americans’
influence on the postwar city. “If, beyond their very numbers and presence, their ability to define the outer parameters of such areas remained limited,” Hirsch demurs, “their determination to refashion the internal ‘givens’ of their world clearly surfaced.” 30 A revised history of the Second Great Migration to Chicago must add black actors and voices, while being sensitive to the opportunities and limits African Americans’ found in the postwar city.

Remaking the Black Metropolis: Self-Help and Power

I seek to raise a central question in African American history: how do we assess the significance of the Black Metropolis? In Black Chicago (1967), historian Allan Spear argued that between 1910 and 1915 black leaders created “not simply an area of Negro concentration but a city within a city,” and “by meeting discrimination with self-help rather than militant protest, this leadership converted the dream of an integrated city into the vision of a ‘black metropolis.’” 31 During the Second Great Migration, middle- and working-class black Chicagoans kept the dream of the Black Metropolis alive, working to build local institutions, sustain neighborhoods, and secure jobs for black workers even in the most trying times. “Most Negroes probably have a similar goal,” declared Cayton and Drake in 1945, “the establishment of the right to move where they wish, but the preservation of some sort of large Negro community by voluntary choice. But they wish a community much larger than the eight square miles upon which the Black Metropolis now stands.” 32 Nonetheless, this modified, expansive “vision of the Black Metropolis” sought both improvement of the quality of life within black communities and the freedom
of choice to move into predominantly white areas of the city. Black Chicagoans got the one without the other -- they created a much larger community but without complete or universal freedom of choice and mobility. Historians have described the persistent racial segregation and economic disparities that resulted -- what is needed is an examination of the how black Chicagoans remade the Black Metropolis in the face of such deep racial inequalities.

Recently, historian Adam Green has recast the idea of black Chicago as a “land of hope.” “That vision and aspiration,” he writes, “extended beyond basic material access, or even everyday ideas of personal freedom” to include the creation of a “cultural apparatus” that made black Chicago “a site of integrating black life well beyond [Chicago’s] limits.” The upside was that by the mid-1950s the leaders of black Chicago’s businesses and media helped create a national black identity. In moments of outrage, such as the murder of young black Chicagoan Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955, black Chicago magazines and radio programs could unify African Americans across the United States in a single moment of protest and catharsis. Yet the downside for Green was that black Chicagoans’ dominant cultural perspective was classically liberal, defined by the “foundational values understood to characterize U.S. society from its beginnings to the present -- market criteria of action and value, rule of law, consensual arrangements of social relations, and above all the philosophy of possessive individualism.” He suggests that “the price of representing modern black life and action in the shape of the dynamic individual [was] paradoxically the flattening of African-American identity more generally.” Green explains mid-century black Chicago as a place not just victimized by the destructive external forces of segregation and urban
decline but defined by the ambiguities of black Chicagoans’ liberal cultural and political identity in the face of racial segregation and discrimination.

Gregory complements Green’s work by highlighting black Chicagoans’ achievements. “Ghettos for those who lived in them,” Gregory argues, “these impoverished and imprisoned spaces would nonetheless be responsible for the production of an evolving complex of cultural forms that would facilitate the transformation of American racial systems.” The residents of black Chicago, from Gregory’s perspective, overcame the difficult conditions of everyday life to recreate the broader worlds of American religion, music, and politics. By shifting black political and cultural power to the North, southern migrants created the resources necessary to generate the modern civil rights movement as well as entirely new forms of American music, sports, and media. “Building communities in the big cities of America during an era when those cities monopolized important forms of power gave black migrants unique opportunities for influence,” Gregory concludes.

Significantly, neither Green nor Gregory examines in detail the quality of everyday life in these “impoverished and imprisoned spaces.” In contrast, “Striving in Black Chicago” takes a much closer look at black Chicagoans’ daily struggle to sustain local communities and create economic opportunities during the changing contexts of the Depression, World War II, and the postwar urban upheaval caused by mass migration, urban renewal, white suburbanization, and the beginnings of deindustrialization. Historians have paid little attention to how black Chicago neighborhoods changed in the middle of the twentieth century. As sociologist Mary Patillo has argued, scholarly “Interest jumped from the nature of racially changing neighborhoods directly to the
situation of poor black areas, with little attention paid to the local experience of neighborhood change among African Americans.” Popular and academic accounts of black Chicago between the 1930s and 1960s generally are organized around a narrative of decline and destruction. The 1930s, so the story goes, were a kind of “golden age” in the city. World War II began a new era when what was once a struggling but solid community ostensibly disintegrated or was destroyed. By taking a shortcut from ghetto formation to the urban crisis historians have taught us essential lessons about the deep inequalities of modern America, but they have also obscured the rich history of black community formation, class relations, and urban politics in the middle of the twentieth century. Black self-help strategies had their limits, but we must examine the strengths and weaknesses of black Chicagoans’ commitment to self-help in order to begin to see how African Americans understood their efforts to improve life in the city as part of a much larger struggle against racial exclusion. This study, therefore, focuses on everyday efforts to recreate the Black Metropolis, the foundation on which black Chicagoans’ more spectacular cultural and political achievements would rise.

Historians such as Victoria Wolcott and Earl Lewis have argued that struggles for the rights of labor and better working conditions displaced neighborhoods as the central political terrain in the 1930s, but the political emphasis shifted back to the community in the postwar era. As late as the 1920s, according to Wolcott, black urban neighborhoods were “a central terrain” in African Americans’ struggles for social mobility. Neighborhoods were also “women’s domain” where “black leaders embraced the opportunity to shape new urban communities by reforming migrants’ dress, demeanor, and deportment.” The limits of neighborhood uplift became especially apparent during
the Depression and black city dwellers turned to new strategies. “Although bourgeois respectability as a reform strategy never entirely disappeared, economic nationalism and civil rights took precedence during the Great Depression.” During the postwar period the central domain of African American politics shifted back to what Lewis calls the “home sphere,” defined as both the household and the community. Lewis suggests that the failure of the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement in the South was that it won benefits for the home sphere -- desegregation and better schooling -- without securing economic progress.

The postwar politics of the “home sphere” in the North took the form of community building efforts, struggles for better housing, improved job opportunities, and economic development within black communities like those detailed in the following chapters. In his study of the Second Great Migration to Chicago, journalist Nicholas Lemann dismisses such efforts, referring not to “community building” but to “ghetto development.” “The idea of ghetto development originated on the left, but it is remarkably appealing across the ideological spectrum. . . . It envelops the ghettos in the romanticized aura Americans attach to small-two life . . . neatly removes from the agenda the most divisive racial remedies of the past generation . . . [and] for blacks drawn to nationalism, it contains the promise of a reunified, self-determining, economically independent community removed from the agonies of assimilation,” Lemann argues. But for all of its promises, he concludes, “the clear lesson of experience . . . is that ghetto development hasn’t worked.” By this Lemann means that attempts to revitalize the poorest neighborhoods may do no harm, but they provide at best temporary help, leaving ever “smaller and more isolated” ghetto neighborhoods to suffer from joblessness, crime,
and poor schools. All of this may be true, but it does not account for African Americans’ roles in the creation of much larger communities and the ongoing evolution of relationships between different parts of black Chicago.

An examination of how black Chicagoans continually remade their own communities necessarily raises questions about the nature and effectiveness of “self-help” strategies. The degree to which self-help has been a liberating or conservative force has long been a central question of African American history, and recently it has become a key question for historians, sociologists and local activists who are reclaiming the importance of neighborhood organization. For example, the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, an eight-year longitudinal research project completed in the 1990s, explores the causes of “anti-social behavior” in Chicago neighborhoods. The findings show that the condition of a neighborhood is not dependent on the class of its residents, but on the levels of what the authors call -- in reliably obscure social scientific language -- “collective efficacy, defined as social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good.”

*American Prospect* columnist Eyal Press captured question about the potential conservatism of self-help with unusual clarity when he analyzed the implications of “collective efficacy” for local organizers like Lisa Banks, a block club leader in Buffalo, New York. “How do we empower ourselves versus having someone else do it for us? That’s what I want to know,” Banks told Press, who was both inspired by Banks’ desire of self-empowerment and troubled by the potential libertarian implications of her emphasis on self-help.
The research on collective efficacy indeed implies that government programs won’t necessarily alter the dynamics in poor neighborhoods. But if this is what collective efficacy is ultimately about, should policy-makers just sit back and leave it to poor people to fix their problems themselves? Was Banks reading from the handbook of Saul Alinsky or of The Heritage Foundation? . . . . Focusing on the social dynamics within neighborhoods also risks obscuring the larger structural inequities poor communities face. On the other hand, as even many progressive scholars who study urban poverty will admit, while structural inequality surely matters, it doesn’t explain everything.48

“Striving in Black Chicago” examines this relationship between the structural causes of urban inequality and ordinary people’s roles in continually remaking the conditions of their lives. Black Chicagoans worked to sustain and rebuild local communities in different ways in the contexts of the Depression, World War II, and postwar urban change, but in each period the pursuit of individual opportunity and happiness remained central to a political universe that also included more radical struggles for labor and civil rights. A quick summary of the case studies I examine in the larger work will provide a sense of the kind of concrete action I have in mind.

A chapter on neighborhood politics in Depression-era black Chicago draws upon the block-by-block Land Use Survey of Chicago (1939) and interviews of African American residents completed between 1936 and 1939 to reconstruct the social and political diversity within the relatively small black South Side after years of struggling with the Depression. Even a quick tour of the South Side of the 1930s and 1940s shows that it had become remarkably differentiated by housing types and by the social status of its residents. This depiction replaces the view of the area’s “golden age” with a more historical portrait of the social complexity contained within the South Side’s eight square miles, and with a sense of how black Chicagoans understood their predicament at the
time -- how they protected themselves, fostered family connections, and allied with or fought against each other.

Perhaps no single person in the Black Metropolis was more familiar with the transformations the Great Depression and World War II wrought in the everyday lives of the wide variety of black Chicagoans than sociologist Horace R. Cayton, Jr. In his contributions to the landmark study (co-written with St. Clair Drake), *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945) and in his work at a social settlement house on Chicago’s South Side -- the Parkway Community House -- an optimistic Cayton sought to apply the lessons he had learned in extensive sociological research to a pragmatic effort to sustain a relatively high status black neighborhood in the Washington Park Community Area. Cayton’s story provides a view into the strengths and weaknesses of efforts to remake black Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s.

Black Chicagoans took advantage of the wartime economic boom and local connections to the federal employment bureaucracy to knock down racial barriers to employment. Although historians have begun to open up discussions of wartime working-class black activism, this study focuses on unconventional sites of employment activism -- including the work of the local South Side office of the United States Employment Service (USES), the Negro Labor Relations League, and a group of black bricklayers and their allies -- who developed connections with national and local government officials to open jobs for black workers. Together, the Negro Labor Relations League, the black bricklayers, and the black administrators of LocalUSES Office #8 fostered the success of a loosely-aligned “black craft economy.” Members of the black craft economy served as opening wedges into higher-wage skilled jobs in retail,
trucking, construction, and civil service work, and as proponents of increasingly controversial black self-help strategies in the postwar era.

The same black bricklayers who helped open hundreds of jobs for skilled black trades workers on defense jobsites also developed over seven hundred single-family houses for black workers in the far South Side community of Lilydale between 1942 and 1947. Beginning with the history of the Lilydale development, a chapter on the postwar history of urban renewal examines how black Chicagoans sought to alleviate the housing shortage and sustain local communities at a time of mass migration and slum clearance. Private housing developments like Lilydale did not offer a solution to the postwar housing shortage, but the bricklayers who constructed those houses acted upon a much broader commitment to community building efforts as a response to postwar urban upheaval. The history of black residents displaced by slum clearance for the Chicago Housing Authority’s Dearborn Homes project in 1947 and 1948 sheds light on the housing prospects of the most vulnerable black Chicagoans. In an extraordinary turn of events, they ultimately worked cooperatively with CHA administrator Eri Hulbert to make the most of the forced relocation. The final case study examines the history of North Kenwood-Oakland, a community along Lake Michigan, just north of Hyde Park and the University of Chicago. North Kenwood-Oakland became a middle-class black community after World War II. Between the late 1940s and the 1950s, it experienced an influx of black Chicagoans displaced by slum clearance projects to the north and west, and of a relatively small number of black southern migrants. Consequently, North Kenwood-Oakland became a site of intense class tensions between black Chicagoans. Despite persistent and diverse efforts to sustain a mixed-class black community, most of
the middle-class residents ultimately left the area. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the working-class black residents remaining in the area formed one of the seminal organizations in black Chicago’s growing neighborhood-based movement for self-determination.

Finally, a study of the postwar transformations of the Chicago Urban League sheds light on the recreation of urban black liberalism. At the same time that mass migration, slum clearance, and the postwar housing shortage created particular difficulties for the residents of the Dearborn Homes site and North Kenwood-Oakland, the same large-scale challenges tested the Urban League’s ability to provide social services, organize local communities, and run job training and placement programs. After 1956, the Urban League virtually gave up on these traditional program areas, opting instead to act as a coordinator for citywide public and private social service agencies, and to become a “responsible” agitator and mediator in the city’s increasingly militant civil rights struggles. The same social and political environment that pushed working-class black residents of North Kenwood-Oakland to form a neighborhood organization for black self-determination -- known more popularly as Black Power -- also pushed the Urban League’s leaders to focus on a new liberal politics of citywide civil rights struggles and social service programs, voter registration drives, race-based electoral alliances, and cooperation with government-funded antipoverty programs that hearkened to the League’s traditional emphasis on finding jobs for black men and helping the black poor improve their quality of life.

The central argument is that black Chicagoans in the context of mass migration and postwar urban upheaval black Chicagoans continually remade their local
communities by opening jobs and struggling to sustain the quality of life in rapidly changing neighborhoods. Critics who see such efforts as overly conservative accommodation during a period of inexorable urban decline obscure the importance of community building efforts during the middle of the twentieth century. Facing extraordinary challenges, black Chicagoans created a sprawling Black Metropolis with significantly more opportunity and potential political power than the majority of black Chicagoans had before World War II. “Striving in Black Chicago” seeks to understand the nature of these achievements by looking closely at how the Second Great Migration changed the politics of work and neighborhood change in the Black Metropolis.

Local community building efforts did not solve the problems of the ghetto, but they provided pragmatic benefits to local black communities during extremely difficult times as well as a base from which many residents moved to take advantage of better opportunities. Community building efforts in black Chicago were essential if flawed parts of a much broader struggle for individual and collective progress. Black Chicagoans connected demands for economic opportunity to struggles for improvements in black communities and civil rights. At the same time, they reinforced black Chicago neighborhoods bases of community and political organizing as well as well as targets of reformers and government action. This study focuses on the processes -- rather than the end results -- of migration, community development, and political changes in the mid-twentieth-century Black Metropolis because those processes both helped determine black Chicagoans’ everyday quality of life and the changing ways in which they addressed struggles to desegregate the city’s schools and to break down the barriers to residential mobility in Chicago.
The Image of the Black Metropolis

In 1966 Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) joined Chicago’s Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) to form the Chicago Freedom Movement to “end slums” in the city. At the outset of the movement, King sought to rally a crowd of hundreds of black and white Chicagoans at the Chicago Amphitheatre. Seeking what historian David L. Chappell has termed “renewal motivated by prophetic truth,” King pointed to the depths to which black Chicagoans had sunk in order to inspire them to create a movement for a better life. The Second Great Migration had brought about 500,000 black southerners to the city over the past three decades, but it had been a profound disappointment:

The Negro had come North, seeking a Promised Land, which, if not flowing with milk and honey, he at least expected to be ladened [sic] with jobs and opportunity. It was in the crushing of such dreams that the North has been most cruel to the Negro. Up and out of the Delta heartland of Dixie, up from Alabama and Mississippi, still they come pouring in, despite the fact that the stream of jobs which once awaited them has long since dried up. . . . Yes, the Chicago Negro, and the northern Negro generally, finds himself an urban peasant, an impoverished alien in an affluent society. He is too poor to rise with the society; too impoverished by the ages to be able to ascend by using his own resources.49

Chicago had become a symbol of dreams destroyed by intransigent racism and urban decline. King’s image of black Chicago has much in common with historians’ depictions of the “second ghetto” and the urban crisis, with one important caveat. While King sought to inspire grassroots activism by spotlighting the extent of racial inequality in Chicago, the standard historical accounts of the city’s black community in the middle of the twentieth century have minimized the extent of its community activism. As Arnold Hirsch puts it, “Community, resilience, and resistance there may be, but if so, they are
pursued and displayed in the virtually unchanged context of residential segregation. That is the first contextual reality.” From this point of view, the history of African American migration and community building represents little more than a monumental effort to gild the ghetto. If “geography is destiny,” as Hirsch suggests, then segregation and urban decline trumps even activism and local efforts to improve life within the borders of the geographically isolated “ghetto” were ultimately of little importance.50

But geography is not destiny. The Black Metropolis was no powerless monolithic ghetto and an individual migrant’s fate in the city depended on a combination of factors, including race, space, gender, skill levels, and political and social connections. A view of twentieth-century African American urban history that recognizes the achievements and limits of everyday efforts to sustain neighborhoods and economic opportunities for black workers demands a set of images that highlight the diversity and contingency of life in the Black Metropolis.

Chicago has provided uneven and limited benefits for African Americans. The city remains a segregated and black residents continue to face disproportionately high levels of unemployment. Despite the successes of the black working- and middle-class, and even the return of many middle-class blacks to older urban neighborhoods in recent years, Chicago continues to have hyper-segregated, chronically unemployed black areas of the city. The current political dilemma is how to address the uneven development of economic and political resources in a greatly expanded Black Metropolis.

There is no straightforward political lesson here, no clear public policy position to take away, except to say that there is no necessary contradiction between self-help and protest politics, or between individual improvement and collective progress. The
ordinary impulse to strive to make life better is may aggravate differences regarding ideology and strategy, and community building often holds the prospect of limited political power, but it is also the foundation on which larger social and political movements are built. The challenge remains similar to the problem that community activists faced in black Chicago throughout the twentieth century: how is it possible “to get together” to improve the quality of everyday life and to tackle massive political and economic challenges despite existing political alliances and patterns of urban life, which are, by their very nature, idiosyncratic and locally-defined? The answer is not apparent. It is clear, though, that a narrow focus on the extremes of urban inequality and struggles over public policy can obscure the broader scope of urban experiences and how they create a political momentum of their own.


1 According to the Land Use Survey, sixty-four of 148 units on Lawson’s block were in need of major repairs or unfit for use. *Land Use Survey, Volume II*, p. 237.


3 Christopher Van Buren, “Interview with Citizens Non-partisan Organization, October 19, 1937.”

4 Christopher Van Buren, “Interview with Citizens Non-partisan Organization.”


8 As historian J. Trent Alexander has argued, “on the whole long-distance migration continued to be an important strategy in the depression era,” when a total of 347,000 people left the South for other regions, but World War II still marked “a new era” in black southerners’ migration. J. Trent Alexander, “The Great Migration in Comparative Perspective,” Social Science History 22:3 (Autumn 1998), pp. 351 and 353.

9 Chicago Plan Commission, “Population Facts for Planning Chicago,” (Chicago: February, 1942), p. 32. Black southerners did not begin leaving the South in large numbers until after Pearl Harbor, but despite their late start, African Americans left the South in higher proportions than white southerners. In 1940, African Americans accounted for only one-fourth of the total southern population, but one-third of the total number of migrants who left the South during the war (540,000 of 1.6 million) were African American. For example, the rate of migration out of Mississippi during the war increased approximately 721% compared to the previous five years. Louisiana, which had actually gained nine thousand people between 1935 and 1940, lost nineteen thousand people during the war. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Monthly Labor Review, (October 1946), p. 485-8.


“In Chicago where every single available living unit regardless of condition is used, the over-crowding has caused a deterioration of dwelling units not only occupied by war workers but occupied by other gainfully employed families. From just one form of deterioration . . . fires, it was estimated that 1,000 persons were driven out doors in a month [in December 1943].” Horace Cayton and Harry J. Walker, United Committee on Emergency Housing, report to National Housing Agency re: “The Problem of Negro Housing and the Program of the National Housing Agency,” 14pp., January 14, 1944. Box 178, Folder 7, Julius Rosenwald Fund Collection, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.


Grossman, Land of Hope, 265.

Green, Selling the Race, p. 214.


Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, p. xvi. Sugrue notes that Hirsch “moves beyond the notion of the state as an all-powerful force. . . . [but he] surprisingly downplays the role of urban blacks, and views them as powerless in the political battles over postwar housing.” Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, p. 300, n. 21. Similarly, Gregory has
argued that Lemann’s *Promised Land* “erases black politics while concentrating on federal policy failures.” Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, n. 4, p. 408.


33 Green, *Selling the Race*, p. 6.

34 Green, *Selling the Race*, p. 45.

35 Green, *Selling the Race*, p. 175.

36 Green, *Selling the Race*, p. 176.


39 Although Gregory focuses much of his analysis on black Chicago, his study is really national in scope. Green, on the other hand, focuses on black Chicago’s media institutions, but his is not a community study. He acknowledges that “the most studied black enclave in the country . . . still retains its secrets, promising revelation for those willing to chase after them,” but he self-consciously forgoes the discovery of those secrets in favor of exploring “the symbiotic interrelation of Black Chicago with wider worlds.” Green, *Selling the Race*, pp. 1 and 9.


43 Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, p. 4.


Rev. James Bevel speech to First Presbyterian Church, May 9, 1966. Research and Planning Box 12, Folder “James Bevel,” CUL Collection.