The Barrio as the Center of Latino History

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On May 14, 1969, just minutes before midnight, the Young Lords Organization (YLO) took over and occupied the Stone Academic Administration building at McCormick Theological Seminary located in the heart of Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. With help from seminary students, the Young Lords moved in, and after learning the layout of the building, sealed all the entrances and set up patrols to control who came in and out. The group that occupied the building that night numbered around eighty and included a good mix of mothers, fathers, Black Panthers, Young Lords, white activists, clergy, and religious leaders from the Northside Cooperative Ministry (NSCM). "The groups who have seized the building," the local Socialist Press reported, "are black, Latin, and white… little red books are in evidence and the clenched fist is the accepted greeting."[1] They quickly renamed the building the "Manuel Ramos Memorial Building" in memory of their good friend and brother killed by an off-duty police officer just a few days earlier.

The occupation was led by the Young Lords Organization, a predominately Latino radical organization that started in the late 1950s as a street gang in Chicago and evolved into an activist group in the late 1960s. As social servants and revolutionary nationalists, the Young Lords practiced a form of pragmatism that focused on local community movements focused on fighting against poverty, displacement, and police brutality. But their vision was much bigger. They envisioned barrio activism as a starting point to their larger agenda for the liberation of the island of Puerto Rico from U.S. colonial rule. "Our mission was self-determination for Puerto Rico and other nations in Latin America," Cha Cha Jimenez, one of the group's founders, explained, "and neighborhood empowerment, that was our mission."[2] At the center of this neighborhood empowerment was Lincoln Park.

Located in the Near North Side of the city of Chicago, in the 1960s Lincoln Park was a neighborhood defined by its working-class aesthetics and its mix of Latinos, African Americans, and ethnic whites. From Victorian brownstone homes near lake Michigan on the east to immigrant housing units to the west, Lincoln Park was one of the most competitive real estate markets in the city. Its location near lake Michigan made it a target for urban renewal hawks who in

the years after World War II invested millions in this working-class neighborhood. That investment meant big profits for business, but it also pushed poor and working-class people out and forced them to relocate as rents soared.

Urban renewal trends were not unique to postwar Chicago. Federal legislation in the form of "Housing Acts" in 1954, 1959, 1961, and 1968 each focused on the redevelopment of what investors tagged as crumbling neighborhoods in prime locations near business districts or attractive landscapes—like Lincoln Park. This translated into the demolition of old buildings, raising rents to push poor people out, and making it almost impossible for poor and working people, mostly Latinos and African Americans, to stay put regardless of how long they had lived in the neighborhood. In Chicago, a city with nearly 250,000 Latinos in the late 1960s, urban renewal policies had normalized displacement, pushing Latinos in Chicago from neighborhood to neighborhood—out of the Near North Side, the Near West Side, and Lincoln Park—to areas in the west side of the city and often into substandard housing units where in some cases they paid higher rents. Chicago was a world made by displacement.

At the height of this displacement, the Young Lords emerged as a political and neighborhood to push back and fight against the displacement that their families and neighbors faced. While I do not have the space in this essay to delve deep into the occupation of McCormick Seminary and the radical neighborhood movement that emerged in its wake, I did want to start this way to make a larger point about the importance of place in Latino history. Social geographers tell us that space and place are not neutral, but in fact are vital in determining social interactions, politics, and social movements.[3] In Mexican American and Latino studies, historians have underscored the significance of place to the movements and politics of Latino history, especially those that emerge out of the barrio. From Albert Camarillo's *Chicanos in a Changing Society* on southern California to Virginia Sánchez-Korrol's classic, *From Colonia to Community,* to more recent work on East Harlem and Washington Heights in New York City, Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, Chicago's Lincoln Park and Pilsen neighborhoods, San Antonio's westside barrio, and Houston's northside; place matters in Latino history.[4] As a civil rights historian, and someone that focuses almost exclusively on the Latino freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s, I have been thinking a lot about the role of place—neighborhoods and barrios—to the rise of social movements. I don't see the barrio as a

monolithic utopia, but as a place where working-class sensibilities and cultural resilience come face to face with chronic poverty, uneven development, and limited educational opportunities in American cities. And barrios are not solely an urban phenomenon. In rural communities, social subjugation in the form of oppressive farm labor created spatial patterns that trapped Latino farmworkers in horrific living and working conditions in places like Delano, California; Goshen, Indiana; Mathis, Texas; Traverse City, Michigan; and Archbold, Ohio. In the cities and in the fields, Latinos became expendable populations that experienced constant terrible living conditions, police brutality, and the constant threat of being pushed out and forced to relocate. Out of these very real experiences, and out of a desire to create a home—whether in rural or urban America—Latinos organized movements for civil and political rights that fundamentally changed the politics of place in the United States. Those transnational, cross border, and hemispheric visions that started in the barrio extended to push for a free Puerto Rico, for justice for Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and for a pan-Latino political identity that acknowledged the connections barrio politics and hemispheric politics across the Americas. From the farm worker movement in central California and the movement for political rights in south Texas—where Mexican Americans were the majority but nonetheless remained subjugated by a deeply entrenched Anglo economic power—to the urban barrios where displacement and police brutality gave rise to Latino militant and radical activism, small places and barrios have led to large scale movements that have fundamentally altered American democracy and centered Latinos in the American story.

I write all this even as the power of place on social movements remains a mystery to me. I'm not afraid to admit that I have not been able to answer the question of why the barrio matters so much, of why it is central to Latino history, in any real quantitative way. But maybe that's okay. The search for home, for belonging, for a place to rest and build community is so fundamental to our collective humanity, and perhaps it should not surprise us when movements for justice rise up around a community's collective need to have a place to call home. I learned this most clearly in the story of the occupation of the McCormick Theological Seminary by the Young Lords in 1969. In the days leading up to the occupation, a young Mexican immigrant, Obed Lopez (himself a community organizer with the Young Lords), talked about how much he

loved Lincoln Park, how his Mexican parents had settled in this mostly Puerto Rican neighborhood, and how love for his barrio was driving him to occupy McCormick seminary; occupation as an act of love. Perhaps that's explanation enough.

NOTES

1 "Community Seizes McCormick Building," *FRED: The Socialist Press Service*, May 19, 1969. Vol. 1, No. 14, pg. 2. Private Archive, Prof. Ken Sawyer, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois.

2 Jose "Cha-Cha" Jimenez, interview with author, Grand Valley State University, Digital Recording, February 12, 2014, Grand Rapids, MI.

3 See the work of Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real and Imagined Places* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

4 For more on this see: David Montejano, *Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Matt Garcia, "Requiem for a Barrio: Race, Space, and Gentrification in Southern California," in A.K. Sandoval-Strausz and Nancy H. Kwak, eds., *Making Cities Global: The Transnational Turn in Urban History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); David Badillo, *Latinos and the New Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Gina M. Pérez et. al., eds., *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); George J. Sánchez, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood became the Future of American Democracy* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2021); Felipe Hinojosa, *Apostles of Change: Latino Radical Politics, Church Occupations, and the Fight to Save the Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021).