From the Near West Side to 18th Street: Mexican Community Formation and Activism in Mid-Twentieth Century Chicago

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In late 1971, a group of Mexican Americans gathered in Chicago’s Pilsen/18th Street neighborhood to discuss the naming of a new Mexican community center opening in the area’s east end. The center would occupy the building of an old Catholic grammar school and adjoining church and rectory, which lay vacant for several years. St. Joseph’s, or St. Joe’s as it was known in the neighborhood, had long served a Slovakian immigrant population, but those residents and their second and third generation descendants had abandoned the neighborhood and the parish years before. The growing Mexican community in the area had obtained permission from the Archdiocese of Chicago to lease the facilities and operate a community center to serve local youth and families.

At their meeting, community members and leaders interested in the establishment of the center expressed passionate opinions about what the site should be named. Older professionals in the community, such as physician Dr. Jorge Prieto and Judge David Cerda, supported the name “Latin American Youth Center,” a label that would clearly identify the community’s purpose and ethnic identity. Younger, more militant participants who had embraced the nationalism of the Chicano Movement of the Southwest ardently called for a name in Spanish that would reflect the politics of a racialized national minority, not the traditional ethnic immigrant identity of the previous generation. According to one of the center’s founders, Phil Ayala, “The more radical side [of the group] came up with [the name] El Centro de la Causa” (The Center for the Cause). Tense debates over the center’s name consumed the lengthy meeting. Ultimately, the group reached a compromise that would seemingly satisfy all involved. Since state law at the time did not allow incorporation under a non-English name, the group decided to adopt both names—the Spanish one to appease the younger radicals and the English version to satisfy state incorporation laws and more moderate middle class sponsors.

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Regardless of the contrasting political views or generational differences, the establishment of the center marked an important moment for the Mexican people of Chicago's 18th Street neighborhood: they had laid claim to the community and began efforts to draw resources and establish services for the growing Mexican and Mexican American population. The creation of institutions such as El Centro de la Causa helped make 18th Street the quintessential Mexican barrio in Chicago and the largest in the Midwest for the past four decades.3

Early Historical Development of a Community

The settlement of Mexican Americans in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood did not occur by accident. Their presence there was embedded in a history of racially-based urban planning that had dislocated them from the neighboring Near West Side, known affectionately as "Taylor Street" (see map 1). Mexican immigrants had a decades-long history on the Near West Side, but by the 1960s the construction of federal expressways, urban renewal, and the construction of the new University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus, had displaced much of the population. As a result, most families moved across the railroad tracks that divided the

Map 1
Near West Side and Lower West Side (Pilsen/18th Street)
two areas and settled in the historically Eastern European Pilsen community (known officially by the Chicago Community Inventory as the Lower West Side). This essay traces the movement of the city’s Mexican community from the Near West Side to 18th Street/Pilsen and the efforts at community formation and activism in both neighborhoods. I argue that the displacement of the thriving Mexican community on the Near West Side in many ways contributed to the emergence of community activism in the 18th Street neighborhood.

The history of Mexican Americans in Chicago, and specifically the Near West Side neighborhood, dates back to World War I when Mexican workers came to labor on the city’s railroads and steel mills. Mexicans settled in the area and established traditional ethnic organizations while making connections with local institutions. The Community Area designated by University of Chicago sociologists as the Near West Side (Community Area #28) had historically been a port of entry for immigrants to Chicago. Just south and west of the downtown business district, it was one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city.

The area received Northern/Western European immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Impoverished and overcrowded, the area was made famous by social reformer Jane Addams, who chose it for her social settlement work and established Hull House in 1889. The dilapidated tenement buildings, which lacked plumbing or sewage systems, provided crude shelter for thousands of European immigrants. At the beginning of the twentieth century Eastern and Southern Europeans (mostly Greeks, Italians, and Jews) began replacing earlier German and Irish immigrants.

When European immigration decreased dramatically in 1924, greater numbers of Mexicans and southern Blacks began making their way to the Near West Side. The aged and neglected neighborhood was one of the least expensive places to live and one of the few areas besides the Black Belt that accepted racial minorities. The Near West Side housed a diverse working class immigrant and second generation population. Though the population was also racially diverse, this diversity belied the rigid physical segregation of African Americans. Blacks lived within Near West Side boundaries, but they generally did not live among Italians, Greeks, or other European immigrant neighbors. European ethnics often had slightly more tolerance for Mexicans than they did for Blacks. In general, Mexicans enjoyed a more ambiguous
racial position, at times considered just another immigrant group, but at other times viewed as racially distinct.8 Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the neighborhood’s large institutional presence brought stability to the area. Jane Addams’s Hull House settlement figured among one of the largest social service agencies in the city. During the 1920s and 1930s Americanization programs at Hull House reached out to some Mexican families. The settlement incorporated Mexicans into their arts and crafts activities, for example, specifically their pottery making program.9 The Institute for Juvenile Research, the Juvenile Justice Courts, and a sprawling medical complex consisting of Cook County Hospital, the University of Illinois Medical School and Center, Rush-Presbyterian Hospital, and St. Luke’s Hospital occupied the western end of the region. The Institute for Juvenile Research began working with Mexicans in the 1940s to combat juvenile delinquency. Various Catholic and Protestant churches dotted the area as well. Finally, the eastern and northern boundaries of the Near West Side contained small factories, the railroads, and other industrial employers.

Mexicans and the small number of other Latin American immigrants in the area had opened their own businesses as early as the 1920s, including restaurants, boarding houses, small grocery stores, and other shops that catered to their cultural tastes and preferences. They also established mutual aid societies, athletic and fraternal clubs, and patriotic organizations. A handful of Spanish-language publications produced newspapers and periodicals in the neighborhood during the 1920s and 1930s, for varying lengths of time.10

In the 1930s, Chicago’s Mexican population dropped to a third of its size as a result of the Great Depression and accompanying deportation and repatriation policies. The various social groups and service organizations that Mexicans managed to create on the Near West Side by the 1940s attest to the stable presence that Mexican immigrants and their children were able to maintain despite these challenges. Mexican and Mexican American area residents initiated various community organizations and groups designed to serve the largely immigrant, and largely impoverished ethnic Mexican community. St. Francis of Assisi parish, which held its first Spanish-language mass in 1926, continued to be an organizing institution in the community after the depression. Mexican men who attended St. Francis established a fraternal organization, the
Wildcats, in 1938. Their newsletter, the *St. Francis Crier*, regularly reported news about neighborhood residents, especially returning young men who had served in the military during World War II. The church also sponsored youth clubs and offered recreational outings for second-generation teens. St. Francis's grammar school served many Mexican children as well.

Census data from 1940 provide a sketch of the existing Mexican population and the neighborhood more generally. Mexicans officially numbered over 2,700 persons on the Near West Side, making up 9.5 percent of the foreign-born population and two percent of the neighborhood's total population. While this may seem quite small, Mexican settlement, like that of most other immigrants, was concentrated in a specific set of blocks, thus making them highly visible as a distinct racial group.11

By the mid-1940s the city's Mexican population began increasing again, numbering over 20,000. This growth included both Mexican and Mexican American (im)migration, but increasingly a new group of Spanish-speaking migrants, Puerto Ricans, began arriving in the city and the Near West Side. The neighborhood continued to serve as a port of entry for many incoming Mexican immigrants, braceros, Mexican American migrants, and Puerto Rican labor migrants.12

Throughout the 1940s, Mexicans on the Near West Side developed various initiatives to address community needs and further plant roots in the neighborhood. In 1943, Mexican Americans formed the Mexican Civic Committee (MCC), under the sponsorship of the Chicago Area Project (CAP), a juvenile delinquency prevention initiative born out of the Institute for Juvenile Research. The Mexican Civic Committee drew some of the city's few Mexican professionals to its board. The chair, Frank Paz, a Mexican immigrant from Michoacan, Mexico, had an engineering degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and worked in the steel mills. University of Chicago instructor Luis Leal, who would later become a renowned Chicano literary scholar, served as an officer as well.13 In its goal of preventing juvenile delinquency, the MCC sponsored summer camps, classes, and other recreational programs for children. Overall, the MCC promoted education as the key to Mexican American upward mobility. The organization adopted a self-help philosophy, espousing notions of civic responsibility, community problem-solving, and education as the means for social improvement.
Recognizing and Standing Up to Discrimination

In 1945 Mexican Americans called upon the citywide Council of Social Agencies to better serve Mexican social needs. The Council served as an umbrella organization for social service agencies throughout the metropolitan area and had a Committee on Minority Groups that addressed minority concerns in matters of education and recreation. That year at a welfare conference that the Council sponsored, Mexican American participants (including some from the Mexican Civic Committee) protested their status as a "forgotten minority," a group that had gone overlooked by the Committee on Minority Groups. After much urging from Frank Paz and the MCC, the Committee on Minority Groups established a special Subcommittee on Mexican American Interests in February 1947. Paz, who served on the Committee on Minority Groups, became the subcommittee's first chair.

The Subcommittee began planning and organizing for a city-wide conference for social service providers in the metropolitan area. On May 22, 1949, the Council of Social Agencies along with the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, social and welfare agencies, and leaders of the Mexican American community, held a conference entitled, "The Status of the Mexican American in Chicago." Frank Paz provided opening remarks and set the tone for the conference by examining the discrimination that Mexicans suffered in Chicago and how it had kept them at the bottom of the social ladder. With respect to housing, Paz remarked, "There is no neighborhood, that I know of, which has a publicly announced policy which says 'We do not rent to Mexicans,' yet it happens--could it be accidentally?--that we find ourselves congregated in particular districts." Paz pointedly asked questions about employment discrimination as well. Why, he asked, were there no Mexican brakemen, conductors, firemen, or switchmen on the railroads? "There is nothing wrong with working as a railroad section hand but when a group of people are branded for employment only in one particular task there is something radically wrong," he contended. Paz cited similar employment patterns in the steel mills and packinghouses. Mexicans worked only in the dirtiest, most dangerous, low-paid, and unskilled jobs. These conditions had not improved for Mexicans despite more than three decades in Chicago.

Finally, Paz made an incisive critique against Hull House, but
without naming the institution explicitly. He cited the settlement house’s failure to incorporate Mexican Americans into its leadership, though it had worked with Mexican Americans for more than a generation: “A settlement house on the West Side ... has served the Mexican community for the last thirty years. During these thirty years there has never been a Mexican American on the settlement’s Board of Directors. From time to time the settlement has had one Mexican on the staff (emphasis added).”19 Paz’s critical analysis of the condition of Mexicans in Chicago in the late 1940s represented one of the earliest attempts to address civil rights for Mexican Americans in the city.

Attendees at the 1949 “Status of the Mexican American” conference participated in workshops on employment, education, and health, welfare, and recreation and concluded by making several recommendations in these three areas.20 In the end, they “proposed the formation of a city-wide, self-directed, non-profit organization for the purpose of serving as [the] representative voice for persons of Mexican American descent in Chicago.” By the following June, the organization was incorporated as the Mexican American Council (MAC), with Paz as the Council’s first chair.21 MAC noted, “The Mexican American is confronted with/manifold inter-related social problems. As a recent immigrant his income is low, his employment security uncertain, and his ‘acceptance’ by other ethnic groups in doubt. He faces numerous problems occasioned by his differences from his neighbors in language, culture, and educational opportunity. Judged by even the minimum of American standards of health and decency, he is in general ‘ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed.’” The Mexican American Council sought “the better integration of the Mexican American into the life of his community in metropolitan Chicago.” Mexican Americans had lived in Chicago for more than a generation, as Paz had noted, and deserved their turn to reap the benefits of “the American dream.”22

Mexican American leaders on the Near West Side addressed the plight of Mexican Americans in Chicago throughout the 1940s. Because deportation and repatriation had effectively diminished new immigration during the thirties, organizations like MAC served a largely settled immigrant and second generation population. By the 1950s, however, service organizations faced new challenges from increasing numbers of Mexican immigrants, Texas Mexicans, or Tejanos, and a new group, Puerto Ricans. In March of 1953, MAC estimated that over 28,000 Spanish-speaking people (including Puerto Ricans) lived in the area.23
New migrants brought with them all of the attendant problems of poor, recent arrivals, something that further compounded the already austere social conditions of Mexican American residents. Those who settled in the Near West Side area were drawn by the relatively low rents, proximity to jobs, and the presence of an already established Spanish-speaking community. As more Mexicans and Puerto Ricans arrived in the crowded, deteriorated community, they faced high unemployment rates, substandard housing, crowded schools, and high rates of poverty.24 Many sought social services at Hull House, others turned to the Cordi-Marian sisters, a Mexican order of nuns who provided daycare and programs for school children.25

MAC's committees provided assistance and referrals for those in need as well. Their health committee helped translate information for the Spanish-speaking. The housing committee assisted those who needed emergency shelter. The labor committee met with union representatives. The educational committee awarded scholarships to Mexican American high school graduates. Finally, the youth committee addressed the issue of juvenile delinquency.26

The Near West Side Community Disrupted

The Mexican Civic Committee and the Mexican American Council represented two of the most visible initiatives of Mexican Americans on the Near West Side. The neighborhood also had an active interethnic community planning group, the Near West Side Planning Board (NWSPB), which in 1949 began plans for rehabilitating, improving, and conserving the neighborhood. The Near West Side Planning Board regularly held open forums for community residents to provide input to future plans for the area. A meeting in March of 1952 illustrates the level of sponsorship the NWSPB received: over eighty groups including neighborhood churches, public housing developments, schools, social service agencies, and civic groups sponsored the event. Mexican Americans participated in good numbers, represented by the Cordi-Marian Settlement, the Mexican American Council, the Mexican Civic Committee, the Mexican Methodist Church, the Manuel Pérez American Legion Post #1017, and St. Francis of Assisi Church.27

The NWSPB succeeded in getting the area near Harrison and Halsted Streets, the heart of the Mexican neighborhood, designated by
the federal government for “urban renewal,” and proposed new affordable housing for the site.\textsuperscript{28} The urban renewal designation, however, inadvertently led to the neighborhood’s demise. Initially, City Hall supported the project, but soon it betrayed the community’s plans for redevelopment.\textsuperscript{29} In a typically unilateral decision in late 1960, Mayor Richard J. Daley offered the neighborhood’s Harrison-Halsted site for the construction of a new University of Illinois campus in Chicago, without consulting the Near West Side Planning Board. NWSPB members and local residents learned of the decision in local newspapers. Although community women, some of them Mexican American, organized and challenged the city through pickets and federal courts, they lost their battle. The construction of the University of Illinois, Circle Campus went forward in 1963.\textsuperscript{30}

Mexicans composed nearly forty-five percent of families and thirty three percent of single residents displaced by the university. Between 1960 and 1970, the area lost 47,000 residents, 9,000 of whom were Mexican Americans.\textsuperscript{31} The Mexican business district on Halsted Street, which provided Mexicans throughout the city, suburbs and even further away imported food products, tortillerias, panaderias, and other ethnic shops, had to relocate. Neighborhood institutions such as social agencies and ethnic organizations dispersed or folded all together as well. Hull House closed its doors and turned to city-wide, rather than neighborhood-specific social services.\textsuperscript{32}

The displacement of Mexican Americans from the Taylor Street neighborhood has become part of a collective historical narrative for Mexican Americans throughout the Chicago area, but particularly for the Mexican community of Pilsen/18th Street. Countless families tell stories of growing up in the neighborhood and eventually being forced to move as buildings were torn down for university facilities, athletic fields, parking lots, or housing for university and medical students. María Ovalle, who grew up near Taylor Street, remembers as a child, coming home from the fourth grade every day to see which buildings had been marked for demolition on her block: “I have a very, very clear recollection of this. ... You would come home and if your [apartment building] was ready [to be torn down] it would have a circle with a cross on it. ... And so, it would be really, really sad! You’d come home and the kids would [say], ‘Oh, our house is going next,’ and you’d have to move.”\textsuperscript{33}

Families who had known each other for decades, or more recent
arrivals who had just begun to establish roots in the neighborhood, were forced to find new housing elsewhere. As bulldozers razed area buildings, the majority of Taylor Street’s Mexican families reluctantly packed up and moved just south and west to the neighboring Lower West Side, more popularly known as Pilsen or 18th Street.

Making Community Anew: From Taylor Street to 18th Street

The geographical movement of Mexicans from Taylor Street to 18th Street in the 1960s precipitated the emergence of social and political activism, particularly among second generation Mexican Americans. As families began establishing new social networks and community ties, many of the second generation more stridently began claiming 18th Street/Pilsen as a permanent Mexican community. Several factors and forces influenced this activism. During the sixties Chicago had vocal leftist and militant minority movements, such as Students for a Democratic Society, the Black Panther Party, and the Young Lords Organization. Nationally, the women’s movement, anti-war protests, civil rights demonstrations, and the Chicano Movement of the Southwest also influenced Chicago’s Mexican activists. But the experience of displacement from the Near West Side, and the new position in which Mexicans found themselves within the area’s ethnoracial landscape played an important role as well.

Eighteenth Street resembled much of the rest of Chicago, layered with generations of immigrants, highly segregated, and characterized by residential succession. The Pilsen neighborhood had historically been a port of entry for European immigrants. German and Irish immigrants settled the area first during the mid-1800s. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, Czechoslovakian, Bohemian, Slovenian, Lithuanian, and Polish workers and their families settled in the area as they searched for housing close to their industrial workplaces. Pilsen lay in the center of an industrial corridor, fringed by railroad tracks on the north, factories and warehouses on the east and south, and the south branch of the Chicago River. To the west, Pilsen flanked the neighboring Little Village/South Lawndale community, which had a similar industrial and demographic composition. Pilsen was a decidedly working class community.

The neighborhood was impoverished and neglected. Housing stock was considerably older than other parts of the city: less than one
percent of Pilsen’s housing had been constructed after 1940, while in some areas of Chicago as much as thirty percent of housing stock had been built since that year. Multi-family apartment buildings outnumbered single family homes. Moreover, many property lots contained two buildings, one in the front and one in the rear, each of which was often divided into several small apartments to increase occupancy. Pilsen residents lived in very crowded conditions. For Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, relocation from Taylor Street to 18th Street did not signal much of an improvement.

This contrasted sharply with the experience of European Americans. By the early 1960s, many of Pilsen’s second and third generation white ethnics had moved out to less crowded, better quality housing in neighborhoods south and west of Pilsen. Some of these families lived in neighboring Little Village (South Lawndale), with its slightly larger homes, while the better heeled moved further south and west to middle class suburbs like Cicero and Berwyn. The simultaneous process of white flight and Mexican in-migration changed 18th Street and eventually the contiguous Little Village area as well. The construction of the University of Illinois-Circle Campus had quickened the change in the racial composition of these neighborhoods.

When Mexicans and Puerto Ricans began arriving to 18th Street and Little Village, they encountered an already deteriorated community with an aging immigrant population that often expressed racial resentment toward these recent arrivals, regardless of whether they were American-born urban renewal transplants or recent immigrants from Mexico. Mexicans had historically held an ambiguous position within the city’s racial order. Although they were immigrants, their cultural differences and the darker skin color of some marked them as racially distinct, especially in relation to European ethnics. Although many European immigrants and their descendants had deep-seated ethnic and national antagonisms toward each another (that is, Poles, Slavs, Czechs), they came together on the basis of their shared “whiteness” to battle the encroaching threat of darker people. By the 1970s, research conducted in Pilsen and Little Village revealed European immigrant anxieties about the changes in the community:

[They] view the exodus of Mexicans, and to some extent the closeness of the blacks, as a threat to their very
existence in every sense of the word. Informants often say that they do not object to Mexicans and blacks as such, but cannot hide a deep-seated anxiety concerning the changes they may bring in their own style of life and in the cultural and social atmosphere of the whole community.39

Researchers explained that in the face of incoming Mexicans and nearby Blacks, whose children attended their neighborhood public high school, "Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and Slovenians [were] sufficiently drawn together to overcome their historical pasts."40

Second generation Mexican Americans grew up with the experience of racial resentment from their neighbors. Alicia Amador, a Mexican American woman, remembered experiencing discrimination from Whites as a child in Little Village in the early 1960s when Mexicans had first begun breaking through neighborhood boundaries.

Racism was awful over there. People can not believe what we went through. I remember walking into a store with my brother and we were waiting [to be attended] and people were walking ahead of us [in line]. Finally, I told the proprietor, "We've been standing here. My brother wants to buy some candy." And he said, "We don't serve niggers here."41

On 18th Street, Mexicans and Mexican Americans had similar experiences. Carlos Valencia, who moved to Pilsen in 1958 when he was a teenager, remembered very tense relations in the predominantly Polish area. As one of the first Mexican families to cross the western racial boundary along Ashland Avenue (where Mexican families simply did not live in those years) the Valencias encountered prejudice from their Polish neighbors. Valencia noted, "We were always fighting with the Polish guys. There was lots of tension."42 Resident Cathy Alaniz told researchers in 1970 about an elderly Polish neighbor, Mrs. Zapolsky: "Whenever the [Mexican children] go down the stairs and pass her on the way, they hear her muttering, 'Mexicans!'" Zapolsky also referred to Alaniz's dark-skinned niece as "that black Mexican."43

Despite these conflicts, by the late sixties signs of a new ethnic
community began to emerge on 18th Street. The 1970 census officially counted a population of more than 24,000 Spanish-speaking people, composing fifty-five percent of the neighborhood’s total population. The community’s poverty remained unchanged. Median family income measured less than $8,600, with sixteen percent of families in the neighborhood living below the poverty line. In contrast, median family income in Chicago’s loop (downtown) district approximated $21,000, with only five percent of families living below poverty there. Forty-nine percent of those employed in Pilsen worked in manufacturing. The community had one of the city’s lowest levels of school completion: the median for adults over twenty-five was only 8.5 years of schooling. Residents were very young, with thirty-nine percent under eighteen years of age.

Such conditions prompted Mexican American women and men to begin organizing and working on social issues in their community. Some local activists worked in social service agencies, formed community-based organizations, and began building coalitions with other groups across the city. Others had more strident critiques of American society and envisioned radical social changes that struck at the root of inequality. Those attracted by cultural nationalism gravitated to the burgeoning Chicano Movement of the southwestern United States. Like their counterparts in places like Los Angeles, those who identified as Chicanos in Chicago made demands for self-determination and community autonomy, protested against local power structures, and demanded greater social services. Unlike in the Southwest, however, this activism emerged in a context of traditional Chicago-style ethnic politics, racially shifting neighborhoods, and coalitions with other Latin American migrants, namely Puerto Ricans. The particularities of Chicago’s political history and ethno-racial landscape tempered some radical activism and promoted more moderate and “accommodationist” community politics among those who preferred to identify themselves as immigrants, akin to Europeans, rather than embrace a racial minority status.

The establishment of El Centro de la Causa, a community youth center, represented one effort at claiming space for Mexicans in Pilsen, challenging social inequalities, and bringing social services to the community. In 1970, Father John Harrington of the Providence of God parish in Pilsen’s east end, informed two Mexican American workers at the Howell Settlement House, John Velásquez and Phil Ayala, about a vacant Catholic school and church building. He suggested that they
could possibly be re-opened and used by the neighborhood. The school facilities included classrooms and a large gym that could be put to use by local youth as a recreational center and meeting place. Velásquez and Ayala successfully negotiated with the Archdiocese to lease the buildings and secured two paid staff positions as well. In November of 1971, the building officially opened as El Centro de la Causa, the Latin American Youth Center, Inc.48

El Centro initially focused on recreational and athletic programs aimed at gang violence prevention. The director hired street workers to reach Mexican youth and draw them into the Center. Staff soon began applying for funding for other projects and quickly expanded their services to programs such as Servicios Sociales del Barrio, Project Quetzalcoatl, the Chicano Mental Health Training Program, BASTA (Brotherhood Against Slavery to Addiction), and Dar A Luz, a mother-infant health program. A fundraising press release from the early 1970s explained why El Centro had been formed: “Over the years this community [the Mexican community of 18th Street] has been ignored by federal, state, and city agencies that have been established to meet some of the needs of inner city residents. . . . There has been little interest on the part of city agencies to [expend] energy or monies to provide needed services for our community.” The Center aimed “to provide an atmosphere which encourages adults to use their civil rights and responsibilities and which enables youth to realize their full potential.”49

The Chicano Mental Health Training Program (CMHTP) symbolized one of the Center’s most successful, though short-lived, initiatives. The program sought to train local community residents as “bilingual bicultural paraprofessionals in the ever broadening field of mental health.”50 CMHTP received funding from National Institutes of Mental Health in July of 1972. El Centro recruited Chicana/o and Mexican American instructors from among local university researchers, graduate students, and social service professionals. They developed a Chicano-centric curriculum which included units on Child Psychology, Machismo, and Marriage, among other topics. CMHTP’s director, Phil Ayala negotiated to have students receive college credit through Malcolm X Community College, a branch of the City Colleges of Chicago.51 Over two dozen neighborhood residents enrolled in the courses. Classes were conducted at El Centro and students completed internships in local mental health or social service agencies. Within four
years, the program had successfully trained forty-eight students, thirty-eight of whom received Associates Degrees, while fifteen continued on toward advanced degrees. The program placed a total of twenty students in mental health service positions, and fifteen in other human service jobs.52

Two years after opening, El Centro received a $75,000 grant for a demonstration project they called Servicios Sociales del Barrio (Neighborhood Social Services). The program provided assistance to families and youth, largely in the form of casework, and included a research component that sought to identify needs and services that were not being met in the community.53 A group of men in the neighborhood also obtained funding to initiate a drug rehabilitation program they called BASTA—Brotherhood Against Slavery to Addiction. They ran a methadone clinic in the basement of El Centro. Some nearby residents opposed having the clinic in the area, fearing that it would attract drug users. European American residents in particular opposed BASTA’s presence in the neighborhood.54

El Centro established a community library as well. The neighborhood had long been without a public library, and while many had petitioned the city to open one in the area, El Centro’s staff saw an opportunity to develop their own community-controlled space. Their community-focused, Chicano-centric philosophy was evident in the mission statement:

Library service in America traditionally has been aimed at the white, middle-class majority, maintaining and reflecting their ideologies, at the expense and exclusion of minority communities. – Our primary goals are to supply the community with the information it needs to survive within a hostile environment, and to improve self-concepts by raising the level of consciousness about ourselves and our culture.55

El Centro’s activities represented Mexican American activists’ efforts to develop community-controlled projects that reflected the community’s values, culture, and needs.

The militant nationalist posture of organizations like El Centro represented one among a broad range of political positions, strategies,
and ideologies in Pilsen’s Mexican community. El Centro took a reformist approach to social service provision, similar to many civil rights initiatives of the times. Radical, leftist groups made more direct critiques of social inequality and class relations. A coalition of Mexican and Puerto Rican workers, for example, began the group Asociación Pro Derechos Obreros/The Association for Workers’ Rights (APO) in the late 1960s. APO staged bus boycotts and sit-ins to protest employment discrimination against Latinos by the Chicago Transit Authority. Leftist organizations such as Centro de Acción Social Autónomo–Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA-HGT) waged campaigns for immigrants’ rights. Moderate and reformist activists led more traditional initiatives. In 1968 Mexican Americans successfully assumed leadership of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council (PNCC), a Saul Alinsky-style Industrial Areas Foundation organization that focused on neighborhood beautification and operated a credit union and buying cooperative. A League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) chapter composed of attorneys, small businessmen, and skilled workers, operated in the slightly more middle class neighborhood of Little Village. LULAC provided scholarships for high school students and promoted greater educational attainment.

Education became a central organizing issue especially among women. In the early seventies, mothers and other residents fought for the construction of a high school in Pilsen. The protracted struggle, which included school boycotts and demonstrations, ended in victory for local Mexican residents who, until then, had to send their children a long distance to the only area high school. Residents named their new school Benito Juarez, after Mexico’s first indigenous president. Still another group of activists established an alternative school for those labeled as “problem” students and those who dropped out or were “pushed out” of the school system. They called the institution Latino Youth Alternative High School.

These community organizations, campaigns, and struggles emerged within a span of only a few years, from 1968 to 1974. Such efforts symbolized an adamant claim on the community by Pilsen’s Mexican and Mexican American residents. This activism was influenced to a great extent by civil rights and radical politics of the times. The war in Vietnam, student protests across the country, and colonial struggles for independence around the world certainly played a role in
politicizing Mexican Americans on 18th Street and transforming some of them into militant Chicanas and Chicanos. But social, political, and economic dynamics at the local level provided more direct inspiration and motivation to act. The displacement of the Mexican community in the early 1960s from the Near West Side, their encounter with prejudice and discrimination, and their need to establish community roots in a new neighborhood influenced the response of Mexican Americans to the social conditions of the barrio. Working within their specific environment and sociopolitical context, Mexican Americans shaped their conditions and sought to improve their lives as best they could.

This article has briefly touched upon the broad contours of the social development of Mexicans and Mexican Americans as they were dislocated from their original settlement to a new community in Chicago. The conclusions about Pilsen’s Mexican community do not necessarily apply to other Mexican populations in the city, such as South Chicago and Back of the Yards, where people experienced more residential stability and did not undergo the displacement of urban renewal initiatives. Indeed, Pilsen is a unique case.

Ironically, the university campus, which originally displaced Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Taylor Street and pressed them into Pilsen, now threatens to displace the community once more. As the university has expanded and central city neighborhoods have become fashionable for middle to upper-income residents across the nation, condominiums, townhouses, and lofts are replacing empty lots, dilapidated frame houses, and abandoned factories and warehouses around 18th Street. Students, professors, artists, and young professionals today encroach on the neighborhood where working class Mexican and Mexican American residents sought refuge four decades ago. This cycle of urban renewal, gentrification, and displacement, which is now repeating itself, should prompt us further to examine the past for clues about how such dynamics may unfold in the future. The history of the Near West Side and 18th Street might also inform contemporary activists’ responses to this most recent threat to their community.
Notes

1 I use the terms “Mexican” and “Mexican American” interchangeably (and sometimes jointly) throughout this essay to denote both immigrants and American-born or raised people of Mexican descent.

2 The debate over naming the center reflected the disagreements within the community over the utility and appropriateness of nationalist Chicano ideology and rhetoric. As in the Southwest, some older generation Mexicans/Mexican Americans took much more reformist, or moderate approaches to social change and community empowerment; Ayala interview, 25 March 2004. El Centro eventually became a Catholic Charities agency and remains so to this day.

3 This designation generally refers to the larger area that includes the contiguous neighborhood of Little Village.

4 Due to limited space, I do not provide an exhaustive treatment of these dynamics. For a more in-depth analysis, see Lilia Fernández, “Latina/o Migration and Community Formation in Postwar Chicago: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Gender, and Politics, 1945-1975” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2005), chapter two.

5 In their community studies, University of Chicago researchers divided up the city into seventy-five “community areas.” Such designations, however, did not often match the names that community residents themselves gave to their neighborhoods. Moreover, these community areas often encapsulated multiple smaller neighborhoods, known to their inhabitants by street names, such as Halsted-Roosevelt, Taylor Street, Maxwell Street, or by other nicknames, such as “Black Bottom.”

6 For a historical description of the Near West Side, see for example, Thomas L. Philpott, The Slum and the Ghetto: Neighborhood Deterioration and Middle-Class Reform, Chicago 1880-1930 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

7 Blacks formed an enclave within the Jewish section of the neighborhood. According to sociologist Louis Wirth, Jews on the Near West Side were less resistant to incoming Blacks than Whites in other areas; Carolyn Eastwood, Near West Side Stories: Struggles for Community in Chicago’s Maxwell Street Neighborhood (Chicago: Lake Claremont Press, 2002), 204.

8 Thomas Philpott argues that Mexicans were considered an immigrant group similar to European immigrants. Yet researcher Paul Taylor noted as early as 1932 that Mexicans had a shifting racial position in the local social order, at times ranked above African Americans, but at other times viewed as similar or even inferior to them. Gabriela Arredondo also argues that Mexicans experienced a great deal of racial discrimination from European immigrants and were racialized distinctly from them. See Philpott; Paul S. Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States, Vol. II (New York: Arno Press, 1970, 1932); and Gabriela Arredondo, “Navigating Ethno-Racial Currents: Mexicans in Chicago, 1919-1939,” Journal of Urban History 30 (2004).

9 Such Americanization programs focused largely on European immigrants such as Italians, Poles, Greeks, and Russian Jews. For an overview of Mexicans on the Near West Side in the 1920s and 1930s, and specifically their relationship to Hull House


12 For a comparative analysis of Mexican and Puerto Rican labor migration to Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s, see Fernández, chapter one.


14 The Committee on Minority Groups operated with the Council’s Division III (focused on education and recreation) and addressed issues affecting Chicago’s Black population, as well as other “minority” issues such as Japanese American resettlement. Horace Cayton, one of the authors of the famous Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (1945) chaired the committee. See Box 145, WC, CHS.

15 See “Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Minority Groups, Wednesday, October 23, 1946," Box 145; and “A Brief History of the Committee on Minority Group Relations, Division of Education and Recreation, Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago,” October 1950, Box 145, WC, CHS.

16 “Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Minority Groups, Feb 26, 1947,” Box 145; “Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of Division on Education and Recreation, Feb 20, 1947,” Box 147; “Minutes of the meeting on Mexican American interests,” 7 May 1947, Box 147, WC, CHS.


18 Ibid., 8.

19 Ibid.


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21 The Sub-Committee on Mexican American Interests had accomplished its goals and thus disbanded. See “A Brief History of the Committee on Minority Group Relations, Division of Education and Recreation, Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago,” October 1950, Box 145, WC, CHS; Untitled document, Mexican American Council, April 1953, Box 88, CAP, CHS.

22 Untitled document, Mexican American Council, April 1953, Box 88, CAP, CHS.

23 Louise Hutchinson, “Quiet ‘Revolt’ Making City Happier Place for Mexicans,” Chicago Tribune (March 29, 1953).

24 See for example, Tom Littlewood, “Mexicans Are Chicago’s Least Understood Group,” Chicago Sun-Times (October 19, 1953).

25 Phil Ayala, interview with the author, 4 December 2003; Jovita Duran oral history.

26 See Hutchinson.

27 Near West Side Planning Board, flyer, March 1952, Box 88, CAP, CHS.

28 Near West Side Planning Board pamphlet, n.d.; James C. Downs to Clayton C. Meyers, 21 July 1955; “Proceedings of the Fifth Anniversary Meeting of the Near West Side Planning Board,” 27 October 1953; all in Box 92, CAP, CHS.

29 See Near West Side Community Council, Near West Side Chronicle (October 1958): 7, in Near West Side Community Committee Records (NWSCC), Special Collections, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).


32 Unfortunately, a historic mural, the first ever painted by a Mexican in Chicago, Adrian Lozano, was torn down during the demolition of Hull House; see Badillo, 50-1.

33 María Ovalle, interview with the author, 6 June 2004, Chicago. The term “house” did not necessarily mean a single-family home, but rather a family residence. Most buildings in the area, in fact, were multi-family apartments.

34 For a discussion of race and housing (and specifically, the issue of public housing, which in Chicago has come to represent the confluence of race and housing), see chapter five of Gregory D. Squires, Larry Bennett, Kathleen McCourt, and Philip Nyden, Chicago: Race, Class, and the Response to Urban Decline (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). For the quintessential study of race, housing, and the creation of low-income African American public housing in Chicago, see Arnold R. Hirsch, Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

35 In 1940 Pilsen was populated entirely by European immigrants and their descendants. Seventy-one percent of residents were “native white,” and twenty-nine percent “foreign born white.” This foreign born population consisted of Poles (31%), Czechs (23%), Yugoslavians (13%), Lithuanians (12%), Italians (8%), and other smaller ethnic groups; Wirth and Bernett.
36 By 1960, however, twenty-three percent of housing units were owner-occupied, a higher proportion than the Near West Side; Kitagawa and Tauber, 76-77. See also Mary Bakszysz and Kay Guzder, “Description of the 18th and 26th Street Communities,” n.d. (ca. 1970); “Pilsen,” n.d., El Centro de la Causa private archives (hereafter ECC). Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry, Community Area Data Book for the City of Chicago: 1975 Census Data by 75 Community Areas (Chicago: Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry, ca. 1976), vi.
37 A white pastor at the Millard Congregational Church in Little Village, Pastor Anderson, explained to researchers in 1969 that he was leaving the neighborhood because the congregation could not support him anymore. There were only 130 members remaining in his church, and fifty percent of them had moved out of the area to Cicero or Berwyn but still came back to the neighborhood on Sundays for church. Bohemian families, Anderson claimed, moved out after their children graduated from 8th grade because they did not want to send their children to Farragut High School where they would mix with Black students. See Sister Maria del Rey and Mary Bakszysz, “Operation of the Millard Congregational Church,” 9 September 1969, ECC.
41 Alicia Amador interview.
42 Carlos Valencia, personal communication with the author, 20 June 2004. Poles had a history of racial enmity towards Mexicans dating back to the 1920s. See, for example, Arredondo, Mexican Chicago, and Taylor.
43 Emile Schepers interview with Cathy Alaniz, 15 September 1970, ECC. Arredondo has documented the particular ethno-racial enmity that Poles had for Mexicans in Mexican Chicago.
44 Researchers and community leaders assumed a significant undercount, especially of the undocumented. The issue of an accurate census count of Latinas/os in the
Chicago metro area would become a cause which some Latina/o leaders in the city took up in the mid-seventies.


46 By Chicago-style politics, I refer to the tradition of white ethnic political bosses who often controlled neighborhoods through patronage jobs, nepotism, and political machines. Such politics were also characterized by pork-barreling and other forms of corruption. From 1956 to 1976, Richard J. Daley reigned as city mayor, epitomizing such practices.

47 Mexican Americans also transformed Howell House into Casa Aztlan during this time.


50 Chicano Mental Health Training Program, funding application to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 30 September 1972, ECC.


53 El Centro Board of Directors, “Meeting Minutes,” 22 March 1973, ECC. See also Servicios Sociales case files, ECC.

54 Humberto Martinez, “BASTA: A Chicano Addict Rehabilitation Program,” n.d., ECC. Documents reveal that Euro-Americans had more negative opinions overall towards El Centro. A survey done in September of 1973 within a two-block radius of the center revealed that some Euro-Americans had not heard of the center and many of those who had held very negative views of its activities, “Research Results of Community Survey,” n.d., ECC.

55 “El Centro de la Causa Library” n.d., ECC.