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In Obama's Backyard: Global Chicago and Global Apartheid

Prexy Nesbitt

The fate of the people of Black Metropolis—whether they will remain the marginal workers to be called in only at times of great economic activity, or will become an integral part of the American economy and thus lay the basis for complete social and political integration—depends not so much on what happens locally as on what happens in American and the world. Given widespread post war unemployment, for instance, the Negro may again become a chronic relief client, despised by the majority of white citizens who have to support him from taxes and the symbol around which the aggressions of a frustrated society can be organized, so that he may fill the role of whipping boy for an emerging American Fascism.¹

It was grimly ironic to have the world watch Chicago be identified as the epicenter of racial unity on the night of November 4, 2008, during President-elect Barack Obama's election night rally in Grant Park. The apartheid character of Chicago is evident in its housing and education policy, criminal justice system, and

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Prexy Nesbitt's connection to his hometown Chicago runs deep, having worked as a street worker, trade union organizer, teacher, special assistant to Chicago's Mayor, the late Harold Washington, and a senior program officer with the MacArthur Foundation. A teacher and lecturer for forty years throughout the Chicago area, Mr. Nesbitt currently teaches African History at Columbia College in Chicago, does diversity consulting with both private and public schools in Chicago, and is involved with teacher training nationally through Eastern Educational Collaborative, based in Washington, DC. Currently, besides his Chicago-based work, Prexy travels the United States speaking on racism, war and militarism issues, especially in relationship to Africa. He also organizes political tours to Africa through an organization he and others founded called MAKING THE ROAD. He is the author of an easy-to-read history of the US involvement in the apartheid state: *Apartheid in Our Living Rooms* (1986) and various other publications about US policies towards Southern Africa. He has traveled to, lived and worked in various Southern African countries for the last forty-four years.

¹ Clayton and St. Clair, *Black Metropolis*, 767.

employment opportunities.² At the same time, it has molded the organizing for social change that occurs in the city. An examination of Obama's training ground is informative as we consider the implications of his election.

Chicago's residential patterns exemplify a situation that the architects of the 1950s and 1960s South African apartheid system would have viewed as the ultimate fulfillment of their greatest dreams. Paul Street, research director for the Chicago Urban League, noted in a 2002 article that "six out of ten African Americans in the Chicago area live in communities where they are at least 80 percent of the population."³ More recently, as *The Chicago Tribune* noted in a December 26, 2008 article, "to truly integrate Chicago, 84 percent of the black or white population would need to change neighborhoods."⁴ In essence, the pattern of residential separation in Chicago is institutionally organized in such a way as to insure that housing in Chicago, except for droplets of integration and gentrification, will continue to be separate and unequal unless radical steps are taken.

It is critical that residential segregation in Chicago be fully understood. Chicago's residential patterns are not just grounded in whites and blacks choosing to live separately, as some have recently suggested with great fanfare.⁵ Residential segregation in Chicago is a foundation stone for a system of race—and class-based inequalities that have governed "the windy city" since before the reign of Mayor Richard J. Daley (father to the current Mayor, Richard M. Daley) began in 1955. Chicago is about inequalities. It is about neighborhoods with shiny new, glass condominiums, banks, doctors' offices, good schools, good restaurants, bookstores, bike paths, flower-lined boulevards and regular garbage pickups. These are in the neighborhoods on the Lake, in the surrounding suburbs (especially to the north), and in a few pockets within the city (e.g., "Bucktown" or "University Village"). These are the neighborhoods of gentrification, privilege, and whiteness with a sprinkling of "flavah." Then, just as in South African apartheid's colonial architecture, Chicago has its neighborhoods, its "township": "K-town" in Lawndale and "La Villita" (Little Village) on Chicago's West Side, Englewood and Roseland on Chicago's South Side. These are the neighborhoods that the city's prestigious universities' staffs tell their students not to frequent except for their Wackenhut-secured annual Martin Luther King Day celebration tours.

² A note on "apartheid." Saunders and Southey's *Dictionary of South African History* defines "apartheid" as "primarily, a political device to preserve racial identity and secure and bolster white supremacy and white privilege ... it [apartheid] was enormously damaging psychologically, and produced such enormities as the forced removal of over three million people in an attempt to remove from 'White South Africa' as many blacks as possible without endangering the labor supply." Various scholars, activists and commentators now also employ the term "global apartheid." This has been most clearly defined as "a system of inequality that dictates access to wealth, power and basic human rights based on race and place." See Booker and Minter, "Global Apartheid."

³ Street, "The Dream Gone Mainstream."

⁴ Ahmed and Little, "Chicago, America's Most Segregated Big City," 1.

⁵ Many commentators and analysts argue that Chicago's residential segregation is a product of choice and selection, the standardized line that "people like to stick to their own kind," e.g., *ibid.*

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see the doc

stages
decapitalization
stagnation
colonization
gentrification
and
urban renewal
or
removal

Specific projects like
- Garfield Park
- the Jane Addams Projects
- Museum

A note

artists = colonizers

Say more about "gentrification"
colonization precedes gentrification

Behind Chicago's historic and celebrated patterns of residential and social segregation, like apartheid in South Africa, there is serious deprivation and denial. And there is a specific and identifiable history that created that denial and deprivation. I assert in the pages that follow that Chicago is an integral part of the system of global apartheid. It is a key outpost of what scholars Bill Minter, Salih Booker, and others have identified as a global system that "entrenches great disparities in wealth, living conditions, life expectancy and access to government institutions with effective power."⁶

In some respects Chicago typifies large urban centers in America today. Renowned Harvard University scholar William Julius Wilson noted in his 1999 book, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide*, that "three quarters of the dominant white population now lives in suburban and rural areas, whereas a majority of Blacks and Latinos reside in urban areas."⁷ But the starkness, depth, and systemic character of Chicago's residential apartheid, historically created by its banks and realtors motivated by racial bigotry, but class and profiteering as well, is, I think, unmatched elsewhere in the USA.

For instance, *The Chicago Reporter* pointed out in its February 2005 issue that those homeowners and landlords in black neighborhoods seeking to improve their properties could not do so unless they financed it themselves. The magazine noted that loan applications for properties in predominately black areas were least successful even when they came from whites and Asians who had previously secured loans successfully in other communities. Banks in Chicago help to keep Black people confined to their quarters and assist in depriving those quarters of resources.

Another pillar for maintaining separate and unequal or apartheid housing in Chicago is the program of public housing administered by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). A 2003 study by Dr. Paul Fischer of Lake Forest College showed that 83 percent of CHA families forced to relocate by the CHA in its drive "to address urban blight," i.e., pave the road for gentrification, were relocated to neighborhoods that were at least 90 percent African American and classified as high poverty. The deliberateness of relocating African American CHA residents into poor, black neighborhoods is amply demonstrated in the following comment by one of the lawyers for a group of residents currently suing CHA:

"Relocation counselors are not advising residents that they can move to any part of the city and the suburbs; instead, they're pushing residents to neighborhoods like Roseland, Englewood, South Shore and Lawndale, and into housing units that are often as bad as the public housing units they left," said Clyde Murphy, Executive Director of the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

The last five to ten years have seen some change. Greater and greater numbers of African Americans in the city of Chicago are purchasing suburban Chicago homes. What is really happening, however, is that most of the purchasing is being done in the city's southern areas that are predominantly black. Thus, new segregated

⁶ Booker and Minter, "Global Apartheid."

⁷ Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide*, 8.

ghettoes are being created in Chicago's southern suburbs.⁸ As pointed out in "Minding the Gap," a November 2003 study released by the Hull House Association, Chicago's African Americans, more than Asians, or Latinos, or any other group, end up living in "racially concentrated" areas, whether urban or suburban. There are not a lot of doctors' offices in Chicago's Black and Latino neighborhoods but fast food restaurants abound. McDonald's Corporation must love Blacks and Latinos on Chicago's West and South Sides. Large parts of these communities have only McDonalds and their buckets of French fries rather than various facilities for fresh and healthy food purchases. A 2007 study done by researchers from the Sinai Health System contended that "if Chicago's black population enjoyed the same level of health as its white population, the average African American in Chicago would live eight years longer than he or she does today. Meanwhile, 4,000 fewer local African Americans would die each year."⁹ Other specific findings about Chicago's apartheid health system from the Sinai study are:

- Forty percent of adults in North Lawndale lacked any form of health insurance—which sounds bad enough, but when one crosses into South Lawndale, the rate jumps to 56 percent.
- The death rate from diabetes among Puerto Ricans in Humboldt Park and West Town was more than twice those of Chicago and the United States, and was believed to be the highest recorded anywhere in the country. Meanwhile, the rate among black residents in the survey was also extraordinarily high, at almost double that of whites locally and nationally.
- Some 34 percent of the Puerto Rican children in the study had asthma, the highest rate recorded anywhere in the country, prompting Whitman to dub Chicago "the asthma capital of the United States." Meanwhile, 25 percent of African American children had asthma, much of it going untreated. By contrast, 10 percent of children nationwide suffered from the condition.¹⁰

The residential segregation of Chicago and its apartheid health care are, in turn, linked to a historical and systematic pattern of decapitalization, plant closures, unemployment, and job loss¹¹ in black neighborhoods that has transformed many neighborhoods into communities of abandonment and desperation. They are neighborhoods where the industry of dope distribution is the most viable economy going. Dope dealing is the local face of capitalism. Factories and artisan shops have been replaced by currency exchanges, bars, storefront churches and beauty shops.

⁸ Immergluck and Smith, *Who's Buying Where?*

⁹ Tritsch, "The Deadly Difference," 2.

¹⁰ Ibid. See also the classic study by DeVise, *Slum Medicine*. Racial health disparities in the USA are being understood more and more as a national problem. See also the striking study, Bronx Health Reach, *Separate and Unequal*.

¹¹ Consistently, African American communities suffered job losses throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. For instance, a 1993 Wall Street Journal survey of 35,000 US companies found that during the economic downturn of 1990–91, African Americans had a net job loss of 59,000, while whites gained 71,000, Asians 55,000, and Latinos 60,000.

Instead of being populated by a productive and stable workforce, many of Chicago's black neighborhoods are filled with former workers or people that have never worked, individuals who have become, in the eyes of the broader community, "superfluous appendages"—originally an apartheid South African term describing workers who no longer have any meaning or value. The report by Paul Street cited earlier documents my argument when it notes that "Between 1991 and 2000, for example, 98% of job growth in the Chicago metropolitan area took place in the predominately white suburbs, and not in the City, which houses two-thirds of the areas African Americans."¹²

The institutionalization of an apartheid construct in Chicago is further illustrated in the arena of public education. As noted by various commentators over the years, Chicago's residential segregation has led to accelerated high school dropout and attrition rates, limited knowledge acquisition, little preparation for higher education, and circumscribed possibilities for enrollment in college. Put simply, as discussed in a 2008 special issue of Chicago's *Catalyst* magazine, children from Chicago's apartheid schools in black neighborhoods, and to a lesser extent those from predominately Latino neighborhoods, are the least likely to graduate from elementary and high school programs and enroll in colleges. A 2007 study done by the Chicago Public Schools Department of Post Secondary Education shows that while Black and Latino students make up about 80 percent of students enrolled in Chicago schools, only 27 percent of black male graduates and 7.5 percent of Latino male graduates enrolled in colleges outside of Illinois.

A recent paper from the Chicago Urban League highlights the systemic character of how public schools in Chicago's African American communities fail because of the lack of finances in African American communities. It notes, "Thanks to the state's [Illinois] distinctively heavy reliance on local property taxes to fund public schools (Illinois ranks 49th among the 50 states in state contribution to public education), residential segregation is a particularly strong barrier to African American educational opportunity in the Chicago area."¹³ What this means is that Illinois has one of the nation's greatest average funding gaps (\$2,384 in 2003) between the least and most impoverished school districts. In effect, it creates an apartheid-privileged school system with two different tiers of public school education, one for urban Blacks and Latinos, the other for suburban, more well-to-do (mostly) white families.

Chicago and Cook County's criminal justice systems provide another link in what might be identified as the "apartheidization" of Chicago and its surrounding environs. Since 1980, the prison population in Illinois has grown by 266 percent. Figures from Cook County Department of Corrections show that forty-four percent of Illinois prison inmates are African Americans from Cook County.¹⁴ Simultaneous to and

¹² Street, Paul, "The Dream Gone Mainstream," *ZSpace Page*, August 10, 2002.

¹³ Chicago Urban League, "The Color of Community."

¹⁴ This approximates national figures. The Sentencing Project points out that of the nearly 2.1 million people in state and federal prisons, African Americans, who are 12.3 percent of the US population, make up nearly half of the US population behind bars.

directly derived from this growth, Illinois has built 20 adult correctional facilities since 1980. Eighteen of the twenty prisons have been built in predominately white southern Illinois. This means that Chicago and Cook County's criminal justice systems are using Chicago's African American prisoners to develop economically marginal, largely white populations in southern Illinois. A former *Wall Street Journal* investigative reporter, Joseph Hallinan, noted in his 2001 study of the growth of prisons in the United States, "despite the conditions . . . people were eager to work in penal institutions and by 1990 . . . prisons had come to be seen as engines of economic salvation."¹⁵

There are two even more grim aspects to the Chicago and Illinois' imprisonment saga. One is the particular treatment of youth in Illinois correctional facilities. Every year there are increasing numbers of young people sent to locked facilities in Illinois. The vast majority of these youth are African American. Just as dramatically, every year the resources available to work with these youth have decreased. The second is the story of what happens to women in Illinois facilities and what happens to them after they leave. One recent finding reported in the October 2003 *Chicago Reporter* indicated that women, especially African American women, are returning to prison after release from their first prison stay at about the same rate as men. What also is clear, as Joanne Archibald from Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM) noted to me, is the relationship between the rising rates of incarcerated women and growing rates of unemployment and domestic violence in African American, Latino and poor neighborhoods.

Another grave component in the composite of the African American situation in Chicago today is that of the African American encounter with the police and other law enforcement representatives. In 2007 Illinois Congressman Danny Davis reported that racial profiling in Chicago was not only continuing to occur but was indeed spreading from targeting African Americans to Latinos and immigrants as well. Part of Congressman Davis' concern stemmed from Chicago's history with its police commander, Jon Burge, the official who, in the 1970s and 1980s, tortured more than sixty black suspects using techniques that ranged from the use of an electric cattle prod to attaching a hand-turned electric generator to suspects' genitals.¹⁶ Not so well-known are the 13,703 excessive force charges against Chicago Police Department (CPD) personnel between 1998 and 2002, which ended up costing the city \$61.2 million in civil suit judgments.¹⁷ What it all amounts to, using the CPD's own sad rationale in excusing the situation, is that these are the "few bad apples" and that this grouping systematically wages a war¹⁸ against African Americans and other

¹⁵ See Massing, "Everybody Wants One."

¹⁶ Conroy, "Police Torture in Chicago"; and Taylor, *Shadow Report*.

¹⁷ Shenoy, "Accounting for Police."

¹⁸ The term "war" is not used thoughtlessly here. The *Chicago Reporter* published in January of 2004 an article "Armed and Dangerous" examining Chicago police officers' use of deadly force. Among other things, they found that: first, since 2000, 59 percent of thirty-seven fatal shootings by police have occurred in Chicago's African American neighborhoods; further, that shootings took place in clusters usually close to an incident where civilians had allegedly brandished a weapon at an officer; and lastly, they are in areas where residents historically have a high distrust of or open antagonism towards police. See also: Correll et al., "Across the Thin Blue Line."

people of color, especially young men. This war brings to mind the counter-insurgency campaign called the "Total Strategy" that the apartheid government waged against the ANC and the anti-apartheid movement in the late 1980s. Of course, it is a deeper story than "a few bad apples." What we see in Chicago is the systematic application of racialized violence and force against people because of the color of their skin and their economic status. As the "Minding the Gap" study concludes: "African Americans are most likely to be the victims of crime and are affected by the justice system in disproportionate numbers." The parallel with apartheid South Africa deepens further when the true racial mindset of Chicago police officers' violence is exposed to public scrutiny. Consistently racist attitudes and actions have also characterized another group of Chicago public servants: firemen. For more than forty years the Chicago Fire Department has demonstrated a record of discriminatory hiring, racial tension within the department, and racist acts against black residents. Several years ago video tapes of a firehouse retirement party showed the department bigots, besides mocking black people, also mocking homosexuals. Defending themselves some argued that this showed they were at least the same to everyone.¹⁹

But it is the violence that black communities inflict upon themselves that is arguably the most cruelly functioning element in the apartheid Chicago scheme. As unemployment deepens in Chicago's black neighborhoods, especially in the city's west and south sides, violence grows (poor Latino neighborhoods like Pilsen and Little Village have the same pattern). According to the Chicago Tribune, for the first seven months of 2008, murders rose 18 percent over the same period in 2007—from 246 deaths to 291.²⁰ In some Chicago neighborhoods an AK-47 and a reputation for "taking people out" have replaced schooling or employment as a status symbol for adolescent males and females.

It was grimly ironic to have the world watch Chicago be identified as the epicenter of racial unity on Tuesday, November 4 during President-elect Barack Obama's election night rally. The apartheid character of Chicago has greatly molded the organizing for social change that occurs in the city. Organizing is often done along separate racial or class lines.

Chicago is a city of separate societies, often hostile but always indifferent, where a viaduct or a highway is like an international border crossing, replete with bitter front line incidents and intolerance. It is a city with no Nelson Mandelas, Desmond Tutus, Bram Fischers, or Beyers Naudes.²¹ There is no city-wide official process to honestly confront some of Chicago's ugly historical memories like the 1919 race riot, the 1953–54 Trumbull Park Homes Race Riots, the 1969 murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, or the 2007 Immigration raid at La Villita Plaza, near the

¹⁹ Babwin, "Racial Problems Plague Chicago Fire Department."

²⁰ Thindwa, "No Jobs Make Mean Streets."

²¹ Bram Fischer was a prominent Afrikaner jurist and member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) who died while jailed for treason in South Africa. Beyers Naude was a heroic and prophetic Afrikaner cleric who once headed the South African Council of Churches (SACC).

Cook County jail. Racial tension is Chicago's metronome—its omnipresence has governed and continues to govern the city. It is a city whose bridges, alleys, streets and garbage cans are politically contested and racialized. This context makes progressive, social change organizing—particularly, organizing that reaches beyond race, class, gender, sexuality, and ableism boundaries—a challenging and perilous road to navigate. Chicago, despite a veneer of spectacular, glittery, glass and steel edifices (mostly in the central business district), cries out for prophetic and transformative leadership initiatives addressing racism and racial polarization that, if pursued, could become a beacon for the nation. Dramatically growing numbers of Chicago's citizenry (as in other parts of the nation) need jobs, housing, health coverage and improved schools. But Chicago also needs a truth commission maybe like the one in Greensboro, North Carolina, maybe with some of the strengths of the South African process. But it must be a process that is accompanied by systematic and comprehensive conversations and initiatives addressing race and tolerance, justice and inclusiveness.

No one knows all this history better than the new black occupants of the White House, for Chicago was the yard in which they trained and operated. They know that it is not just Chicago with deep overlays of global apartheid. They know very well all that is involved for the United States to take the needed steps towards serious and far-reaching social and economic change. Barack Obama worked for years as a community organizer, as well as being an elected official. Michelle Obama was the Executive Director of Public Allies, one of Chicago's most important sites for recruiting and training organizers. All this is to say that the United States has never been led by individuals as intimately acquainted with the depth and systematic nature of racism and inequity as President and Mrs. Obama. The big question is how deep into the forest of structural racism and apartheid-like inequity the new administration will choose to venture. Just as Humpty Dumpty wasn't ready for his big fall, the United States is not yet ready for seriously transformative change.

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