Stealing Home

Eminent domain, urban renewal, and the loss of community

By Linda Christensen

This is the second of a two-part article on "Stealing Home," a unit about ways the homes of people of color and poor people have been stolen through "race riots" and urban renewal. The first part, "Burned Out of Homes and History: Unearthing the Silenced Voices of the Tulsa Race Riot," was published in the fall 2012 issue of Rethinking Schools. *Both of these articles are now available at the* Zinn Education Project *website.*

Desiree Barksdale's description reveals the pain that many students feel when their home is stolen—through eviction, divorce, court orders that place them in foster care, or gentrification that pushes low-income and people of color out of our school's neighborhood and into the "numbers," as the students call the outer ring of Portland where they have landed.

Hugh Arnott, Los Angeles Times, reprinted with permission.

May 8, 1959: Aurora Vargas is carried by Los Angeles County Sherriff's deputies after her family refused to leave their house in Chávez Ravine.

I knew it was the eviction notice that came no matter how hard [my mother] worked, how good we were, how friendly of a neighbor we were. I was young, but I wasn't stupid. I knew we were going to have to move again, but so soon this time? Would we end up in a shelter again? Would we have to switch schools? Again? Tears swelled my eyes and poured down my dirty, 8-year-old cheeks. My tiny fists clenched so tight my knuckles turned white, my whole body shook with angry sobs. Barely brushing 4 feet tall, I was going to destroy the whole world for what they were doing to me: for taking away my security, my happiness, my home.

After hearing students like Desiree discuss the gentrification of Jefferson High School's neighborhood, Dianne Leahy, the insightful and hard-working teacher with whom I co-taught junior English for the last two years, and I decided to create a yearlong curriculum we christened "Stealing Home." In the unit, we look at the history and literature of stolen homes and land—from Native American "removals" to reservations, to the violent expulsions of African Americans during the 1920s and '30s, to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. We look at the resistance that emerged. The last segment of our unit—eminent domain and urban renewal—brings the teaching back to our neighborhood and the students' anger over gentrification that initiated our investigation.

Who lived on these lands that became public land? Guess whose homes most often lay in the path of "progress"?

To understand how eminent domain works, students consider Chávez Ravine, where Dodger Stadium now lives, and Albina, the historic African American neighborhood that Jefferson High School anchors. Briefly: When the local, state, or federal government determines that they want to expand a highway, build a bridge or park, erect a hospital, or lay down railroad tracks, they can seize someone's house or land with "due compensation," with or without the owner's consent. Sounds fair, right? Often this has worked for the public good—think parks, wilderness areas, the Oregon coastline, the Redwood National Forest in California, and even public housing projects that provide homes to people who might not otherwise be able to afford them. Also think: Who lived on these lands that became public land? Guess whose homes most often lay in the path of "progress"? Eminent domain provided the machinery to plow under the homes of those living in Chávez Ravine and Albina during the 1950s and '60s.

Chávez Ravine to Dodger Stadium

Chávez Ravine, located a few miles from downtown Los Angeles, was home to generations of Mexican American families. In 1949, about 1,100 families lived in the valley. Chávez Ravine was a tight-knit, self-reliant community. Residents gathered for weddings, fiestas, quinceañeras, and music festivals. They were poor by conventional standards: Many homes lacked electricity and indoor plumbing. In 1950, Frank Wilkinson, assistant director of the L.A. Housing Authority, declared Chávez Ravine an eyesore and a shantytown, and marked it for redevelopment. Specifically, the city of Los Angeles decided to build public housing units on the land with a new grant from the federal government. All residents received letters from the city telling them that they had to sell their homes in order to make way for the new Elysian Park Heights housing project. A few rejected the city's offer; they were physically carried out of their homes. Residents were promised first choice for these new homes. But the homes were never built.

To help students understand—and care—about the story, Dianne and I opened with a slide show featuring Don Normark's amazing photographs of Chávez Ravine's homes and people and, ultimately, the bulldozing of the community. Normark was a young photographer who stumbled on Chávez Ravine while trying to locate an elevated spot to photograph the city of Los Angeles. He took hundreds of photos that told the story of

the community and its destruction. (These later became the book *Chávez Ravine, 1949*, then a movie, *Chávez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*, featuring songs by Ry Cooder.)

We started with Hugh Arnott's photograph of Chávez resident Aurora Vargas, being physically carried from her home by police officers. As we showed students the Vargas slide, we said, "First, just notice what you see. Make a list of your observations about the photograph." As students shared their observations, we listed them on the board. For the next section, we asked students to make connections. "What does this photograph remind you of? Anything from your life? From movies? From a book?" Again students shared out loud.

For the last section, we asked the class, "What questions do you have about the photo? What do you wonder about?" Once again, they shared, but their questions bubbled over each other: "Why are the police officers carrying her?" "Why are other people standing around and not helping?" "Who are the other men standing on the porch?" "Why are reporters there?" "Where did this take place?" We listed the questions on the board. I said, "We're not going to answer your questions now, but over the course of the next week, you will discover answers as we watch films and read articles about the events shown in this photo."

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Chávez Ravine house gives way to bulldozer, 1959.

After the slide show, students watched the video based on Normark's photographs. Before we started the film, we told students that they would write a poem or an interior monologue at the end of the film to capture what they saw and felt about the community. We encouraged students to take notes during the film to catch language and images to use in their poems. "Write down details that stand out for you from the film. Whose expression or story touches you? Write down their words, a description of their face. What words resonate for you from the residents? Get those words down on the paper. Whose voice helped you understand how people felt about the loss of their home? Don Normark, the photographer, documented the story of this community. Your poem or interior monologue will be another documentary."

In the film, students saw families doing what families do—sisters combing each other's hair, neighborhood kids playing baseball in dusty lots, boys wrestling in a yard, uncles sitting on porches talking. They related to the man who said the kids from Chávez Ravine won a lot of sports trophies even though they looked like "raggedy-ass kids from the East Side."

After the film, Dianne and I asked students to share details from their notes: "What stood out?" As students shared, we wrote their images and words on the board: kids playing ball; the cracked earth; the woman who said, "Going to a Dodgers game was like dancing on a grave"; the bulldozer pushing over homes; processions through the hills with lighted candles; the guy who said, "We used to swim naked in the L.A. River."

Once we had language on the board, we gave students model poems. We started by reading and listening to Ry Cooder's song "Third Base, Dodger Stadium." The song is written from the point of view of a displaced resident who grew up in Chávez Ravine and who now parks cars at the stadium:

Mister, you're a baseball man, as anyone can plainly see.
The straightest game in this great land. Take a little tip from me.
I work here nights, parking cars, underneath the moon and stars.
The same ones that we all knew back in 1952.

And if you want to know where a local boy like me is coming from:
3rd base, Dodger Stadium.
2nd base, right over there. I see Grandma in her rocking chair.

History often tells only the conclusion—the building of Dodger Stadium, in this case—but we wanted to highlight those residents who did not go silently from their homes.

Watching linens flapping in the breeze, and all the fellows choosing up their teams.

We discussed both the poem and the idea of "persona"—writing from the perspective of something or someone who witnessed the events. We asked students to brainstorm whose point of view they could write from, encouraging them to "think about people, but also think about landmarks, buildings, trees." (See "Unleashing Sorrow and Joy: Writing Poetry from History and Literature" in *Teaching for Joy and Justice* for more examples.)

Sarah Gomes wrote from the point of view of the soil left behind when the residents were forced out:

Chávez Ravine: The Soil Poem

I am the rough soil,
the dried trees that some called home.
I don't need paved roads or
fancy homes.
I am the love that comes from the souls
of these people,
the memories that were made on me.
Running, jumping, building, planting.
I am the land,
the land that has been stolen.
I now belong to a large structure,
full of people that have no love for my soil.
No families.
No memories of running up hills and
playing games all day.
My rough soil will forever lie restless
for the people who brought me to life.

Digging into the History

To help students navigate the complex history of Chávez Ravine, we created a tea party to introduce them to the main "characters" they would meet as they read news stories about the events leading up to the destruction of the community. In addition to familiarizing students with the people involved, we used the tea party to present background information about the use of eminent domain. I've found that studying photographs, then circling back through tea parties, videos, and readings that explore multiple perspectives on events helps students gather deeper understandings about the content.

History often tells only the conclusion—the building of Dodger Stadium, in this case—but we wanted to highlight those residents who did not go silently from their homes and to show how they fought back. We included roles for residents like Aurora Vargas, who students met in the opening photographs, and also her father:

Manuel Arechiga: *My family and I fought every way we knew how to stay in our home in Chávez Ravine. Police had to carry my daughter, Aurora Vargas, from our house. I continued to camp out in a tent after they bulldozed my home. I kept a shotgun by my side in case anyone decided they were going to move me by force. You see the U.S. government gave money to cities to tear down "shantytowns" and build public housing. This meant a lot of money for cities. The city of Los Angeles used a law called "eminent domain" to take our land. This law says the government can buy people's houses to build projects for the "public good." The public good in this case was to take homes that they considered "substandard" and build big high-rise apartments. Then a group of Los Angeles citizens decided that sounded like communism—the sharing of wealth—and they voted against the housing project. The city decided to build a baseball stadium instead of housing for poor people. So my wife and I took the city to court. We said the money was supposed to be used for housing, not a ballpark. We lost*

"Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid, it is man-made, and it can be removed."

our home and our land, but we didn't lose our pride because we fought with everything we had.

Through the tea party, students also met local politician Edward Ross Roybal, who opposed the evictions, and Walter O'Malley, who profited from the evictions by building Dodger Stadium.

After the tea party, we read a series of 10 newscast transcripts by Southern California Public Radio correspondent Kitty Felde. Because they were radio broadcasts, they read like mini-plays, so we read them aloud in class, with students taking parts. After the readings, we discussed what we learned in each part.

In the segment "Chávez Ravine Residents Fought to Save Homes," for example, Felde interviews former residents about fighting back:

Charlotte Negrete-White: *Oftentimes in history books we hear about families or certain ethnicities just being bowled over, but, in fact, the people of Chávez Ravine, they banded together.*

Felde: *Many of them were poor, the children of Mexican immigrants. They collected signatures on petitions and went to City Hall meetings. And they found an unlikely ally in real estate developers. Negrete-White says the group called itself CASH.*

Negrete-White: *The Citizens Against Socialist Housing, it was just really an interesting acronym. And they sided with the residents because real estate, for one, didn't want what they termed "socialist housing," nor federally subsidized housing.*

Felde: *It was the era of Joe McCarthy, stoking fears that Communists [were] lurking around every corner.*

In his essay at the end of the unit, Troy Frison summed up what many students came to feel about the problematic use of eminent domain and their suspicions of the process:

How would you like it if you had your house taken away from you by the government for the "public good?" The people of Chávez Ravine got their homes bulldozed and the land was used to build Dodger Stadium. "Eminent domain" is what the government used to take the homes of people in Chávez Ravine. This law states that the government can take people's property for the "public good." It sounds suspicious as it is. What it's really saying is that if they can't find space to build something they want, they're going to bulldoze people's houses to make space. That's a rather cruel way to go about things, if you ask me.

Vince Singer captured both the resistance and the pain in his essay:

With the threat of eviction, many residents had to make a decision—leave compliantly with money in their pocket, or stay and fight for the land they called their home. When the 90 days crept away, the state of California came into Chávez Ravine, and they wouldn't leave until everyone was gone. Mothers' and children's tears littered the dirt into mud as they were dragged from their front doors. Stoic men pushed back their tears of defeat as they walked out of their homes, lives were left inside these hand-built homes.

Bringing It Home: Albina

We were running out of days in the school year, but we wanted to end our yearlong unit back at home to dispel the idea that oppression always happens at a distance. The history of the

We live in a system that continues to put profit over people.

Albina community, where Jefferson High School is located, parallels aspects of the history of Chávez Ravine.

In the 1950s and '60s, Albina was a thriving racially mixed neighborhood and, because of racial redlining, home to most of Portland's African American community. Jazz clubs, doctors, dentists, hairstylists, and restaurants lined North Vancouver and Williams avenues. Local officials wrote a grant for federal funds to expand Emanuel Hospital. Soon after, the Portland Development Commission declared homes and businesses in the area in an "advanced state of urban blight." Residents wanted to rebuild their aging homes, but they were unable to secure loans. Instead, in the area that housed the African American community, the city tore down 450 homes and built a new freeway, a hospital, the school district headquarters, and a sports arena.

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Building Dodger Stadium, 1961.

Neither Dianne nor I was an expert on our community's history, but we knew we wanted students to probe the history of our neighborhood. Although we didn't have a local novel or play to link to our study, we located articles from the local African American newspaper, the *Skanner*, and selected chunks of a doctoral thesis, "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940–2000," by Portland State University Professor Karen J. Gibson. Then we arranged a walking tour led by my friend and colleague Tom McKenna, who has spent years studying Albina history.

We read a few newspaper articles before our field trip. Students needed enough background information to understand the context, but we felt they would be better prepared and more willing to wade deeper—into the academic text of "Bleeding Albina"—once they connected with the story of loss.

Before we headed out on the school bus for our Albina tour, Dianne and I gave students a note-taking sheet. We started the day with a quote from Nelson Mandela: "Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid, it is man-made, and it can be removed." We wanted them to think about who made poverty in their neighborhood and how. Who benefited from the loss of homes? Who suffered? We said, "As we travel through Portland neighborhoods and learn history, take notes. Capture Mr. McKenna's words. Capture images. Capture ghosts of our past. You may choose to end our field trip with a poem, an interior monologue, or a page response to Mandela's quote."

Students were stunned to learn about their local history. As we walked down North Vancouver and Williams avenues, the heart of historic Albina's business district, we looked at photos of Citizen's Fountain Lunch and Billy's Cleaners. Tom, a gifted storyteller, brought the past to life as we walked past the blocks where jazz greats—Lionel Hampton, Art Tatum, the Nat King Cole Trio, Roy Eldridge, Al McKibbon, and Thelonious Monk—played on rainy Portland nights. We paused at the former Tubman Middle School, and Tom spoke about the Black United Front's struggle to get the school district to build a middle school in the African American community. They did. And now the school is shuttered. From the playground of this historic building, we gazed through a maze of underpasses at the Minnesota Freeway, while McKenna described the project that razed homes on Minnesota Avenue in order to build a section of I-5. We stood near the White Horse Tavern and imagined the homes that once overlooked the Willamette River. We circled at the edge of Legacy Emanuel Hospital, which quadrupled in size over a 10-year period as African Americans picketed, demanding an end to the destruction of their neighborhood, the opening of health care clinics, and jobs for displaced people.

Like the outraged folks in Chávez Ravine, Albina residents fought back. Tom ended our trip by discussing how the community organized the

Emanuel Displaced Persons Association. They argued that the plan was unfair, the compensation for their homes inadequate, and the explanations for their removal unclear. They asked the city to "see that those displaced can move with dignity and without suffering financial loss."

Our students were profoundly affected by the loss they witnessed. As we parted at the end of the day, we encouraged them to write with an attitude, but also to write with their hearts, as corny as that sounds. I said, "Name the places. Name the buildings. Name the freeways. Name the stores. Get specific about the place and then use your feelings about the loss to move your poem."

When we read our pieces out loud during the following day, Sinnamon's poem reflected the tone of the class—joy at discovering the history of their past, sadness that it was taken away first by "urban renewal" and then by gentrification, and an unwillingness to let it go (see end of article). Uriah Boyd located her poem in real and imagined details from the homes razed for the "public good":

The place that I call home is humble
And its creaky floorboards have seen us all
in our most vulnerable state
Gramma and Grampa dancing barefoot in
the living room,
the "shuffle shuffle" of their feet
becoming the musical selection of the evening.
These doorframes have held up dreams
Hoisted them upon their broad shoulders
and offered them up to the skies.
That front door has warmly greeted kind
souls,
and the back has banished offenders.
I once mopped the floor with Mama's tears,
And the scent of Gramma's sweet potato pie
will forever haunt this kitchen. . .
In the confines of these walls,
Three of my cousins were born.
And now you tell me that you want to take
this place away
For the "greater good."
Whose good?

The poetry from that day exploded. Some poems sang elegies for Albina. Some poems loved Williams Avenue, others honored Unthank Park, and one celebrated the legacy of a neighborhood that is buried under I-5, the school district office, and a "big-ass hospital."

Writing the Essay: Examining Patterns

Although we wanted to honor the memory of the people of Chávez Ravine and Albina, Dianne and I didn't want students to get lost in the past. For the culminating essay, we encouraged students to connect the stories of the places and people they studied, to examine the patterns of "stealing home," but also to bring the topic back to their lives.

Students had saved evidence from all three pieces of our stealing home study during the second semester: Tulsa, Chávez Ravine, and Albina. They had readings, one-page essays they had written, poetry, film notes. To help them construct their essays, we began by asking, "What patterns did you notice across the three cities? Where's your passion on this topic? What moved you? What do you want to write about?" Students listed potential topics, and Dianne and I wrote them on the board: The use of eminent domain in Albina and Chávez Ravine; the forced removal of people across the three cities; the pattern of removing poor people of color. Then students chose a topic from the board or created their own. They wrote their topic on a long sentence strip and posted it on a bulletin board.

The next day, we handed sticky notes to each student and asked them to write one piece of evidence that supported their topic on each sticky note. We elicited a few examples based on their topic board. Under "Eminent Domain," students wrote details about Chávez Ravine and Albina—numbers of homes bulldozed, names of businesses wiped out, quotes from residents of each area, what was decimated and what was built. Students stuck their evidence notes under their topic sentence strip. Once the board was filled with evidence, Dianne and I told them, "If you have only one or two sticky notes, it means you don't have enough evidence to write your paper." We encouraged them to look at each other's topics and evidence, to add to evidence sheets based on

Albina Poem

Sinnamon Thomas

Footprints.
Gone.
The path where we first walked that proud stride and traveled vanished
cast over by the city's new vision.
Gone.
Gone was. . .
The thought that for once being black was special.
Didn't they know that when we entered the Cotton Club our feet moved to the rhythm of that rich, smooth jazz,
and we felt on top of the world.
At least in our city of Albina.
First, they had us on the west side of the river, then moved us east
A closer view of the river
And that river sure is long.
You see, where that freeway is?
The start of that bridge, the Coliseum, that hospital?
You're not hearing me.
I'm talking about that big-ass hospital
That was where we lived
Homes, businesses, tender black love.
Our union, all they gave us stood in those spots
All of our brown children with Kool-Aid smiles going to that school, Eliot.
Ain't there no more.
All of it.
Gone.
We had all the opportunities and fortune we could handle.
At the bottoms of our feets, on our soil.
Ripe and rich soil.
Hmmmmm.
And then they wanna move us out, with nowhere else to go.
Our 800 block of N. Albina Ave., which was once filled with our future
And squashed with his insensitivity.
The white man we call him.
Attack after attack and more attacks.
But we still thrive.
Don't think we went through this without a fight
You damn right, we battled
But
Ronnie Herndon, Dr. Norval Unthank,
Our heroes, our culture.
Gone.
Our history still remains in that soil
But what they forgot was that our rich legacy
Will never be
Gone.
Yeah I said, won't be gone.
Gone.
I laugh, because WE are not gone.

what they learned from their classmates and to dig back into their notes for more support.

Dianne and I worked on developing strong openings throughout the year. In this essay, we encouraged students to loop back to earlier writings—poetry, narratives about a time their home was disrupted, a startling story from the readings or films we'd encountered. What I've discovered from years of teaching writing is that essays are stronger when students are steeped in content over long periods of time, when they have multiple resources to draw from, when they have many ways to approach a topic, and when they are allowed to follow the thread that ignites their passion. All of those conditions were present in this essay.

Vince Singer used his poetic vision in his essay:

> *A lush landscape around the border of Los Angeles, Chávez was never considered a rich or appealing neighborhood. Chávez was a place where bare feet were your best pair of shoes, a place where children lived Christmas on a cardboard sled, and a place where the rooster was the house's alarm clock. Most of all, Chávez Ravine was a place where a person must live to experience its beauty.*

Our focus on poetry over the year gave students both the capacity and the license to breathe metaphoric and poetic language into their essays.

As a language arts teacher, I have a duty to teach students to read and write effectively, but one cannot write without learning how to think about the world, to step back from our individual pain and ask questions and find patterns. I want students like Desi to know that her loss of home wasn't because she wasn't good enough or smart enough, but because we live in a system that continues to put profit over people.

As Uriah Boyd wrote in her final essay on Albina and Chávez Ravine, "I like to think that there still exist times and places where the color of one's skin is completely irrelevant to the way that they are treated. There are places where nobody needs saving, nobody feels mistreated, and everyone is equidistant from perfection. Ideally, everyone would live in this type of place. Ignorance would be replaced with understanding. Fear with curiosity, timidity with unashamed interest. But realistically, as history has taught us, these places are often near impossible to find."

Resources

Ry Cooder. *Chávez Ravine* (audio CD). Nonesuch, 2005.

Kitty Felde. 10-part radio series on Chávez Ravine, KPCC Southern California Public Radio, June–August 2008. The transcript for part 1 is available here. Transcripts for all 10 shows available at scpr.org.

Jordan Mechner. *Chávez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story* (video). Bullfrog Films, 2004.

Don Normark. *Chávez Ravine, 1949.* Chronicle Books, 2003.

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