

Injury, Recovery, and Representation in *Shikaakwa*

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There I sat—tapping my foot, refreshing the web browser every minute, on the minute. I glanced at the upper right corner of my computer screen, then at my watch, then at my computer screen again to confirm. Time was indeed . . . passing.

Finally, I got up, deciding that fresh air would be a welcome distraction—or at least a better use of my time than staring at my inbox. I had just grabbed my blazer from the back of my swivel chair and walked to the door when I heard a ding. I rushed back to my seat.

The email's subject line read, "Book Cover." My editor, David Brent, had finally sent me the image I had been waiting for—only eleven minutes later than promised. I downloaded the photo and clicked on the file.

This wasn't what I was expecting.

Well, I sat for a while, mouth agape, looking at the famed Chicago skyline and its celebrated Sears Tower juxtaposed against an aerial view of a darkened street corner. The name of my book, *Renegade Dreams*, was sprawled across the cover in bold red letters on a bright yellow graphic resembling caution tape.

I took a breath.

After digesting the image, I sent it to a few trusted colleagues for their opinion. *Was I overreacting?* For a moment I thought so. But when my colleagues were just as outraged as me, I found myself emboldened.

I typed a message to David. "While I appreciate the effort the press put into this design, I am not comfortable with it. . . . This picture contradicts the larger argument I am making in the book. It is essentially a shot of Black Chicagoans on a street corner—literally in the shadows of greater Chicago. The picture makes people anonymous and suggests that the corner is a space of injury and not much else. This image disturbs me because I go to great lengths to show that my interlocutors are more than people who hang out on a corner inciting violence."

I closed my email by providing links to Chicago artist Carlos Javier Ortiz's work. I admired his photographs and hoped the press might contact him for an alternate book cover. "Will you please consider his work in relation to the concerns that I have expressed here?" I asked.

Fortunately, my editor advocated on my behalf. Together we selected a photograph from Ortiz's *We All We Got* series.¹ It depicts young Black Chicagoans holding candles and gathering in front of a tree where one of their peers was shot



Figure 13.1. A group of Black urban youths holding candles at a vigil that honors the life of a slain teenager.

and killed (figure 13.1). The young people are trying to heal from the trauma of urban violence.

Even after David and I settled on the image that we would ask for permission to use, I found myself online at my desk on several different occasions, looking at Ortiz's photographs for hours on end. Instantly, the pictures transported me from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I taught at the time as an assistant professor, to the West Side of Chicago, where I conducted the research for my book.

I could see Ortiz in my mind's eye trotting behind me with a camera swinging from his neck. It was as if he was there, chronicling my fieldwork experience with me. I had waited for the bus on Ogden Avenue, one of the streets that Ortiz photographed. I had been inside St. Sabina Parish—one of the churches that Ortiz immortalized—for baptisms and funerals. Some of the people he photographed were my friends. Others were strangers but lived parallel lives to the people I had interviewed.

In centering my book on disabled gang affiliates who use wheelchairs, I highlighted the overlooked fact that most victims of gun violence do not die. Chicago is a prime example of this trend. As I wrote, "Between 1999 and 2014 [when my book was published], more than 8,000 people had been killed, while an estimated 36,000 had been otherwise debilitated" (Ralph 2014, 4).

In a context where community residents anticipate gun violence, the disabled young Black men I came to know were deeply conflicted. Gang members who were killed became martyrs. But disabled gang members, unable to contribute



Figure 13.2. Ondelee Perteet, dressed in a white tuxedo, poses with his prom date. Friends and neighbors take pictures of the couple.

monetarily in the manner most valued (that is, as street-corner drug dealers), were often forgotten about, marginalized, and neglected. They sacrificed themselves for a gang that had, sadly, left them behind.

I do not mean to suggest that all young people who are disabled in Chicago due to gun violence are gang members—or even Black men. Still, this demographic anchored my study of injury. I explored how painful it felt for someone to feel abandoned by a gang after being maimed because of his allegiance to it. The young men in my study carried a particular kind of grief. Their mothers and fathers, the people who constantly warned them about their criminal activities, were now their caregivers.

Admittedly, my book did not chronicle the lives of Black teenagers who were actively trying to *avoid* the dangers of the street. Yet I knew that some of them were victims of gun violence too. In this way, I believe Ortiz's work complements my own, especially his photographs of Chicago native Ondelee Perteet.

One of Ortiz's photos captures Ondelee outside on the sidewalk in front of an apartment building just before his senior prom, seated in his wheelchair (figure 13.2). The teenager is wearing a white tux. His dreads are parted neatly and braided. Ondelee smiles. Ondelee's prom date drapes her arm around his shoulder and leans into him. Her wavy black hair grazes her shoulders as they pose. Little kids stand on the sidewalk behind the couple. Family, friends, and neighbors surround them, snapping pictures like paparazzi. I imagine that Ortiz,



Figure 13.3. Family picture of Laurence Ralph with his two brothers.

pointing his camera lens between the crowd of onlookers, is the only one on that sidewalk with a professional camera.

When I clicked on this photograph from Ortiz's digital archive, it instantly struck a chord. But this feeling of *déjà vu* wasn't merely because Ondelee reminded me of the young men I knew in wheelchairs on the West Side of Chicago. It was because Ondelee looked like I did when I was his age. And yet, back then, I didn't know anyone who had been shot. The possibility of being gunned down and paralyzed at the age of fourteen after someone opened fire at a party—like Ondelee was—wasn't something I would have anticipated.

But now, Ondelee's broad smile, as Ortiz captured it, made me think of myself. I thought about an old family portrait that hung above my mother's fireplace for years (figure 13.3). Posing with my two older brothers, I have the same hairstyle as Ondelee and a similar grin.

Fast-forward seven years, and Carlos Javier Ortiz has become just "Carlos" to me, which is to say, my friend. Our friendship began after our first conversation on the phone. "I'll send you a file of my pictures," Carlos told me, "and you can use them in your lectures if you want."

Over the years, Carlos and I have updated each other on the progress of our work. We have collaborated on projects. And we've sat together in front of large crowds discussing the intersection of my scholarship and his art.

The last event Carlos and I participated in was during the summer of 2021 for a digital exhibition at New York University on the relationship between protests and mourning. That's when I found out Carlos had just completed a short film, which was months away from being screened at the Tribeca Film Festival. After writing about gang affiliates who used wheelchairs, I immediately recognized the importance of thinking through the ways mobility and immobility shape people's understanding of what's possible for them to achieve.

In the film festival's online program, Ortiz describes his film, *Shikaakwa*, as "an elegy for the landscape and people who inhabit the land now referred to as Chicago."² By using its Indigenous name—the name given to it by Native Americans—Ortiz invites us to pay attention to the place we now call Chicago not only as it is, but how it once was. In his synopsis of the film, Ortiz tells us that "despair, movement, progress, and stillness" have remained staples in the landscape across centuries. What he doesn't explicitly say is that violence by way of the gun also had a lasting impact on its inhabitants. The technology colonists wielded to displace the Potawatomi, Odawa, Sauk, Ojibwe, Illinois, Kiikaapoi, Myaamia, Mascouten, Wea, Delaware, Winnebago, Menominee, and Mesquakie still haunts the terrain.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from seeing *Shikaakwa* in person. Still, I bought tickets to the virtual festival, made a bowl of popcorn, and projected the film on the large screen in my living room. As the short film started, I found myself leaning forward on the edge of my couch. Ortiz's style of cinematography immediately struck me. In *Shikaakwa*, he uses a "two-channel projection" such that parallel images appear on-screen simultaneously. The effect of this cinematic technique is to produce a series of striking juxtapositions.

Ortiz recorded the images that appear on channel 1, while Ondele's mother, Deetrenea Perteet, recorded the video on channel 2. Deetrenea's grainy home videos were originally intended to document her son's recovery. She never intended for that journey to be featured in festivals.

As the short film begins, a dance drill team comprising young Black men in white T-shirts perform a precisely choreographed routine while twirling wooden replica rifles in the air, on the left side of the screen. The second channel is black, steering my attention to the dancers.

Then I hear a familiar voice—Pastor Pflieger from St. Sabina Parish: "God, we remember the life lost here earlier this week, senseless violence. We wrap our arms around his family. We wrap our arms around all his relatives. We wrap our arms around our community. Because when a life is lost anywhere, we all suffer. We all lose."

The drill team continues to dance as channel 2 transitions to a group of Black men marching while carrying a makeshift cross (figure 13.4). On the horizontal axis of the cross, where Jesus's arms would typically be, the words "STOP SHOOTING" are painted in red.



Figure 13.4. Drill team (*left*); protesters carrying a cross (*right*).

I hear Ondeleé's voice for the first time, rapping a song he wrote:

Shot and paralyzed at the age of 14
 The Lord's by my side, when somebody tried to smoke me like a crack fiend
 But I got to thank the man that the kid still breathing
 So I said my prayers and knew that everything happened for a reason . . .
 It wasn't easy trying to survive a bullet through the chin . . .

Ondeleé's voice fades away.

On channel 1, Black teenage boys ride their bikes on the sidewalk. On channel 2, older Black men sit in wheelchairs on a Chicago street corner (figure 13.5). Of course, one group—the older men—*must* use their wheelchairs to navigate the environment, whereas at any moment the teenagers can discard their bikes and run through the uncut grass into the forest behind them. Yet and still, the older, disabled men foreshadow the lives that the seemingly carefree teenage boys *could have* one day. Put differently: if we regard debilitating gun violence as a kind of destruction that impedes a person's natural life course, then the wheelchair becomes a symbol of premature debility for Black urban residents—doesn't it?

As I ponder the symbolic status of the wheelchair in urban Chicago, I realize that my formulation works in reverse in another of Ortiz's scenes. An older Black woman sits in her wheelchair at a vigil, holding a framed photograph of a young man, presumably her dead grandson (figure 13.6). Watching her strength amid the tragedy surrounding her, I assume that her disability results from a long life—a "natural" part of aging. In this light, her wheelchair looks more like a throne that signifies her privileged status as an elder—especially when juxtaposed against the photograph she holds. At least she has lived. There is an aliveness, particularly in the face of violence, that becomes synonymous with mobility in Ortiz's film.

Like the dancers with their wooden rifles, the film's subjects sometimes perform violence (like actors on stage) to showcase their humanity. This *performance of violence* speaks against Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) formulation of symbolic



Figure 13.5. Boys riding bikes (*left*); men in wheelchairs (*right*).



Figure 13.6. A group of Black women protesting gun violence while holding pictures of slain teenagers.

violence, which refers to the dominance that a government or a privileged social class has over another. No. This kind of dramaturgy is more akin to a “renegade dream”: “an aspiration rooted in an experience of injury, which reimagines the possibilities within injury” (Ralph 2014, v).

Lest I be accused of unduly projecting agency onto desperate situations or suggesting too rosy a picture, I should say that these dreams were not grandiose. These were not the genre of dreams that have been Disneyfied and squashed into the storybook realm. In fact, when I first moved to Chicago, I did not recognize residents’ struggles as dreams because they were often quite banal. Safe passage to school became something to dream for, as did a stable job and affordable and livable housing. These dreams, it is critical to note, didn’t always come true: children were gunned down on the way to school; adults searched for work endlessly; the threat of displacement haunted residents daily. In the face of these



Figure 13.7. Ondelee kicks his leg on the hospital bed.

hardships, the most remarkable aspect of people's desires and the communal projects associated with them was the immense effort it took for Black Chicagoans to obtain resources that barely scratched the surface of actual need. The brutal honesty with which they acknowledged the difficulty of real change suggested that the power of such dreams is that working toward them, regardless of whether they come to fruition, have their own transformative capacities.³

After Ondelee was shot, a doctor told him that he had lost all sensation in his legs and would never walk again. And yet, in the film's climactic scene, Ondelee repeatedly kicks his leg in the air while lying on a hospital bed (figure 13.7), dramatizing violence and joy simultaneously.

"I will kick you in your face," Ondelee flails his left leg. Up and down, up and down, in defiance of his doctor's prognosis. "I will kick you in your face. Man, I swear . . . to . . . God. Look at that leg. Look at it. Man. . . I will kick you in your *eye*." Ondelee continues to kick his leg on the hospital bed as his mother laughs at this miraculous play fight.

This scene allows the viewer to reimagine Chicago as a place where violence does not have to be routine or naturalized. Life could be different.

Cut to a dozen colorful balloons floating through an overcast sky. "Look there, that beautiful blue sky. God made it all, didn't he? He made all that sky," a disembodied voice says as the balloons float high above.

In Chicago, in a ceremony that has become commonplace, family members will gather to release balloons on the death anniversaries of loved ones. The balloons symbolize the act of their loved ones transcending the earth, ascending to a higher spiritual plateau. Only in this scene, Ortiz reverses the release of the balloons. They descend from the sky into the hands of the grieving family



Figure 13.8. Ondelee walks down sidewalk holding a friend's hand.



Figure 13.9. Ondelee's mother holding his baby as Ondelee watches.

members. What if God or fate granted their loved ones a second chance? What would that look like?

In another scene, Ondelee—the human embodiment of radical optimism—slowly and unsteadily walks while holding a friend's hand (figure 13.8). As he lumbers on, we hear his mother Deetrenea's voice: "They say he'd never walked again. They said he'd never move his arms or legs again, but God said he will. I mean, we came to church today without the wheelchair. He decided to come on in. Cause God had a message for him today."

As the film comes to an end, the disparate channels give way to one full screen. Deetrenea sits on her bed, holding her grandson—Ondelee's baby (figure 13.9).

Gazing at his mother and his newborn son, Ondelee looks ahead.

From the first moment I saw Ortiz's photography, I knew that it resonated with the theoretical concerns of my book, which has to do with the forms of violence and injury that open the way for political transformation and future-making. Ortiz's art also dovetails with how I engage with hypervisible social phenomena such as gangs and police through a grounded theory approach.

Traditional ethnographic methods reify the ideal of the "distanced" and "objective" ethnographer, often employing theories and concepts that "research subjects" are unfamiliar with or do not understand as a way to perform authority and expertise. By contrast, I employ theories and concepts that emerge from the fieldwork experience, deconstructing the self/other divide to which the traditional paradigm is indebted. My approach does not rest on a distinction between the ethnographic self and native other but instead draws its analytic leverage from an ethical commitment to "proximity" (Miller 2021).⁴ In sum, my ethnographic aim is to break down the barrier between my interlocutors and myself by historicizing social problems *with* them. It is through this process that I build a subtle string of observations into powerful considerations of violence, debilitating injury, and death in the American inner city.

Watching Ondelee's family in that final scene, I better understood why the original cover of *Renegade Dreams* offended me so much. It was because my research interlocutors in Chicago cannot be adequately understood through familiar analytics such as "deviance" and "pathology." Such characterizations of urban life can become a reality of their own—a reality that too often forecloses the potential for injury to be a productive condition that sets new horizons in people's lives. An injury, after all, is not reducible to the violence that caused the pain and disappointment. Injury entails the possibility of recovery. That possibility, in Ortiz's work and my own, is coterminous with tenderness, hope, kinship, and love.⁵

NOTES

- 1 The photographs featured in this article are included with permission of the photographer, Carlos Javier Ortiz. They are published in Ortiz's 2014 book, *We All We Got*.
- 2 See <https://tribecafilm.com/films/shikaakwa-2021>, Last accessed on November 11, 2022 and also Bourdieu (1991), Miller (2021), Ortiz (2014), and Ralph (2014).
- 3 On the relationship between injury and disability, see: Livingston (2012), Kafer (2013), Crosby (2017), and Puar (2017).
- 4 On grounded theory and "proximity" see: Miller (2021).
- 5 See also: Rapp and Ginsburg (2001): 533–556.

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