

CHICAGO STORIES

CARLOS JAVIER ORTIZ
AND DAVID SCHALLIOL
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During the Great Migration (1916–1970), six million African Americans left the South to find better lives in the North and West. Large US cities—including New York, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Detroit—grew drastically, with the promise of industrial jobs and freedom from oppressive Jim Crow laws. Chicago was permanently transformed during this time; its population of black residents grew from just 2 percent of the overall population in 1910 to 33 percent by 1970.

Yet, from the onset, the city was far from integrated. Black residents were limited to living in zones in the South and West sides of the city, colloquially known as Chicago’s “black belt.” Racially restrictive covenants kept homeowners from selling to non-white buyers. A form of racial discrimination known as “redlining” labeled black neighborhoods on maps as hazardous and ineligible for mortgage financing from banks and other entities. Many realtors frightened white homeowners into selling their homes at a discounted rate when black families moved to their block, convincing them that their property value had declined. These same realtors would then sell the home to a black family at a profit. This practice, known as “blockbusting,” resulted in many white homeowners moving to the city’s suburbs while keeping black neighborhoods separated and at a disadvantaged distance, fueling the deep racial divide we still experience in our city today.

This is a very condensed version of Chicago’s problematic history with segregation and targeted disinvestment in black communities, but it provides important context for the works of the two artists featured in this exhibition: **Carlos Javier Ortiz** (American, 1977) and **David Schalliol** (American, b. 1976).

Carlos Javier Ortiz considers the ideals of those who traveled to Chicago during the Great Migration, the hardships they encountered in the North, and the generations of people born from this initial migration who are still cut off from equal opportunity. His film *A Thousand Midnights* (2016) begins with serene depictions of life in the South. Imagery of an elderly woman singing around a birthday cake surrounded by family and aged hands washing homegrown tomatoes in a kitchen sink are accompanied by audio narratives. The stories describe struggles of life as a sharecropper or being the first to integrate an all-white school. Ortiz then moves from depicting life in the South to views of the North, turning his camera to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where Martin Luther King Jr. was shot in 1968, to Chicago, to a memorial service at the grave of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being falsely accused of whistling at a white woman. Though the imagery returns to the positive (a young girl playing alone in an open field, a group of teenagers dancing in a street), Ortiz threads the theme of violence through all his films and photographs: the ways violence was—and is—inflicted on people of color from the outside, and how it can be internalized and perpetuated for generations.

In another film and photographic series, *We All We Got* (2014), Ortiz documents communities in Chicago affected by gun violence. Portraying the epidemic from multiple perspectives over the course of many years, the works expose a complex narrative that traces the issue beyond headline appeal, casting a light on the larger forces fostering recurring tragedies in our city. The project provides an extended, empathic window into the areas where

gun violence is an ongoing, multifaceted issue: illuminating both a street culture that glorifies aggressive gang activity and the overwhelming toll of gun-related deaths on families and their neighborhoods.

David Schalliol photographs in many of the same Chicago neighborhoods as Ortiz, focusing on the buildings and demolished homes as evidence of a city divided. At once a sociologist, filmmaker, and photographer, Schalliol questions the ever-changing urban landscape as it relates to larger race and class inequities. His feature-length film *The Area* (2018) follows a community activist, Deborah Payne, as she fights a multi-billion-dollar intermodal freight company in its quest to buy and demolish more than four hundred homes owned by African American families in her Chicago neighborhood of Englewood. Schalliol closely documents Payne's story, picturing the heartbreak each time a home or building is demolished to create parking spaces for freight trains, and encapsulating the assault of such developments on the soul of a community. Many of these homes mark the very places where southern black families established themselves upon arriving in Chicago, building their lives and communities, only to have their children or grandchildren forced out of ownership decades later for corporate gain.

The Area is featured alongside Schalliol's photographs of lone buildings centered between vacant lots, the enduring structures appearing as shrines to disappearing neighborhoods. These images challenge us to consider the wider narrative or causes of urban transformation: what was there, why it no longer stands, and what will follow. Schalliol explains: "Instead of seeing one peculiar building, we see the legacy and immediacy of urban transformation.

Instead of asking 'What happened to this house?' we ask, 'What is causing this phenomenon?'"¹

Like Dawoud Bey's *Birmingham* series, also on view in the museum, Carlos Javier Ortiz and David Schalliol ask us to connect the present to the past—and thus to see the ways that fraught history powerfully manifests in our own backyards.

Kristin Taylor
Curator of Academic Programs
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Carlos Javier Ortiz and David Schalliol's works are currently held in the MoCP's Midwest Photographers Project—a revolving collection of portfolios by established and emerging photographers from the Midwest.

¹ David Schalliol, artist statement, "Photography: Isolate Building Studies (2006–Present)," accessed January 18, 2019, http://davidschalliol.com/isolated_building_studies.