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978-0-521-59320-5 - The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago
Public Housing

Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall

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The Dignity of Resistance

Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing

The Dignity of Resistance chronicles the four-decade history of Chicago's Wentworth Gardens public housing residents' grassroots activism. This comprehensive case study explores why and how these African-American women creatively and effectively engaged in organizing efforts to resist increasing government disinvestment in public housing and the threat of demolition.

Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall, utilizing a multidisciplinary lens, explore the complexity and resourcefulness of Wentworth women's grassroots organizing – the ways in which their identities as poor African-American women and mothers both circumscribe their lives and shape their resistance. Through the inspirational voices of the activists, Feldman and Stall challenge portrayals of public housing residents as passive, alienated victims of despair. We learn instead how women residents collectively have built a cohesive, vital community; have cultivated outside technical assistance and organizational and institutional supports; and have attracted funding – all to support the local facilities, services, and programs necessary for their everyday needs for survival, and ultimately to save their homes from demolition.

Roberta M. Feldman is Professor of Architecture at the School of Architecture and the Co-Director of the City Design Center at the College of Architecture and the Arts, University of Illinois, Chicago.

Susan Stall is Chair of the Sociology Department and Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at Northeastern Illinois University.

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*Women Residents' Activism in Chicago
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ROBERTA M. FELDMAN

University of Illinois, Chicago

SUSAN STALL

Northeastern Illinois University



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Foreword

Sheila Radford-Hill

I first arrived at Wentworth Gardens in the spring of 1982. I took the number 24 bus from downtown Chicago and got off at 35th and Wentworth Street, right in front of the old Chicago White Sox stadium, Comiskey Park. I walked the few short blocks past Tyler's Restaurant, past the grocery store, past Progressive Baptist Church, past T. E. Brown Apartments, past the senior citizens center, and through the modest neighborhood filled with homes that were well past their prime. As I walked, I was struck by the sense of neighborhood that these people of meager resources had somehow captured like lightning in a bottle. The easy familiarity and gossipy love that neighbors have for each other would lead me right to the office of the Wentworth Local Advisory Council (LAC).

As a trainer/organizer for Designs for Change (DFC), an education advocacy organization, I had the mission of organizing parents of special education children so that they could actively challenge the special education policies at their school. The neighborhood school was the Robert S. Abbott Elementary School, a once proud elementary school named for the famous founder of the *Chicago Defender*. Sadly, the memory of Robert S. Abbott was tarnished by a school plagued with low achievement and a disproportionate number of special education-identified students.

With the support of the Wentworth LAC, I visited the development frequently and confirmed what a DFC analysis of the school's enrollment patterns had shown, namely, that children from Wentworth Gardens were being inappropriately placed in special education classes. In addition, they were being educated in a setting that was becoming increasingly segregated because of the district's policy of busing children from other schools in the region to the Abbott School. In other words, Abbott had become a dumping ground where children were receiving inferior education services and, in many cases, were inappropriately referred for special education. Under federal law, children receiving these services were entitled to a "free and appropriate education"; through research it became increasingly clear

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that the school's practices violated these rights. As the parents became increasingly aware of the situation at Abbott, they discovered that the school district was indifferent to their plight. To make matters worse, the school's long-time principal was not an advocate for the children at Abbott: He was complacent about underperforming teachers and condescending to the parents, many of whom were poorly educated.

In the winter of 1983, the parents wanted change. At their request, I helped them organize a parent action against a regular education teacher who had become mentally incompetent to teach her class. After repeated attempts to get the teacher removed, the parents felt that some form of direct action was the only option left to safeguard their children's right to an education. None of the parents had ever done anything like this before; they were scared but resolute. They did not turn back even when the principal threatened to have them arrested for trespassing. On the appointed day, the parents commandeered a vacant classroom, and, with the permission of each child's parent, they moved the students to an empty classroom and demanded a substitute teacher. The protest was meant to pressure the principal and the district to put children before union work rules. If these authorities could not remove the *teacher from the class*, the parents could remove *the class from the teacher*.

Within 24 hours a substitute teacher was provided and the mentally incompetent teacher had been transferred to the central office. For more than a year after this action, the parents continued to collect and analyze data about Abbott school; some testified at the teacher's dismissal hearing; others became school activists, and, in 1988, with the passage of Chicago School Reform, they became members of the Local School Council (LSC).

When I left DFC and got a job at the Chicago Area Project (CAP), the residents again requested my help. My assignment was to provide technical assistance to their organization. This assignment also involved organizing the residents. This time, the intransigent bureaucracy was the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), and the purpose of organizing the residents was to pressure CHA to repair neglected and dangerous conditions in the development.

Along with the struggle to repair Wentworth Gardens before it fell down around the residents for lack of investment and blatant neglect, there was the struggle to establish an independent organization to better serve their needs and the struggle to save their dilapidated homes from the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois partnership that financed a new White Sox park. The neighborhood south of 35th Street was destroyed by this stadium redevelopment scheme.

As the organizer involved in these struggles, I helped the residents form Wentworth Residents United for Survival, the South Armour Square Neighborhood Coalition, and the Wentworth Resident Management Corporation. I worked with residents to plan the overall strategy and several of

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the tactics discussed in this book. The tactics were often confrontational, but the strategy made use of and sought to preserve the community-building spirit that characterizes Wentworth Gardens. For these people, community building is an act of resistance: a commitment to join together out of the needs of people, to work together as neighbors, and to overcome the real and present danger of annihilation.

Through these struggles, I learned that the *heart of grassroots organizing* is resistance. Resistance is a moral response to the significant human misery heaped on marginalized people at the hands of inept, insensitive, complacent, and often corrupt bureaucracies. I learned that *the soul of grassroots organizing* lies in its insistence on human dignity for all people. These women taught me that *grassroots movements require both heart and soul*.

This book captures the story of women who simply refuse to accept institutional arrangements that dehumanize and degrade them. The intensity of this research is fueled by the researchers' commitment to placing the community action of the resident leaders in Wentworth in the context of the struggle for human dignity. In this instance, the research documents the struggle against timid and inept housing policies. These policies take place, in turn, within the larger context of changes in the U.S. economy that have accelerated the decline of low-income neighborhoods. The unequal distribution of economic prosperity has produced increased economic isolation and social distress among people in poor communities. Economic deprivation, toxic political representation, exploitative institutions, and austere social conditions are the forces that work against decent housing and sustainable development for the residents in Chicago's public housing.

The residents of Wentworth Gardens understand these realities, but they are not interested in organizing *around issues*; they want to save their homes and their neighborhood. Organizing in this community is a lopsided struggle for a place at the decision-makers' table, a place that is rightfully theirs because the residents share a vision of what their community should be.

The older leaders are effective representatives of this vision because the neighborhood they desire is as real to them as the reality of the neglected physical spaces is to those of us who do not live there. Their collective vision was formed from the memories of the neighborhood these women first called home. The love of home and the love of their community brought them together and will keep them together despite bickering and occasional falling-outs.

The older generation knows that when your home is threatened, it becomes a place of insurgency, a place where community building and social action can foster empowerment. After 20 years of watching the people in this development from the perspective of a community organizer, I am struck by the fact that the younger activists have a harder time imagining what the community could be like if active residents made powerful

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interests accountable to their needs. These younger women have grown to understand the heart of grassroots organizing. The struggle continues for their souls; this book is a window into that struggle.

The research is designed to document the struggles of marginalized people not only to validate their knowledge but also to challenge society's prevailing insensitivity to the lives of the poor. Deep within the soul of grassroots organizing are a thirst for freedom that cannot be quenched, a hunger for justice that cannot be satiated, a will to succeed that cannot be denied, and a desire to build a legacy of change that will pass on to new generations. This book is about *the heart and soul of grassroots organizing*. Let it inform your understanding of how grassroots people in modest circumstances can become change agents on their own behalf.

All struggles are not won in the traditional sense; a recent visit to Wentworth reminded me of this. As I walked throughout the "Gardens" on a hot summer day in 2002, I was dismayed at the magnitude of the challenges ahead of the residents who are now in charge of managing the development. But as I watched the young people celebrate the beginning of a fully resident-managed development, I realized that many more hearts are waiting to be touched and transformed into grassroots activists. To these young people will fall the broader task of building the institutional capacity needed to safeguard promises grudgingly made by the power structure.

If America is to achieve economic and social equity, if America is to live the promise of democracy, its scholars, teachers, researchers, policy-makers, and citizens will need to learn from the wisdom and experiences of people working for change in their local communities. The well-researched case study presented by the authors of this book reminds us that those called to strengthen the resistance of the poor are rich indeed.

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In the spring of 1987 nearly 400 people – public housing residents, housing activists, community organizers, housing professionals, and academics – gathered for the Women and Public Housing: Hidden Strength, Unclaimed Power conference at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The intent of this 2-day conference was to provide a public forum to highlight resident-initiated responses to entrenched social problems existing within public housing developments locally and nationally. There was the added hope that the conference participants could become a base for future organized actions. One of us, Susan Stall, was the coordinator of the conference. The other, Roberta Feldman, prepared the photodocumentary for the plenary session, “Sharing Our Homes, Sharing Our Communities.” Representatives from Wentworth Gardens spoke in the session “Planning Our Communities to Resist Displacement.”¹ Through the year-long preparation for

¹ The necessity for a conference on women and public housing was first proposed at the closing session of the “Women and Safe Shelter” Conference (April 25–26, 1986) by public housing residents and advocates. The conference was preceded by a series of organizing meetings held throughout Chicago in which public residents voiced their concerns, raised issues they considered important, and shared their knowledge of local initiatives. These community meetings culminated in the “Women and Public Housing” Conference (May 29–30, 1987). Local and national community activists living in and/or working with public housing explored such issues as leadership development, self-employment, resident management, and welfare reform in 25 conference sessions. Wentworth Gardens appears in the document that accompanied the conference, *A Resource Directory for Residents in Public Housing*, which identifies 130 on-site service providers and advocates for public housing residents and includes 12 case studies of resident activists (Hunt-Rhymes et al., 1987).

As a direct outcome of the conference, Susan Stall, as a community consultant, with a committee of public housing residents and resident advocates facilitated the formation of the citywide nonprofit tenants’ organization, Chicago Housing Authority Residents Taking Action (CHARTA). (See *The New York Times*, June 2, 1991.) Several Wentworth Gardens residents worked collaboratively with CHARTA organizers.

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this conference we became acutely aware of the essential roles that women residents living in Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) developments play through their organizing efforts to create and secure their communities. This was our first opportunity to become acquainted with women from Wentworth Gardens, and we have remained involved with Wentworth activists since that time.

Our initial visits to the Wentworth Gardens development were motivated by our intention to write an accessible account of the residents' past and present organizing initiatives for an audience of community activists and reformers (Feldman & Stall, 1989). As we grew to know the Wentworth resident activists better, we were struck by their creativity, camaraderie, and tenacity in the face of formidable challenges. We became increasingly convinced that it was important to offer an alternative portrayal of public housing residents – one that contests existing pervasive negative stereotypes.

As feminist action researchers we recognized our privileged social positions and the structural barriers to developing a complex understanding of the everyday lives of low-income women of color. As white women who live in safe and secure housing, we do not face the same day-to-day issues that Wentworth activists confront. As a result we sought to bridge the differences between us and the residents, and whenever possible to build reciprocal relationships that foster an exchange of trust. We were cognizant of our responsibility not only to reciprocate the Wentworth residents' contributions to our research, but to contribute to positive social changes in their community.

Shortly after we began our research at Wentworth, in 1989, Susan Stall was invited to organize and chair the Wentworth Gardens Resident Management Community Advisory Board. The tasks of this advisory group have been to advise and support the technical and organizing tasks of Wentworth's resident management board. Later Roberta Feldman worked with Wentworth Garden residents and their South Armour Square neighbors on a feasibility study for a new adjacent shopping center through conducting participatory design workshops.

Since the late 1980s, we have attempted to promote the efforts of resident activists by documenting and giving public recognition to their past and current organizing achievements in a variety of alternative venues. For example, we prepared an exhibit for the Chicago Peace Museum in Chicago that provided photo documentation and text describing community actions at Wentworth; served in an advisory capacity to the Field Museum's new permanent exhibit *Living Together: Sheltering Ourselves*, which features the Wentworth resident activist Mary Rias in the accompanying video; and contributed to the telecourse aired by PBS, *Women and Social Action*, which includes the Wentworth resident activists in a 1-hour segment,

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"Low Income Women's Resistance."² In several instances, Wentworth Gardens residents have participated in conference and colloquium presentations with us.³ Also, we have presented our slide documentation and observations of their activism in varied and multiple settings and for diverse audiences in the hopes that potential community supporters will

² The installation, "Community Builders – Wentworth Gardens Resident Activists," was in the *Supportive Housing and Protective Environments (SHAPE)* Peace Museum Exhibition, February 26–May 28, 1994. It was designed and executed by Roberta Feldman, Jack Naughton, Susan Stall, and Linda Hover-Montgomery and is now mounted in the RMC conference room at Wentworth Gardens.

The telecourse *Women and Social Action*, directed by Martha Thompson, was distributed nationwide (live feeds as well as videotapes) by PBS Adult Learning Services from 1994 until 2000. Susan Stall served on a multiuniversity advisory committee for the development of the telecourse from 1993 to 1994 and worked with Martha Thompson to orchestrate the video segment taped at Wentworth Gardens. The 1-hour segment "Low Income Women's Resistance" focuses on the organizing successes and challenges at Wentworth Gardens. The accompanying study guide, *Teleclass Study Guide: Women and Social Action* (Thompson, 1994), also describes and analyzes the activism of the Wentworth Gardens residents, both in the study guide section "Low Income Women's Resistance" and also in a reprint of one of our earliest articles, "Resident Activism in Public Housing, A Chicago Public Housing Development: A Case Study of Women's Invisible Work of Building Community" (Feldman and Stall, 1990). *Women and Social Action* is still listed on the PBS Adult Learning Services website (http://www.pbs.org/als/women_act/index.html). Videotapes of the course are still being distributed by RMI Media Productions, Inc. Also, it continues to air at several colleges and universities licensed to offer it on the Education Channel (<http://www.educationchannel.org/html/Telecourses/womensocialact.html>), and it is still in use at at several colleges and universities.

The Wentworth Gardens resident Mary Rias was one of four individuals featured in a video exhibition, *Living Together: Sheltering Ourselves*, which opened at the Chicago Field Museum in 1997. This exhibit instructs visitors about the diversity of urban homes and neighborhoods in the contemporary United States. Roberta Feldman served on the advisory committee for this exhibit from 1995 to 1997.

The Community Design Center at UIC provided some of the technical assistance to work on two reports requested by Wentworth. Both the research and the reports were conducted in partnership with the residents: *Wentworth Gardens Resident Management Corporation Community Housing Concerns Report*, which had the contributors Khari Hunt, Hallie Amey, Susan Donald, Wateka Kleinpeter, Roberta Feldman, and Erin Hayes (May 27, 1998), and *An Assessment of the Resources and Needs Available for the Development of a Child Care Program at Wentworth Gardens*, by Susan Donald, Erin Hayes, and Bianca Wilson (1998).

³ Since 1988, one or more Wentworth Gardens residents have presented with us in five colloquium, or conference settings: "Women and Housing Activism" at the Radical Scholars Conference, Chicago, July 1988; "Getting to Know Our Neighbors – IIT and the Public Housing Community," at Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, December 1989; "When Housing Is Not Enough: Chicago Public Housing Residents Become Community Developers," Future Visions of Public Housing (An International Forum), Cincinnati, Ohio, November 1994; "Resident Management at a Chicago Public Housing Development," International Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) Conference, Saint Louis, Missouri, March 1998; and "Women, Resistance, and Public Housing," Gender and City Spaces (A Gender and Women's Studies Lecture Series), University of Illinois at Chicago, September 2002.

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learn of the challenges and successes of these Chicago-based community efforts. Finally, through both our roles on the RMC Community Advisory Board and our protracted involvement as researchers we have attempted, whenever possible, to serve as conduits for material and technical resources in the greater Chicago area.

This book would not have been possible without the friendships we have developed and the gracious assistance we have received from numerous women in the Wentworth Gardens development, and from several of their community partners. We are especially grateful to the women of Wentworth whom we interviewed for this study, who included us in countless meetings and events. It has been our privilege to be welcomed into such an emotionally warm and vibrant community. They have changed our lives forever.

In a project with such an extended time frame there are numerous individuals who we want to thank. The four research assistants who assisted us in this project each made a unique contribution. Quentin Stevens did essential research of the CHA archives and prepared materials for the design workshop at Wentworth Gardens. Nancy Hudspeth did excellent reviews of the history of public housing and resident management and contributed to our observational data. Both Lynne Westphal and Lynne Moch observed at countless Wentworth meetings and events; their field notes and their interpretations of their data gathering were invaluable. We are indebted to Brad Hunt for his detailed responses to our inquiries on public housing history and his detailed and knowledgeable review of our chapter 2. Both Pat Wright and Jim Chapman generously shared written materials, legal documents, and their memories of the organizing efforts at Wentworth that predated our own involvement. Gowri Betrabet participated in the community garden focus group and contributed her careful observations. Diana Solis's early photographs at Wentworth inspired our own attempts at photo documentation of the residents' activism. Elizabeth Michaels transcribed the majority of our interviews. Brenda Sherwood transcribed the audio of a videotape of a Wentworth event. Laura Swartzbaugh and Holly Pringley helped us organize our references. Kevin Stevens supported digital files of images. Jason Feldman generously donated his design expertise to create the cover, photo collages, and timeline.

Many other individuals collaborated with us in our efforts to share technical resources with the Wentworth Gardens residents. Craig Wilkins offered the residents real estate development seminars and finalized the shopping center design. Jack Naughton was the cofacilitator in the participatory design workshop. Michael Gellick and Jacques Chatain gave their time and professional expertise to prepare the architecture and engineering assessment. Jason Feldman contributed the design for the Wentworth RMC's logo and newsletter. Erin Hayes, Bianca Wilson, and

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Khari Hunt partnered with residents on the needs assessment survey and implementation study of the day care training center. Both Lynne Westphal and Lynne Moch were genuine participatory researchers at Wentworth – actively engaged in several Wentworth organizing and fundraising initiatives.

Our thanks to Irv Altman and Dan Stokol, the series editors. Irv has consistently provided ongoing support for this book, from its first conception as a book chapter to its present form. Martha Thompson and Judy Wittner read numerous drafts of each chapter over the past years and generously agreed, along with Jamie Horwitz, Randy Stoecker, and Lynne Westphal, to read and comment on the first draft of our manuscript. Also, Jennifer Gress's careful reading and detailed editorial comments provided a detailed guide during our revisions. Sheila Radford-Hill was a wonderful sounding board for our theoretical musings and offered enthusiastic and thoughtful support throughout this writing project. Conversations with Leslie Kanes Weisman, Terry Haywoode, Maurine Wood, Gail Radford, and Charlie Hoch offered useful ideas and encouragement along the way, and intellectual collaborations with Nancy Naples and Randy Stoecker helped us to refine our theoretical thinking.

We also want to recognize our respective universities and university centers for their support of our work. Through the University of Illinois at Chicago, Roberta Feldman received a Great Cities Institute Faculty Seed Grant and a Great Cities Institute Faculty Fellowship. From Northeastern Illinois University at Chicago, Susan Stall received a Committee on Organized Research Grant.

Finally both of us have certain people in our immediate lives who sustained us during this multiyear endeavor:

Roberta Feldman:

The staff at the UIC City Design Center – Tasneem Chowdhury, Elizabeth Kocs, Laura Swartzbaugh, and Jenna Robison – I am indebted to you for covering for me in the last throes of completing the book manuscript. Judith Kirshner, the dean of the UIC College of Architecture and the Arts, and Katerina Ruedi, the past director of UIC School of Architecture, I thank you for the gift of time to complete this project.

My greatest debt is to the ongoing support of my family: my memories of my father's words, "You can accomplish whatever you set out to do"; my brother Leslie's unyielding support of my goals; the love of my husband, Richard, who lifted my spirits; my son Scott, who provided uncompromising intellectual council; my son Jason, whose creative talent gave visual expression to the project, and whose nurturance filled the void; and Monica and Gabriel for the time this book has taken from our being together.

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Susan Stall:

I owe a tremendous debt to my writing group colleagues and friends, Martha Thompson and Judy Wittner, for their unflagging support of me and of this project. Thanks to Laurie Danch, Gail Radford, Robyne Luzietti, Kathy Lorimer, Liz Brown, Kathleen Slobin, and Lissa Schwartz, who provided me with emotional support when my spirits and my confidence were dragging. My mother, Phyllis Stall, did not live to see the completion of this project, but her spirit lives on through the intensified support of my sisters, Patti, Julie, and Stephanie, and my brother, John. Finally, I am blessed to have Charlie Hoch and Gina Hoch-Stall in my life. The writing process does not bring out the best in me, but Charlie and Gina continuously nurtured me with food, humor, and their unconditional love.