

ARTIFACTS RELATED TO IMMIGRATION

Jane Addams Hull-House Museum Collection
Alternative Labeling Project

A Hungry Song in the Shadows

When I think about Chicago's first settlers, migrants, jobseekers,
who sought haven or the hope of one,

I think about a place fierce with wails, noises in all decibels,
tongues from all reaches, and how this is not just a city,

but a dream state of brick and chain-link fences, where poetry clatters
along with the El train on iron rails, where temples hold every

belief and street corners every color, a city that nourishes all palates,
holds all thoughts, and still contains the seed of this vital idea:

In accord with nature, all is possible. This is a city that steam built.
That muscle and sweat solidified into a church

of organized labor. Where a swampy onion field in a few generations
could become home to the brightest and most jagged skyline,

where fossil fuels are holy water and smokestacks and silos remain
as soot-stained monuments to industry—from horse-drawn plows,

to the foulest stockyards, the roar of combustion engines, the rattle
of metal-tipped tools, and smoke-curling big rigs streaming along

cluttered expressways and upturned streets. I came to this city on my knees,
laden with heartaches, bitter in the shadows, seeking a thousand voices

that spoke in one voice, where steel no longer reigned, but where open mics
and poetry slams kept the steel in our verses, lamenting a life of work,

in a time of no work, and where the inventive and inspiring
could finally burst through the cement viaducts and snowy terrains.

Now we are artists or we die. From the fractured neighborhoods where
bootblacks and news hawking boys once held sway, to this daunting

gentrified metropolis of ghosts, toxic waste, and countless poor ripped
from their housing projects, three-flat graystones, or trash-lined

bungalows, yet nothing can truly uproot the uprooted. The energy for what
Chicago can become is buried inside people, in callings, passions,

and technologies, but only if this manufactured garden aligns
with real nature, no longer limited, finite, fixed on scarcity,
but abundant,

cooperative, regenerative, like a song across the lakeshore, blooming
with lights, music, dance, banners, and words into a cornucopia

of potentials, possibilities, even the impossible. It's an imagination
for the intrinsic beauty and bounty in all things.

Chicago. Clean. Just. Free. It's the city we've wept and bled to see.

by Luis J. Rodriguez, 2011