



BOOK REVIEW

Building Radical Hope in the Immigrant City: A Conversation with Jess Andors and Dan Rivera*

One of the core challenges that Michelle Wilde Anderson discusses throughout *The Fight to Save the Town* is the problem of narrative, which is inextricable from the intertwined problems of economic collapse, poverty, divestment, and racism. What stories are being told about these places and by whom? How do these stories feed or fight the decline? What are we doing on the ground to fight, and how can we discuss these efforts to amplify their power?

Jess: In thinking about the work in Lawrence, Massachusetts, I often return to a line from the Vietnamese author and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha. Trinh writes about the damage caused by dehumanizing narratives that colonizers use as a tool of social and economic control. She writes—and I love the passion of this, the sense of how high the stakes are—“You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don’t, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said.”¹

Our home—Lawrence—is not a colony, per se. However, it is a post-industrial, working-class, immigrant city that is now 82% Latino and 41% foreign-born.² Lawrence was carved out of the surrounding farming communities in 1847 by Yankee entrepreneurs exploiting the Merrimack River for hydropower to run

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1. TRINH T. MINH-HA, *WOMAN, NATIVE, OTHER* 80 (1989).

2. See *QuickFacts: Lawrence City, Massachusetts*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://perma.cc/RRN7-AMSQ> (archived Mar. 10, 2023).

their mills.³ It was a planned city designed from its inception as a worker's city.⁴ Over the years it has been populated by successive waves of immigrants, at times specifically recruited in their countries of origin by industry as cheap labor.⁵ There is no "rich neighborhood" here, and early mill profits were rarely reinvested locally. Instead, their profits flowed into model villages in wealthy neighboring Andover or art museums and universities in Boston.⁶ Currently, our residents fill the lower-skill and lower-wage jobs of the regional economy.⁷ So in some senses it has fulfilled a similar economic function as a traditional colony, providing the natural resource of (mostly immigrant) labor to create value for those outside the city.

It is also a city that is trying to reinvent itself—to tell a new story in the face of larger economic and social forces over which it has little control. I think one of the crucial bits that Michelle captures in her chapter is how important it is for us in Lawrence not to be "said" by others outside the city, especially as we slowly find the words to speak our own better future into being.

Dan: I'm a Lawrence kid, and for Lawrence kids of my generation the way we make our way in life is rooted in this place. We got here as immigrants ourselves or as children of immigrants. Growing up here, we watched two generations move through the city: immigrants moving in and making a life, and white flight moving out, always talking about the museum-picture story of the city in its heyday, of Essex Street stores and Broadway theaters. It was great; and now, well, not so much. So how do we fix these things?

There are fundamental structural problems in the world, from economic disparities to racial injustice and all those in between. We got to be mayor of our hometown, a small 6.5-square-mile part of the world. We were allowed to

3. EARTHA DENGLER, KATHERINE KHALIFE & KEN SKULSKI, IMAGES OF AMERICA: LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS 9-22 (1995); *Background and Early Development of Lawrence*, LAWRENCE HIST. CTR., <https://perma.cc/FS7D-JRU6> (archived Mar. 10, 2023).

4. See DENGLER ET AL., *supra* note 3, at 7-8; *Background and Early Development of Lawrence*, *supra* note 3.

5. See MICHELLE WILDE ANDERSON, THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE TOWN: REIMAGINING DISCARDED AMERICA 16-17, 135-36 (2022); DONALD B. COLE, IMMIGRANT CITY: LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS 1845-1921, at 10-13 (1963).

6. See EDWARD G. RODDY, MILLS, MANSIONS, AND MERGERS: THE LIFE OF WILLIAM M. WOOD 85-112 (1997) (describing Billy Wood, Lawrence's wealthiest textile industrialist, and his investments in Andover and elsewhere).

7. See *American Community Survey: Selected Economic Characteristics*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://perma.cc/4E7E-C6SC> (archived Mar. 10, 2023) (describing the occupations, industries, and incomes of Lawrencians); ANDERSON, *supra* note 5, at 132-33.

run the government for a community with less than 100,000 people. The problems of education, poverty, unemployment, and crime are huge, for towns, states, and nations alike. But we figured out early that we didn't have to fix the problems on a grand scale. We did not need to have solutions for everybody. We only had to make lives better for the people within our 6.5 square miles.

Jess: Exactly! I always wonder: Is the balance of good and evil in the world ever going to change? I hope that Martin Luther King Jr. was right, that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. But I can't worry about the whole universe. I can get up every day and do everything I can to make my little corner of the world—these 6.5 square miles—better and more just. And one of the ways that I think we can make it better here is to work with what we have, to draw on the tremendous strengths that our immigrant families bring to the table.

This is especially important in the face of the economic change, industrial divestment, and public divestment eloquently described by Michelle in the Lawrence chapter.⁸ In Lawrence, economic and demographic upheaval had created such collective trauma; generated tension between established and newer residents; and eroded trust, self-efficacy, and civic participation.⁹ It's necessary to first create a culture of aspiration and mutual support in order to tackle the challenges that upheaval presented. You have to rebuild the civic infrastructure because you can't do it alone—despite the importance of individual leadership.

This rebuilding has been central to our strategy and approach at Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW)—we call it “network organizing.” It involves building individual and group relationships, social capital, and social infrastructure at the level of the block, the neighborhood, the school, and eventually the community. Network organizing builds “weak links” between people across lines of class, culture, and language, taking into account the embedded history of its specific geographic place. Weak links are important because they complement the strong links of kin and faith that already exist in many immigrant communities. This approach prioritizes reciprocity and relational, not transactional, interactions; it looks for agreement on goals and priorities to create a foundation for mutual aid and action. It is intensely asset-

8. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 5, at 140-53.

9. See *id.* at 154-58; see also LLANA BARBER, *LATINO CITY: IMMIGRATION AND URBAN CRISIS IN LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS, 1945-2000*, at 1-4 (2017) (providing a detailed history of the rise of inter-ethnic tensions in the city and, in particular, anti-Latino sentiment).

based rather than deficit-focused, recognizing the tremendous talent, strength, hustle, and courage that people bring to Lawrence. It relies on an “open architecture” of more organic, demand-driven participation rather than forcing people to join hierarchical institutions before accessing information and opportunity.

Network organizing, at both the neighborhood and institutional level, is especially crucial when city government and other local public agencies have thin resources. It has been percolating for a long time in Lawrence through LCW and many other groups and entities. Over time, this kind of individual mutual aid effort has trickled up to become an institution-level mutual aid system that works collectively to solve problems and undertake joint projects. It has been forged in earlier public health and local planning collaboratives—across political campaigns—in efforts to turn vacant mills into housing and vacant lots into parks and greenways, as well as in vigorous multi-generational protests against local magazines trying to “say” the city in conventional narratives of urban disorder and despair. It became the basis for the work Michelle delves into in the Lawrence chapter.¹⁰ To tackle the problem of local wages and jobs—particularly for parents of Lawrence public school children—is to take on a complex set of interrelated issues that are rooted in the economic and demographic upheaval described above, and thus it requires a multi-faceted, cross-sectoral partnership to address.

Economic development in a place like Lawrence can be almost comically overwhelming. On one hand, you have a hard-working and aspirational Latino immigrant workforce whose individual members often bring substantial skills and experience from their home countries.¹¹ On the other hand, the language barrier represents a thorny challenge in finding comparable or career-track employment, especially given the difficulty of learning English as an adult.¹² Moreover, investing in one’s own education or training often becomes a trade-

10. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 5, at 160-67 (redefining Lawrence’s narrative from the pessimistic portrayals written by other outsiders into one emphasizing the successes of Lawrencians).

11. See Jacqueline Hagan, Nichola Lowe & Christina Quingla, *Skills on the Move: Rethinking the Relationship Between Human Capital and Immigrant Economic Mobility*, 38 WORK AND OCCUPATIONS 149, 151 (2011) (“[W]e find that many migrants working in the construction industry are quite skilled, having come to their [new jobs] with technical skill sets acquired on-the-job either in their home communities or in their previous U.S. jobs.”). “Im/migrant” is a term inclusive of both migrants and immigrants. “A migrant is someone who moves temporarily to a new country while an immigrant is someone who will settle and stay permanently.” *Im/migrant*, BOS. MED., <https://perma.cc/NVK5-JS6S> (archived Mar. 10, 2023).

12. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 5, at 179-80.

off between short-term and long-term economic opportunity. Do you stay in that evening English class (or college course) and learn enough to access a higher-skill, higher-pay job opportunity? Or do you drop out to take a second-shift job that pays a dollar an hour more and helps put food on the family table this week?

Individual and systemic challenges exist on the employer side as well. Local and regional employers are extremely varied in their embrace of practices that would engage and build from the strengths of this local workforce. Some, but not most, companies embrace a bilingual manufacturing floor by investing in and advancing bilingual supervisors, running English classes so employees can get paid to learn, and adopting paid internships and on-the-job training and apprenticeships.¹³ In the health sector, providers are only now beginning to explore investment in internal and external pipelines for staff growth and advancement, precipitated by an acute shortage of both entry-level and skilled nursing staff across the sector.¹⁴ In the trades, a “silver tsunami,” high training barriers to entry, and only recently dissipating racist attitudes among local union leadership have created a looming chasm of skilled worker shortages that local vocational schools and others are struggling to fill. Successful training programs across sectors with employer partnerships, wrap-around supports, and access to financial incentives struggle to find consistent funding.

Dan: I’ve found the key to addressing these big problems is to start small. The problems were so big that even if you were making impactful change, you could not tell. And that makes it hard to motivate people to work for change or to even to have hope for change. How we motivated our team and others—the way we built hope—was by breaking every issue down into a math problem. Abel Vargas, my Economic Development Director quoted in the Lawrence chapter of Michelle’s book, started the practice:

Abel: Dan, do you know how many jobs it takes to move the unemployment number down 1%?

Me: How many?

Abel: 300 and something.

Me: That’s a lot of jobs.

13. See *id.* at 181.

14. See Dave Muoio, *Adapting to Labor Shortages in the Healthcare Sector: Will Bonuses and Benefits Be Enough to Tackle Healthcare’s Workforce Shortages?*, MARTIS CAP. (Oct. 5, 2021), <https://perma.cc/ANU6-8JK2> (archived Mar. 10, 2023); LAWRENCE P’SHIP, TRAINING CONSORTIUM: EMPLOYER NEEDS SURVEY 6, 10 (2016); MAUREEN MEDLOCK ET AL., DELOITTE CTR. FOR HEALTH SOLS., ADDRESSING HEALTHCARE’S TALENT EMERGENCY (2022), <https://perma.cc/MH9D-266F> (archived Mar. 10, 2023).

Abel: Is it really though? It's six jobs a week. That also means that a half percent move is 150+, that's three jobs a week. We've got to be able to grow three to six jobs a week.

If we can fund ten training seats for \$110,000, how much to fund twenty or thirty? Where are the savings every time we double that number? We started to put a number on all of the problems. Making one route on the local Transit Authority bus line free for a year would cost \$55,000. What's three routes? \$165,000, plus \$30,000 for marketing and implementation. So we could make three of the busiest bus lines in Lawrence free for under \$200,000 a year. We could afford that. It wasn't the whole system, but it was three lines servicing the poorest census tracts in the state.

How do we add cops? How many council votes to pass zoning for affordable housing? To pass the budget? What if we could collect 10% of the uncollected taxes? How about putting into production some of the properties the city took in tax title? Where do we start? Where is the biggest return? How do we know we are being successful? What's the count?

These problems are so big that they are daunting. They are insurmountable because they persist. Add to it that we are all enamored with the home run, the silver bullet, the universal policy that fixes it all. Those things have occurred some places, and they have made tremendous change. It happened in Lawrence with the Bread and Roses Strike.¹⁵ You know how long ago that was? 110 years! That's 3.3 generations of Lawrencians, and today we are still solving fundamental inequities for immigrants coming to America—there are differing degrees of suffering, but the problems persist. All I know is that we were able to hire and deploy the first minority-majority police department in Massachusetts history, and we did it three, five, six cops at a time. We got free buses for the poorest Lawrencians—not by fixing the whole problem, but by doing three routes. We were trying to make changes and affect people's lives—not in one big win, but in 1,000 small victories.

Even the tagline for our campaign was one of increment: "Make Lawrence Better." Could Lawrence be as great as it supposedly was before? We didn't know. But better we could do. Better is measurable.

15. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 5, at 135-41; see generally BRUCE WATSON, BREAD AND ROSES: MILLS, MIGRANTS, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM (2005) (describing the 1912 Bread and Roses Strike: a strike by immigrant textile workers in Lawrence).

The coolest part was that we found at every turn, in every problem area, that there were all of these people and organizations already making incremental gains. But they only felt beaten down by the negative press coverage of the day or overshadowed because the larger, societal-level data persisted. The numbers were feeding a negative story that became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Business didn't site their facilities, and those jobs didn't come because there were no home runs to talk about or to point at.

Jess: In the face of all this, a multifaceted approach at several levels is critical in tackling these problems. Take the paraeducator (or teaching assistant) training program highlighted by Michelle as one example. The program requires intense on-the-ground logistical collaboration (on recruitment, coaching, wrap-around support, retention, scheduling, location, etc.) and joint fundraising across LCW, Lawrence Public Schools, the Adult Learning Center, and Northern Essex Community College. Three years into the program, the issue of paraeducator wages became increasingly urgent as public school wages failed to keep pace with both the rising cost of living or regional trends. This issue prompted internal advocacy by the collaborative partners—which complemented strong union activism—to influence the contracting process and help achieve a substantial wage bump for paraeducators.¹⁶ At the same time, a statewide coalition (including LCW) worked to push a successful ballot initiative to raise state funding for public education through a surtax on the wealthiest earners, in part to make such changes sustainable.¹⁷

All of this has to be complemented, going forward, by the kind of work Michelle is doing in this book. It is important to the story of this program and these efforts, partly to the outside world to catalyze support, but most importantly to us here in Lawrence—so the partners feel the energy of these accomplishments and build on them; so the immigrant parents coming through the para program recognize the opportunity and see the path clearly; so that the stories we tell each other and that come to define us are our own true stories of cooperation and overcoming and hope.

Dan: I agree! This book takes all the large problems that the communities are facing and tells the story of the small victories. By shining a light on those

16. See *Lawrence Federation Paraprofessionals Reaches Historical Settlement with Transformational Wage Increases*, AFT MASS., <https://perma.cc/JRS7-4ZBX> (archived Mar. 10, 2023).

17. See *Fair Share Amendment*, MASS. BUDGET & POL'Y CTR., <https://massbudget.org/fairshare>; *Yes on 1, FAIR SHARE FOR MASS.*, <https://perma.cc/A53L-QATM> (archived Mar. 10, 2023).

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victories in the places in the country where progress is not expected, the book tells people in similar places that progress is possible.