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They Were Not Sitting Ducks: Rethinking Black Activism in Housing and Urban Renewal in Late Nineties Milwaukee

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They were not sitting ducks: Rethinking Black activism in housing and urban renewal in the Late Nineties Milwaukee.

John Pierre Jones worked in Square D,¹ an electrical parts manufacturing company in Milwaukee and later in Schlitz Brewery company in Milwaukee till it closed in 1982.²

In a conversation with me, Jones shared, “...those were tough times for Black folks—when the factories started folding up and leaving, it was difficult for us [Black people] to find similar jobs. I had to find something I was good at, so I studied carpentry. Most of the things I knew, I learnt myself. I got very good at it; I fixed a lot of homes for people and did a lot of work in this community. I had financial and employment freedom.”³

Black political and social struggles have existed and continue to exist in many shapes and forms, but only a few have been highlighted, with many of political struggles being overlooked or belittled either by design or done unintentionally. The political nature of the field of historical studies and the pedagogy of history may account for this circumstance. As Edward Hallett Carr argued, History is inherently subjective, and historians are limited by their subjective worldview.⁴ The patriarchal dominance of historical studies had for long, shaped what counts as history. This sidelined what Zachary Schrag called “humble stories”⁵ and has instead emphasized excessively on historical big moments. Peniel E. Joseph noted that historians have given the civil rights movement a lot of attention throughout the last century, especially during its heroic years from 1954 to 1965. Bus boycotts, sit-ins, political assassinations, legal and legislative wins indelibly characterized these years, and historians consider them as the most important social and political struggle of the Black race.⁶ To simplify, we more often recognize and discuss historical protests and elitist legal forms of activism over the more subtle and yet equally important efforts.

Allow me to bring into this discussion two examples of the narratives in Black historical accounts that I think have centered heavily on riots, mass demonstrations, racial clashes, and police brutality. These are the works of Simon Balto’s *Occupied Territory: Policing Black*

¹ “Squared,” accessed October 8, 2022, http://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/palmeri/commentary/squared.htm. Square D employed 1,700 workers in Milwaukee in 1971. Claiming too high taxes and wage rates, the company fired about 1,000 workers and moved half of its operations out of Milwaukee.

² “Schlitz Brewing Company,” *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee* (blog), accessed October 8, 2022, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/schlitz-brewing-company/>. Schlitz sought to lower production cost in 1981 by imposing concessions on its striking workforce. Contract discussions fell through. In 1982, the Schlitz board of directors sold the Milwaukee factory to the Stroh Brewing Company.

³ Oral Interview with author, summer 2020; Obituary of John Pierre Jones. John Pierre Jones was a self-trained carpenter who lived in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood of Milwaukee. He was born in 1941 in New Orleans and came to Milwaukee at the age of Seven with his parents and two older siblings.

⁴ Edward Hallett Carr, “The Historian and His Facts,” *What Is History*, 1961, 24.

⁵ Zachary Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (University of Toronto Press, 2022).

⁶ Peniel E. Joseph, “Historians and the Black Power Movement,” *OAH Magazine of History* 22, no. 3 (2008): 8–15.

*Chicago*⁷ and Arnold Hirsch's *The Making of the Second Ghetto*.⁸ While I consider these pieces to be extremely valuable and well executed historical scholarship, they lean heavily on massive protests and violence in Chicago and focused on radical groups like the Black Panthers and similar organized actions relating to racial violence and police brutality. Balto's book tells a convincing story of the origin and the persistence of police brutality and mass incarceration in Chicago. In a similar vein, Hirsch offered a well-documented chronicle of the volatile racial relations that had erupted in Chicago following Black immigration to the city in the 1940s, and how this contributed to the housing and residential segregation of the city. Hirsch also analyzed the interplay of businesses and public policy in perpetuating racial segregation in the city. Inasmuch as these stories are important and require more attention, narratives that fixate on radical methods and protests inadvertently validate the misconception that violence and chaos is an innate characteristic of the Black man. It reinforces the notion that the African Americans has radical organizing, chaos, and rebellion as the handiest technique and an unavoidable tool for social and economic equality. Regrettably or not, the riots that erupted in cities like Portland, Chicago, and New York (notwithstanding the several peaceful protests) following the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 serve as an indication of how widely protest and violence have been accepted as forms of Freedom Struggle. Still, violence and legal battles are only two of the many ways Blacks pursue social justice, and the role of history and historical scholars is to address this by extending the scope of our narrative of Black Freedom Struggle to include other equally important modes of activism, the humble stories.

The elite led civil rights movement is the other dominant form of historical narrative of Black Freedom Struggle besides the previously discussed radical movements. Wendy Plotkin's "Hemmed In: The Struggle against Racial Restrictive Covenants and Deed Restrictions in Post-WWII Chicago," is a good example⁹. It focused on the perspective of the civil rights movements, and the legal and political "gains" in Black political history. This perspective of the history of black politics and agency has dwelled on so much civility and elitism of Black led institutions and politics in the Black Freedom Struggles. Such narratives are seen as charismatic and patriarchal actors which historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls "Bowdlerized heroes." Hall argued that this perspective confines the Black Freedom struggles to a single halcyon decade.¹⁰ Plotkin focused most of her article on the interplay on the legal battles of several institutions in the 1940, like the Chicago Committee of Race Equality (CORE), the Metropolitan Housing and Planning Council, the NAACP (Chicago and National Chapters), Illinois congressional members, and the Federation of Neighborhood Associations. While this is in no way a misplaced or unwarranted endeavor, it strongly overshadows local struggles and highlights middle-class activism.

By ignoring the daily, unorganized, and spontaneous actions of African American political history, and failing to see them as acts of resistance, we are contributing to the

⁷ Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (UNC Press Books, 2019).

⁸ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁹ Wendy Plotkin, "'Hemmed in': The Struggle against Racial Restrictive Covenants and Deed Restrictions in Post-WWII Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-) 94, no. 1 (2001): 39–69.

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

obscuring of the “hidden transcripts” and the “infrapolitics”¹¹ of Black history. But as Robin Kelley showed, “belittling every act of resistance and privileging the public utterance of Black elites, creates the notion that Black people, particularly Black working people, remained silent and showed no resistance.”¹² It also risks obscuring the organizational abilities of the many women, whose action may have shaped these male fronted institutions. The incessant attribution of Black freedom struggles to a class of elites also obscures the significance of ground level efforts and working-class struggles.

The field of history is on a transformative wave, it is bringing into its sphere multiple perspectives of feminism, postcolonialism and critical race theory to change what counts as history. There is a rise in the telling of “humble stories” to create a full spectrum of Black political struggle. In recent times, historians are charting a new path in the Black historical narrative by magnifying the voices and actions of less known activists who have contributed significantly to the Black freedom struggles. A notable work that stands out in this is Todd-Breland’s *A Political Education* in which she traces the role of local community-based activism and role of individual Black organizers, educators, and parents who fought for Black self-determination within and outside the public-school systems in Chicago to engender education reform which would improve Black education.¹³ Though Todd-Breland highlighted the role of some notable institutions like the NAACP and other well-organized institutions, her work is aptly balanced with individual initiatives and feminist actors at the local level. Her work offered a blend of techniques of Black freedom struggles in education reform. Another work that highlights the achievement of feminine activists is Crystal M. Moten’s *Kept Right on Fightin*. Moten recounted the experiences of some less known Black Milwaukee women, who passionately challenged economic and employment injustices in the 1950s and 1960s. Amongst the various actors she discussed were Anna Mae Finney and Bobbie Chappel, who sought to fight the economic injustice they experienced on their own by approaching the union steward of Kromer Cap Company where they worked, and by registering complaints at the Wisconsin Industrial Commission. Their actions sought to overturn the WIC position that Black working women who resisted were not welcome in Milwaukee’s manufacturing industries. Also discussed is Nellie Wilson, an employee of A.O. Smith who rose through the ranks from union steward to the executive board of the local 19806 and to the Wisconsin American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. Through her career, she had been an ardent advocate in opening doors for people who have been excluded from industrial jobs, particularly women. According to Moten, remembering characters of the sort, their actions, and forms of resistance, regardless of their successes, gives us a more complete picture of Black Milwaukeeans’ experiences in the struggle for black liberation and economic justice. The stories of these actors, when brought to book, may contribute to the disestablishment of the dominant narration of radical and middle-class activism. It creates an avenue to recognize the contributions of

¹¹ James C. Scott, *Domination, and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990). James Scott defines “Hidden Transcripts” as everyday acts of resistance that manifests in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other practices. These acts are mostly submerged and can also include theft, foot

¹² Robin DG Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History*, 1993, 75–112.

¹³ Elizabeth Todd-Breland, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s* (UNC Press Books, 2018).

individual activists, whose stories might have otherwise been hidden by the institutions they worked for. This creates a fuller picture of black freedom struggle.¹⁴

The conversation I had with John Pierre Jones about his self-chattered path to “financial and economic freedom” within the constraints of employment discrimination, and racism was a great inspiration for this paper. I sought to explore similar acts of resistance, ones that operate within the law but seek to create change. The works of scholars like James C. Scott, Robin Kelley and Crystal Motem became valuable resources for this work. Although not all Black Freedom Struggle stories can be told, certainly not at the same time, it is important that we turn our attention toward a wider context of the Black Freedom Struggles, to explore its multi-dimensionality and look more at the perspectives of local, decidedly ordinary people.

Taking on this charge to explore the “hidden transcripts” and everyday acts of resistance, the following explores three instances of Black actions of resistance and survival in response to power constraints. The exceptional local history of Milwaukee is taken as an avenue for this narrative of the sublime form of Black Freedom Struggle, described in this paper as Black Proactivism. To clarify, Black Proactivism is the act of seeking social change proactively. Popular narratives of Black Freedom Struggle are mostly termed as activism, a concept that closely relates to actions taken to respond to a particular social issue. Black Proactivism is a bit foresighted. It is the informal, unorganized, and mostly individualized efforts to improve socio-economic conditions even before a problem becomes well defined. Black Proactivism deviates from more radical strategies like riots, demonstrations, and legal battles, and relies more on building structures that will in themselves create the change desired. I begin with the Black immigration to Milwaukee, to show why they present a unique form of freedom struggle.

Black Immigration: The Milwaukee Story

Milwaukee presents a unique perspective when discussing Black struggles of the 20th century, and the primary reason is the exceptionality of the history of Black migration in Milwaukee. Blacks migrated to Milwaukee in large numbers later and at lower rates than to other Northern cities like Chicago and Detroit. In 1930, Milwaukee’s African American population was only 1.2 percent of the city’s total. It had increased by 236.5 percent from the previous decade, but the figure stood at 7,501 people.¹⁵ Milwaukee was not a popular destination for Blacks in the south, and little was known about the city, hence voluntary migration to the city was limited. It took the joint efforts of employment agencies, African American journalists, and media organizations like the *Milwaukee Journal* to attract black people to Milwaukee.¹⁶ While other midwestern cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago experienced large influxes of the Black population during the “great migration” following World War One, Milwaukee’s influx of Black people occurred only after World War Two, a period historian Paul Geib refers to as

¹⁴ Crystal M. Moten, “‘Kept Right On Fightin’ ...’: African American Women’s Economic Activism in Milwaukee,” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 2, no. 1 (2016): 33–51, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jcivihumarigh.2.1.33>.

¹⁵ Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (University of Illinois Press, 1985), 115.

¹⁶ Trotter, 116

"the late great migration." Between 1940 and 1970, Milwaukee's Black population grew, from 8,821 to 105,088 people.¹⁷

Paul Geib described the Milwaukee Black population during "the late migration" as "not backward southerners but heady urban pioneers."¹⁸ Most were hardworking people who were braced for positive change. Geib's review of oral histories showed that Milwaukee's late migrants were skilled and had successful careers in the manufacturing sector. They were able to gain blue-collar occupations and were able to purchase homes. Despite these characteristics of the late migrants, it cannot be said that all Black migrants to Milwaukee had a similar fate. Nevertheless, the Black immigrants in Milwaukee were unique and poised

To offer this narrative of how Black migrants in Milwaukee responded to racism and discrimination with a unique form of agency and thus exhibited "proactivism," I examined the archival records of the Milwaukee Urban League and newspaper articles between 1930 and the 1970s on issues relation to urban housing and expressway construction. This search was more focused on individual or collective actions of the Black working class that were not elite based or radical. Through processes of triangulation, certain stories emerged which formed the following discussion. To this end, I intend to tell a story of Black self-determination, political advocacy, and an overall sense of resilience among Black Milwaukeeans. This differs widely from more popular notions of African Americans as rioters, unresourceful, docile, child-like, simple, lazy, and easily pushed around by the system.

"We want to start building but we need money." Bernice Copeland Lindsay

*"Carver Memorial Homes Inc., has tried for over a year to finance itself as any other company would do, but it seems that, these avenues are closed to the Negroes, therefore we are appealing to the people of vision to contribute to the solution of the most acute problem facing Milwaukee, where 13,000 people are living in an area meant for 6,000... we want to start building, we have priorities for 58 houses, we have sites for 42 units and we have permits to build but we need money"*¹⁹

Bernice Lindsay



Bernice Copeland Lindsay

Bernice Copeland Lindsay

¹⁷ Paul Geib, "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970," *The Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 4 (October 1998): 229-48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649025>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Art Goeldner, "Real Estate News," *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), April 9, 1944: 20. NewsBank: Access World News.

Photo taken from newspaper- “Services set for activist Bernice Copeland,” *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), November 17, 1985: 2. NewsBank: Access World News.

Bernice Lindsay has been an enthusiastic activist of African American welfare, particularly in seeking improved housing conditions for African Americans in Milwaukee. She was born in Winchester, Indiana and moved to Milwaukee in 1928 prior to being a social worker in Indianapolis.²⁰ In 1944, she became a member of the Milwaukee Commission on Human Rights, and in 1957, she was nominated to the Governor's Commission on Human Rights.²¹ Lindsay had been an activist whose actions were essentially not reactive but foresighted. Lindsay aided in the founding of the Mary Church Club in 1933, a group dedicated to promoting Black people and improving inter-racial tolerance. Reading and writing schools for black men and women were among the club's efforts. She also founded the Creative Center at 1108 N 20th St., a location where inhabitants of the Inner City may learn about the arts.²²

With a vision of improving housing conditions for African American, Lindsay together with 15 other African Americans, purchased at least 12 lots in the Carleton's addition (bounded on the east by Sherman Boulevard, on the South by Hampton Avenue, on the west by North 47th Street and on the north by Fairmount Avenue)²³, as early as 1932. The plan was to build housing for African Americans and Black war veterans who would be returning home to very limited housing. This is an exceptional case of proactiveness. However, due to racial restrictive covenants and racial hostility, this project was stalled, and Bernice Lindsay was the only one who successfully built a house and moved into the neighborhood, living at 4851 N. 44th St.²⁴

Amidst persistent racial hostility, unfavorable policies and the worsening housing conditions of African Americans, Bernice Lindsay and other African Americans formed the Carver Memorial Homes Inc., where she served as the secretary.²⁵ The firm was formed on February 10, 1943, when a group of African American met and discussed the possibility of securing housing for Black workers and war veterans. The first housing project of Carver Memorial Homes was located on the southeast corner of N.7th and W. Galena St. The Carver Memorial Homes demonstrated a perfect example of Black Proactivism in the approach the group took to develop the housing units. This was not a case of protest or demonstration in their seeking housing justice, but a self-help approach through collective values and mutual support. Frank Kirkpatrick, a member of the group stated the mission of the group clearly:

²⁰ “Services set for activist Bernice Copeland,” *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), November 17, 1985: 2. NewsBank: Access World News.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Alderman explains action” *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), September 11, 1944: 22. NewsBank: Access World News.

²⁴ Art Goeldner, “Real Estate News,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), April 9, 1944: 20. NewsBank: Access World News.

²⁵ “Housing Hope in Sixth Ward,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), June 20, 1943: 10. NewsBank: Access World News.

“We will not do it with words and meetings and begging and shouting. We will not do it with waiting for the others to do it for us,” we will do it by our own work, our money, our determination.”²⁶

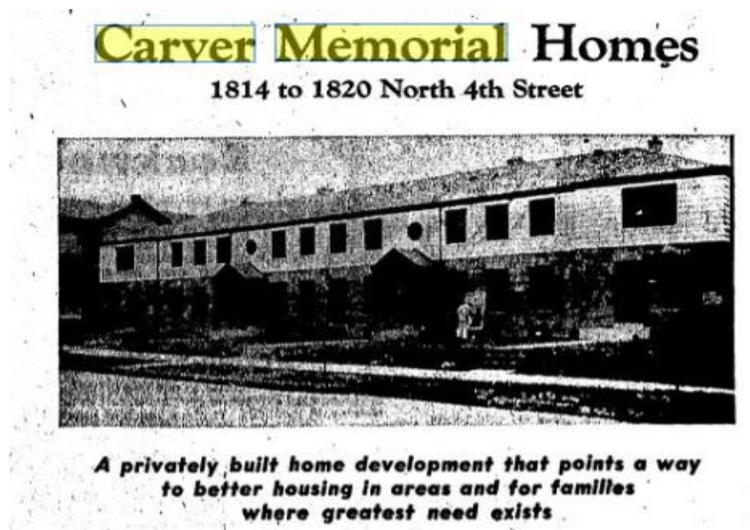


Photo of Carver Memorial Homes. *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), November 19, 1944: 45. NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current.

The Carver Memorial Home was a successful endeavor. A 10-unit family housing project was opened in 1944 on the 1800 block of N. 4th street as a “self-help” plan to rehabilitate the African American community and to provide Black housing.²⁷

Besides being a crucial member of the Carver Memorial group, Bernice Lindsay proactiveness was also evidenced at the private level. Bernice Lindsay was buying homes and renovating them to allow for African American occupancy. To this end, Bernice Lindsay and her husband, John B. Copeland, were honored by the Citizens Planning and Urban Renewal Committee on February 20, 1966, for their work in converting a fire-devastated structure at 2510 N. Teutonia Avenue into a mix of apartments and businesses.²⁸

Bracing for the Expressways; William Barlow and Ella Jean Walls

William Barlow and Ella Jean engaged in a study was to ascertain the housing needs of people living in the pathway of the expressway that was planned to cut through the African American community. They were poised to “assume responsibility to discover and publicize the nature and characteristics of this kind of displacement” and to help those to be affected by the expressway (Interstate 43) by working with the community members and other community organizations to

²⁶ “Cornerstone Ceremonies Mark Opening of Carve Housing Project,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), April 7, 1944: 3. NewsBank: Access World News.

²⁷ Negroes Advised to Own Homes, “*Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), May 17, 1954: 3. NewsBank: Access World News.

²⁸ “Homes, Firms Given Remodeling Awards,” *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), February 18, 1966: 3, NewsBank: Access World News.

provide these housing needs.²⁹ They exhibited exceptional agency in recognizing the need to document the impending impact of the expressway construction and to what housing needs would ensue from the construction. This shows that Black Milwaukeeans were not sitting and hopelessly waiting to be removed.

The North-South (Interstate 43) and Park East freeways were built in the 1960s, destroying many houses and businesses, displacing many inhabitants, and disrupting community life. The impacts were disproportionately felt by the Black communities. According to a member of Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler's administration, "building of an expressway interchange on 8th and Brown Streets on the North Side would demolish a significant quantity of slum housing that urban renewal would not reach for many years."³⁰ The freeway's impact on Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhood which was home to a slew of black-owned businesses, hotels, and nightclubs has been fairly recognized in Milwaukee's history and historian Gregory Dickenson asserted that racial discrimination played a factor in the community's demise.³¹ Ivory Abena Black described Bronzeville as a city within a city, that did not expand externally, only internally, and people helped each other with child raising, job placement, tutoring, money lending, repair services, and maintained strong social contacts.³² It was a self-sustaining community with mutual support networks and collective ethos.

After the destruction and displacement, the housing stock for African Americans was not replaced in a meaningful way. In other situations, the replacement housing stock was unclean or uninhabitable, and no one in local government took responsibility for moving displaced African Americans.³³ In addressing the Milwaukee County Expressway Committee in December 1970, Alderwoman Vel R. Philips called out the fact that "neither the county nor the state had spent any money to replace any of the housing units they have caused to be destroyed."³⁴

This devastating aftermath of the freeway construction makes the initial efforts by William Barlow and Ella Jean Walls a classical show of proactiveness, even as they did not realize the full effects of their efforts. William Barlow lived at 5061 N 32nd Street in Milwaukee, a community now called Old North Milwaukee. Barlow was concerned about the African American families that would be displaced by the proposed expressway and he sought to take proactive measures. He reached out to the Milwaukee Urban League, specifically, to Lucinda J. Gordon, the Director of the Community Development Department organization and volunteered during his summer break to undertake a housing survey. Under the directorship of Martin L. Chonsteadt from the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Barlow teamed up with Ella Jean Walls and together, they prepared the *"Housing Needs and*

²⁹ "Housing and Social Characteristics of Residents to be Displaced by the Expressway: Survey of a Three-block Area on the Near-North Side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 1960," Milwaukee Urban League Records, 1919-1979, UWM Archival Collection, Box 15, folder 26.

³⁰ Gregory Dickenson, "Through Highways: Construction of the Expressway System in Milwaukee County, 1946-1977" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1689396261?pq-origsite=primo>.

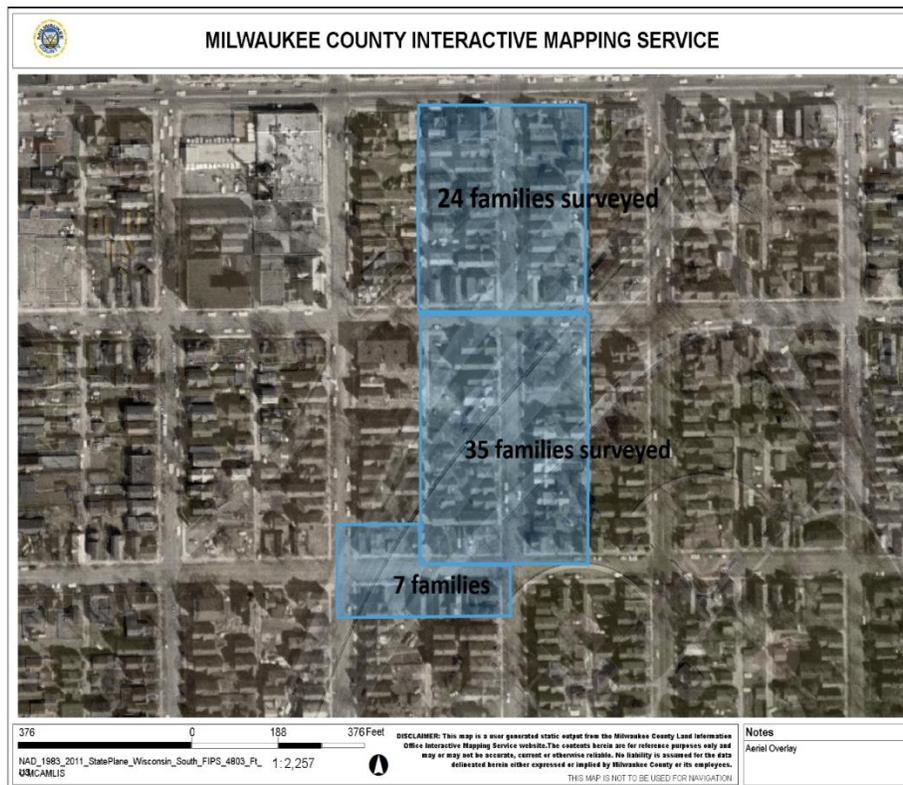
³¹ Dickenson, 151.

³² Ivory Abena Black, *Bronzeville, a Milwaukee Lifestyle* (Publishers Group, 2006).

³³ Dickenson, 152.

³⁴ "Address to Milwaukee County Expressway Committee 1970," Vel R. Philips Papers, 1946-2009, UWM Archival Collection, Box 20, Folder 15.

*Social Characteristics of Residents to be Displaced by the Expressway: Survey of a Three-block Area on the Near-north Side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*³⁵



The photo shows the area surveyed by Barlow and Ella Jean overlaid by the I-43 Expressway. Source: Milwaukee County GIS & Land Information Interactive Map.

Barlow and Walls surveyed 66 families which represented about two thirds of the total number of families residing in a three blocks radius in the route for the proposed expressway.³⁶ Their survey found that those blocks, now replaced with the I-43, did not seem to be populated by newcomers or people who recently arrived as migrants to Milwaukee. Although some of the families to be displaced were new in the city, by 1960, most of the families had made Milwaukee their home and established strong community ties within their neighborhoods. There were twenty-two of the 66 families surveyed who had lived in the city since the end of the second World War, and 16 families lived in Milwaukee for 20 or more years.³⁷ The survey showed that most of the families migrated from Southern states. The majority came from Mississippi (14), a

³⁵ "Housing and Social Characteristics of Residents to be Displaced by the Expressway: Survey of a three-block area on the near-north side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 1960" Milwaukee Urban League Records, 1919-1979, UWM Archival Collection Box 15, folder 26.

³⁶ The areas surveyed were: "The 2100 N. block of 9th Street and west side of streets between Lloyd and Garfield Avenues; The 2200 N. block of 9th Street, east and west side of street, between Garfield and North Avenue; The 900 W. block of Lloyd Street, north and south side of street, between 9th and 10 Streets."

³⁷ "Housing and Social Characteristics of Residents to be Displaced by the Expressway: Survey of a three-block area on the near-north side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 1960" Milwaukee Urban League Records, 1919-1979, UWM Archival Collection Box 15, folder 26.

few from Illinois (9), Arkansas (8), Indiana (4), and Missouri (4). Migrants from other states and countries averaged about one. Most of the residents were renters, but a good number were homeowners, and the homes were comprised of duplexes (32), single family (8) and multiple family units (26). Six out of the eleven homeowners had their properties paid for whilst the remaining were paying an average mortgage of \$65. The residents surveyed were fairly educated. Of 125 adults, only two had no formal education, 12 had completed grade 12, and 9 of them had some college education. The report described the residents as “relatively stable, fairly well-settled people, who have been in Milwaukee for a good many years”³⁸ As most of the families learnt about their fate of needing to relocate for the expressway through the work of Barlow and Walls, the families surveyed were less enthusiastic about leaving, dreaded the opportunity of not having replacement housing and regretted having to depart from the community they had built. When asked where they wanted to live, as if to say the city was going to honor such promise to provide alternate housing, just ten of the 66 families said they wanted to live on the outskirts or farther west of the city. Most of them selected neighborhoods that were only a few blocks away from their current homes.

The survey tells the story of the agency and initiative-taking disposition of William Barlow and Ella Jean Walls. They were poised to do something about the impending erasure of a particular Black community and engaged with the MUL to find solutions. William Barlow and Ella Jean’s efforts to actively forewarn the residents in the marked areas for the expressway construction is an intervention that has been really underestimated and untold. The situation might have been extremely disastrous had their survey not been done. In fact, plans for the expressway were not widely shared, and construction details had low publicity.³⁹ Their survey showed that among the 66 families surveyed, 11 had a vague idea of the expressway and its effects, while 55, that is more than three-fourth, had no knowledge of any impending expressways in their community.⁴⁰ Another importance of their survey, especially for us today is the ability to bring the stories of the families that have been removed by the freeway construction back to life. It brings the human face to those impacted rather than just being considered mere statistical representations. Through this report, the stories of these families’ lives, the community they built, and the goals and aspirations they held are kept alive.

Black proactivism, as discussed here, is by no means mutually exclusive from other known forms of Black Freedom Struggle. However, this form of activism or struggle as demonstrated here allows for a wider scope of our understanding of Black Freedom Struggle. It is apparent that there are dissimilarities amongst the characters discussed in their exhibition of proactivism. Bernice Lindsay is a proactivist because she sought “self-help” means to improve upon the housing conditions for African Americans. Knowing that Blacks were trapped in the sixth ward and there would be no houses for Black war veterans returning from the world war, she and her group sought to provide housing units ahead of their return. She was also involved in improving her neighborhood by renovating dilapidated homes and converting them into

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dickenson, 153, 154. According to this study, officials did not disclose center line locations or right of way widths in a timely manner. African American residents were unaware of plans of the freeway constructions until the construction equipment and bulldozers appeared on their streets.

⁴⁰ “Housing and Social Characteristics of Residents to be Displaced by the Expressway: Survey of a three-block area on the near-north side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 1960” Milwaukee Urban League Records, 1919-1979, UWM Archival Collection Box 15, folder 26.

businesses and apartments. Additionally, she founded the Creative Arts Center to train African Americans in all forms of art as a way of providing them with skills that would make them employable. Her actions had more of a foresighted goal than an immediate one. William Barlow and Ella Jean Walls used a survey to create awareness of the incoming expressway and to help residents who would be impacted to find new housing. Their actions are considered proactivism because they administered the survey and resource education in 1960, long before the grounds were broken for the highway construction.

Being cognizant of current social issues and having the agency to anticipate where needs for social justice might arise is what differentiates proactivism from the traditional forms of activism with which we are familiar. The local activists discussed were but a few of the Black Milwaukeeans who made heroic efforts and attempts to thwart injustice before it happened, fixed things that were not publicly labeled as “broken”. Proactivists are not sitting ducks. They do not wait for injustice; they anticipate and act accordingly.