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Mapping Racism and Resistance in Milwaukee

1/12/2021

By Derek Handley

While walking in the northern Milwaukee suburbs, I have noticed an exponential increase in the number of Black Lives Matter signs. Most of them have been placed in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The signs come in different types; Some with black fists, some couched with other phrases like ‘believe science,” some simply in bold black lettering with a white background. Although I am very happy to see the visible support of social justice, what I find ironic about these signs is that they appear in neighborhoods where African Americans (or anyone that is not of the “Caucasian Race”) were excluded from buying a home up until 1968 when the Fair Housing Act was passed. With less than 5% African Americans in many of these suburbs, some have labeled Milwaukee as the most segregated city in America. This segregation is due in large part to the racially restrictive housing covenants, which was a cornerstone of institutional racism.

The history of racially restrictive housing covenants and their central part in institutionalizing racism has returned to the forefront of our national consciousness with the emergence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism and ongoing movements for racial justice. In the first half of the 20th century, racial covenants prohibiting non-white people from buying or occupying housing and certain parcels of land were used throughout U.S. cities for segregationist purposes. A covenant is a type of contract included in a property deed referring to the conditions attached to housing or land. The violation of covenant conditions comes with the risk of foregoing a property. Racially restrictive covenants began appearing in deeds with greater frequency at the turn of the century, becoming commonplace and withstanding court challenges throughout the 1910s, 20s, and 30s (To learn more about restrictive covenants see Mapping Prejudice).

But these covenants did not go unchallenged by African Americans. The resistance to housing covenants in cities such as Milwaukee highlights the impact Black residents in northern cities had on housing debates and civil rights activism. Black agency in challenging racial covenants strategies of resistance have shaped and continue to influence movements for racial justice.

To depict this struggle visually, Anne Bonds of the UWM Geography department and I have begun working on a digital project called “Mapping Racism and Resistance in Milwaukee County” (*MRR-MKE*). With the help of the University of Minnesota’s Mapping Prejudice team, our public humanities project will examine racial housing covenants and resistance to them in Milwaukee County through GIS mapping, archival research, and rhetorical analysis. Analyzing and depicting Black agency from within the contested space of Milwaukee County will provide a more complete narrative of the impact of racial housing covenants, as well as expand our understanding of the various methods of resistance across scales employed by Black community members. One example of resistance was when Zeddie Quitman Hyler asked his white friend to buy property in Wauwatosa (a suburb of Milwaukee) and then sell it to Hyler. Despite community resistance, Hyler built his house in 1955 and remained there until his death in 2004. Through mapping and rhetorical analysis, we seek to better understand Black Milwaukeeans--such as Hyler--and their allies as complex actors in the narratives of their own lives.

Our research is animated by the following questions: What is the historical geography of racial

covenants in Milwaukee County and how does this spatial patterning connect with contemporary geographies of segregation and racial inequality in the Milwaukee metropolitan area? How did racial covenants operate in the specific urban and racial context of Milwaukee County, together with other discriminatory housing policies and racialized patterns of development? Finally, how and where were restrictive covenants enforced and how did Milwaukee County residents resist them?

To answer these questions, we will be working with community partners and local residents to help with the research. Our plan is to recruit citizen researchers by holding community workshops on racial covenants in Milwaukee and surrounding suburbs; to visit high school and college classes; and to use various social media platforms. The outcomes from this research will include an interactive, digital resource about covenants and challenges to them in Milwaukee County, a collaboratively produced map visualizing the geographies and temporalities of covenants and covenant resistance, and a dataset of racial covenants that will be accessible to the community, policy makers, and other researchers.

Working with the community means that the *MRR-MKE* project is more than just an academic endeavor. Through community workshops that will engage Milwaukee County residents in the process of examining racial covenants, our project will support broader conversations and dialogue about structural racism and resistance to it in one of the nation's most segregated metropolitan areas. We hope that this scholarly project—co-produced with the local community—will help us to get a little closer to understanding how systemic racism works in our country, and to begin thinking of new ways to address housing problems in Milwaukee. It will also provide a concrete way for those wonderful people who have placed Black Lives Matter signs in their yards to support ending systemic racism.