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Black Autonomy as a Form of Resistance and a Symbol of Rebellion: A Comparative Study of Robbins, Illinois, and Milwaukee Bronzeville (1920-1970)

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BLACK AUTONOMY AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE AND A SYMBOL OF REBELLION:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ROBBINS, ILLINOIS, AND MILWAUKEE BRONZEVILLE

(1920-1970)

by

Nateya Taylor

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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May 2023

ABSTRACT

BLACK AUTONOMY AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE AND A SYMBOL OF REBELLION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ROBBINS, ILLINOIS, AND MILWAUKEE BRONZEVILLE (1920-1970)

by

Nateya Taylor

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Amanda Seligman

Black towns and segregated Black neighborhoods are two examples of majority Black communities that were formed because of the racial discrimination African Americans faced. Previous research has examined majority Black communities from a deficit model; however, this paper highlights the assets of autonomy and resistance in two majority Black communities in the Midwest: Robbins, Illinois, and Milwaukee Bronzeville. This paper compares Robbins, Illinois, a Black town, and Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhood, a segregated Black community, to answer the questions: How did African Americans in Robbins, Illinois, and Milwaukee Bronzeville use autonomous practices to navigate racial discrimination between 1920 and 1970? What were the similarities and differences between the way Black autonomy was practiced in Milwaukee Bronzeville and Robbins, Illinois? How were Black autonomous practices in Robbins, Illinois and Milwaukee Bronzeville viewed and/or challenged by their non-Black counterparts? And how does Black autonomy affect Black liberation? Using archival data and secondary data analysis, this paper reveals how Black residents practiced autonomy by creating their own businesses, organizations, churches, and more in response to racial discrimination. The key findings of this research indicate that first, the ways Black residents practice autonomy in majority Black communities are similar but not identical. Second, Black autonomous practices

are challenged through urban renewal and racially targeted interstate highway construction. Last, majority Black communities use Black capitalism to achieve Black liberation; however, Black liberation is not achievable under a capitalistic system. Ultimately, this paper argues that full Black liberation can be achieved when Black people can exist without having to resist.

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To my ancestors that paved the way and made a way out of no way.
To my grandparents, aunt, and uncle, Eddie Mae Jones, Joseph Jones, Sharlette Bowden, and
Andrew Rowsey who are smiling down on me from heaven.
To my partner who effortlessly cheers me on and supports all my aspirations and dreams.
To my parents who always saw the gifts and talents inside me from a young age and encouraged
me to dream big.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction.....	1
The Origins of Black Towns and Segregated Black Neighborhoods.....	1
Research Questions.....	4
Research Objectives.....	4
Chapter Two.....	6
Black Autonomy in Black Towns: Robbins, Illinois.....	6
Literature Review.....	9
Black Autonomous Practices in Robbins, Illinois.....	18
Plain Talk: Black Autonomy as a Mindset.....	18
Newspapers.....	21
Local Businesses.....	23
Health Services.....	24
Churches and Government Organizations.....	27
Airport.....	29
Chapter Three.....	32
Black Autonomy in Segregated Black Neighborhoods.....	32
Literature Review.....	37
Black Autonomous Practices in Milwaukee Bronzeville.....	47
Local Businesses and Community Organizations.....	47
Health Services.....	5
Black Newspapers.....	52
Freedom Schools.....	53
Faith Institutions.....	56
Entertainment District.....	58
Politics and Black Power.....	59
J. Anthony Josey: Mayor of Milwaukee Bronzeville.....	59
Vel Phillips.....	60
Chapter Four.....	65
Comparing Black Autonomy in a Black Village and Segregated Black Neighborhood.....	65
Similarities.....	65
The Influence of Heritage and Culture.....	65
Survival and Sustainment.....	67
Black Capitalism.....	68
Differences.....	72
Limited Autonomy and Contrasting Goals.....	72
Community Characteristics and Racially Targeted Acts.....	74
Chapter Five.....	78
Conclusion.....	78

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Chapter One

Introduction

Black autonomy: the independence and/or self-governance of Black people to fulfill a desire or need. Following the abolition of slavery in the United States, African Americans were left in a gray area with little guidance on how to integrate into society as newly freed people. Because of their separation from Africa and exclusion faced in America, African Americans' sense of belonging was ambiguous. As Black people continued to face exclusion in American society, they took various approaches towards achieving equality: integration, Black autonomy, or a combination of both. When integration was not immediately attainable or undesirable, Black residents used autonomous practices as forms of resistance, challenging policies that reinforced exclusion, racial discrimination, and racial inferiority. Even more, sometimes non-Black people viewed Black autonomous practices as rebellious because it communicated a powerful message: racial discrimination did not determine Black people's destiny. In some cases, Black autonomy was met with racial hostility in the form of racially targeted acts against Black communities. This thesis will focus on the Black autonomous practices, and racially targeted acts in response to these practices, in the Black village Robbins, Illinois and the segregated Black neighborhood Milwaukee Bronzeville in Wisconsin.

The Origins of Black Towns and Segregated Black Neighborhoods

Black towns are defined as separate settlements with at least a 90% Black population.¹ "Black towns" serves as an umbrella term for separate Black settlements whether they are specifically towns, townships, villages, cities, etc. Black towns were born out of the frustration Blacks felt from not feeling accepted or even tolerated in American society. Early examples of

¹ Norman Crockett, "Preface," in *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), xiii.

Black towns are Black settlements that were formed during the post-Revolutionary era and late antebellum years, when formerly enslaved Blacks isolated themselves in hopes of being left alone.² Black towns reached their peak approximately 50 years after the Civil War. At least 60 Black communities settled between 1865 and 1915, with Oklahoma having the most settled Black communities.³ Black people's desire for freedom was the main motive behind establishing Black towns. In the study on Boley, a Black town in Oklahoma, historian Melissa Stuckey explains what Black towns represented to Black people:

Both before and after emancipation, independent black communities, incorporated or not, represented black people's attempts to establish autonomous communities free from white surveillance and control. The sovereignty afforded in such places was central to African American desires for and concepts of freedom.⁴

Moreover, scholars Melissa Stuckey and Norman Crockett further define the Black town movement and ideology. Melissa Stuckey defines the Black town movement as, "an isolationist response to the horrors of Jim Crow in the United States."⁵ Furthermore, Norman Crockett, author of *The Black Towns*, describes the Black town ideology as a combination of economic self-help, moral uplift, racial pride, and civic engagement.⁶ Black people created their own economic opportunities in Black towns by building their own businesses such as banks, schools, churches, and more on land they acquired. Early founders of Black towns saw Black capitalism and Black autonomy as a solution to creating and sustaining generational economic opportunity and equality for Black people. Overall, Black towns were separate, majority-Black communities where Black people isolated themselves to escape from racism and fulfill their desires for freedom.

² Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xii.

³ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xii.

⁴ Melissa N. Stuckey, "Boley, Indian Territory: Exercising Freedom in the All-Black Town," *The Journal of African American History* 102, no. 4 (January 2017): 493, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.102.4.0492>.

⁵ Melissa N. Stuckey, "Boley, Indian Territory," 492.

⁶ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xiii.

On the other hand, segregated Black neighborhoods are majority Black communities that exist within a municipality. Unlike Black towns, segregated Black neighborhoods were not separate Black communities that Black people isolated themselves in. They are communities where Black people were forcibly isolated because of discriminatory housing practices. Discriminatory housing practices against African Americans existed before the 1930s, but these practices were institutionalized after the establishment of the U.S. federal government's Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933. The HOLC measured mortgage investment risk of neighborhoods using residential security maps⁷ that assigned grades to neighborhoods on a scale from A to D, with D being the most "hazardous" rating colored red and A being the "safest" rating colored green.⁸ Historians have conflicting arguments on whether HOLC maps pioneered practices such as redlining and racial steering. Historian Kenneth Jackson argues that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and private lenders obtained residential security maps to determine lending decisions.⁹ Therefore, it is possible these maps spearheaded discriminatory lending practices such as redlining and racial steering. Redlining refers to discriminatory lending practices that denied financial services such as mortgages¹⁰ and insurance¹¹ in neighborhoods of color. Similarly, racial steering refers to real estate dealers persuading potential home buyers to buy homes in certain neighborhoods based on their race.¹² Areas with a majority African American population were consistently given a grade D,¹³ and lenders used this rating to

⁷Emily Lynch et al., "The Legacy of Structural Racism: Associations Between Historic Redlining, Current Mortgage Lending, and Health," *SSM - Population Health*, 14 (2021): 100793. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352827321000689>.

⁸Amy Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation," *Journal of Urban History* 29, no.4 (2003): 395. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0096144203029004002>.

⁹Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners," 395.

¹⁰Lynch, "Legacy of Structural Racism," 100793.

¹¹Gary Wolfram, "Insurance Redlining and Government Intervention," Foundation for Economic Education, June 1 1997, <https://fee.org/articles/insurance-redlining-and-government-intervention/>.

¹²Neil Bruce, "Real Estate Steering and the Fair Housing Act of 1968," *Tulsa Law Review* 12, no.4 (1977): 759. <https://digitalcommons.law.utulsa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=tlr>.

¹³Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners," 395.

reinforce redlining and racial steering. These forms of racial discriminatory lending policies that denied African Americans access to financial services and drew lines of where they could and could not live, institutionalized residential segregation practices that persisted into the 1960s and produced the segregated housing patterns seen in cities like Milwaukee.

Research Questions

By comparing the Black autonomous practices of Robbins, Illinois, and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents between 1920 and 1970, this research aims to answer four questions: How did African Americans in Robbins, Illinois and Milwaukee Bronzeville use autonomous practices to navigate racial discrimination between 1920 and 1970? What were the similarities and differences between the way Black autonomy was practiced in Robbins, Illinois, and Milwaukee Bronzeville? How were Black autonomous practices in Robbins, Illinois and Milwaukee Bronzeville viewed and/or challenged by their non-Black counterparts? How does Black autonomy affect Black liberation?

Research Objectives

Through an interdisciplinary approach that lies at the intersection of history, geography, and sociology, the objective of this research is to shift away from the narrative that majority Black communities are spaces that sustain racial injustice. Although this is true, this is not the only narrative that exists about majority Black communities. Research also shows that majority Black communities are spaces of resistance and resilience, where Black residents have transformed spaces that were meant to be oppressive into spaces of freedom. The objective of this research is to approach the study of majority-Black communities from a well-rounded perspective, recognizing both the adversity and prosperity these communities experience. Black people integrating into non-Black neighborhoods is often the proposed solution to reduce

segregation and the number of majority Black communities. However, this emphasis on integration suggests that majority-Black communities are inferior, and that Black people need to move out of majority-Black communities to thrive. This research challenges the idea that integration is the only narrative where Black people thrive; Black people can thrive in majority-Black spaces too.

Another objective of this research is to enhance the recognition of Black towns. Morris Turner identified more than 200 Black towns in his 1998 book *America's Black Towns and Settlements*,¹⁴ which serves as a historical reference guide. Even more Black towns have been identified since the publication of his book. Black settlements and towns existed across every state in America. Some remain today; however, many have declined economically. There is not much documentation on the daily lives of people living in some Black towns because residents' experiences were not always recorded. Also, whites were not interested in preserving the history of Black towns.¹⁵ Scholarship on Black towns tend to focus on towns in the southern and western part of the US, especially Oklahoma, since this is where most Black towns were located. This research will not only add to the scholarship on Black towns, but also the scholarship on Black towns in the Midwest whose histories should not go unnoticed. Even more, this research will compare two majority Black communities that have not been a point of comparison before: a Black village and a segregated Black neighborhood.

¹⁴ Morris Turner, *America's Black Towns and Settlements: A Historical Reference Guide* (Rohnert Park, CA: Missing Pages Productions, 1998).

¹⁵ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xii-xiii.

Chapter Two

Black Autonomy in Black Towns: Robbins, Illinois

Robbins, Illinois is located southwest of Chicago and is one of the oldest African American incorporated municipalities in the United States. Robbins was incorporated as a separate municipality on December 14th, 1917¹⁶; however, the village's origins began 25 years prior. The first Black settlers of Robbins came in 1892. The area now known as Robbins, Illinois, was then called the Bremen Township.¹⁷ The Black settlers who migrated to Robbins were from diverse backgrounds. A 1930s interview, conducted by the U.S. Works Progress Administration (WPA), described the Black settlers who migrated to Robbins. The interviewee stated,

Whence came the Robbins Negro? Well, many of them are naturally from Chicago's teeming south side . . . Some of them [sic] were workers skilled in the building trades, there was an ex-Pullman porter or two, many common laborers, a few college graduates, and a sprinkling of share croppers and plantation hands fresh from the south.¹⁸

Three features attracted Black settlers to Robbins: the area's intended use for a separate, Black community, the area's familiarity to the south, and the suburban lifestyle. The WPA text expands on the desired lifestyle of Black settlers in Robbins, and the population Robbins chose to serve. The text explains, "But the dweller in Robbins is a true Negro suburbanite. This southwest suburb of Chicago is inhabited and run exclusively by (and for) the colored race."¹⁹ In addition, the open land in Robbins that mirrored the southern atmosphere attracted Black settlers to the area.²⁰ As a result, Black settlers established organizations, churches, schools, and businesses.²¹

¹⁶ "About Robbins," <https://www.robbins-il.com/about-robbins>.

¹⁷ "The Mother of Robbins, Illinois," Robbins History Museum.

¹⁸ Alfred O. Philipp, *Robbins, Ill.--A folklore in the making*, 1939, Midlothian, Illinois, Manuscript/Mixed Material, p.6, <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh000078/>.

¹⁹ Alfred O. Philipp, *Robbins, Ill.--A folklore in the making*, 3-4.

²⁰ Tyrone Haymore, Personal communication, 16 September 2022.

²¹ Brown, "The Saga of Robbins," 5-7.

One of the earliest settlers and first Black women to settle in Robbins was Jennie Smith. She helped build homes, apartments, churches, grocery stores and more in the area.²²

However, settlers faced several hardships keeping their businesses open and were vulnerable to white terrorism from neighboring white settlements who exhibited racial hostility.²³ Clarence E. Brown, a former resident of Robbins describes the racial hostility from neighboring white settlements in a personal account titled “The Saga of Robbins, Illinois:” “Our area was completely surrounded by a few towns of foreign personalities and American born persons who were openly known to hate Negroes even more than some of our deep Southern states. There were no Negroes near who could help us.”²⁴ Because the Bremen Township was unincorporated, Black settlers had no established government or police protection of their own; therefore, community leaders went to the neighboring city Blue Island to ask for assistance with surveillance of the Bremen Township. The white officials of Blue Island offered their support to the Black settlers of the Bremen Township, but this offer was insincere. Instead, the white officials used this as an opportunity to come into the area to entice and pick up Black women and girls.²⁵

Furthermore, in 1909 a white real estate dealer named Henry E. Robbins saw the Bremen Township as an opportunity to help Black people and encouraged Black settlement there. Whet Moser in the article “Why Robbins Looks So Southern” explained, “Henry E. Robbins, seeing the possibility of helping colored people, induced a few to settle here on the abandoned lots, which he sold as cheap as \$90 on the monthly payment plan.”²⁶ Between 1911 and 1917 more

²² “The Mother of Robbins, Illinois,” Robbins History Museum.

²³ Brown, “The Sage of Robbins,” 6.

²⁴ Brown, “The Saga of Robbins,” 4.

²⁵ Brown, “The Sage of Robbins,” 2.

²⁶ Whet Moser, “Why Robbins Looks So Southern,” *Chicago Magazine*, December 2, 2014, <https://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/december-2014/why-robbins-looks-so-southern/>.

than 300 people had settled in the Bremen Township. With the growth of settlers and still no established government for protection, community leaders discussed incorporation.²⁷ Thomas Kellar, Leroy Thomas, and Richard Flowers were three members of a political club who proposed the incorporation of the Bremen township. Thomas Kellar investigated the incorporation process and reported back to the club members.²⁸ Meetings were held to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of incorporation.²⁹ Some club members opposed incorporation, but most of the settlers were in favor of it. Ultimately, it was decided that incorporation was the best decision.³⁰ As a result, Robbins, Illinois was born on December 14th, 1917. Kellar, Thomas, and Flowers became known as the three founding fathers of Robbins, naming the village after the real estate dealer Henry E. Robbins who promoted early Black settlement in the area.

Black Population Growth in Robbins 1920-1970

Year	Black Population	Total Population	Percentage of Black Population
1920	-	431	-
1930	686	753	91%
1940	1307	1349	97%
1950	4729	4766	99%
1960	7410	7511	99%
1970	9436	9641	98%

Sources: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, "Illinois Number of Inhabitants" in "1940 Census of Population: Volume 1 Number of Inhabitants," Table 4; "Chicago Metropolitan District" in "1930 Census Metropolitan Districts Chicago cities and suburbs," Table B; "Illinois Characteristics of the Population" in "1940 Census of Population: Volume 2 Characteristics of the Population," Table 29; "Population of Illinois by Counties" in "1950 Census of Population Advance Reports," Table 3; "General Characteristics" in "1950 Census of Population: Volume 2 Characteristics of the Population," Table 38; "Advance Reports General Population Characteristics" in "1960 Census of Population," Table 13; "General Population Characteristics, Illinois" in 1960 Census Population, Volume 1 Characteristics of the Population, Part 1-57," Table 22; "General Population Characteristics Illinois" in "1970 Census of Population Volume 1 Characteristics of Population," Table 16 and 31.

²⁷ Pamphlet, "A Century of Celebration Worthy of Preservation" 16 December 2017, p.13, Robbins History Museum.

²⁸ Pamphlet, "A Century of Celebration Worthy of Preservation" 16 December 2017, p.13, Robbins History Museum.

²⁹ "1917 Birth of the Village of Robbins, IL The Richard Flowers Home," Robbins History Museum.

³⁰ Pamphlet, "A Century of Celebration Worthy of Preservation" 16 December 2017, p.13, Robbins History Museum.

Literature Review

Academic scholarship on Black geographies and Black towns have identified the relationship between race and space and the variety of ways Black people historically have practiced space-making. This literature review will discuss relevant research on Black geographies, Black towns, and Robbins, Illinois while also identifying the gap in the literature this thesis aims to fill: research on Black towns in the Midwest.

Geographer and social scientist Camilla Hawthorne in her 2019 study, “Black Matters Are Spatial Matters: Black Geographies for the Twenty-First Century” describes the central claim of Black geography scholarship:

Black Geographies asserts the inherent spatiality of Black life—the spatial imaginaries, space-making practices, and senses of place rooted in Black communities. Starting from the understanding that all social relations are grounded in spatial relations, this scholarship privileges Black world-making practices in all of their multiplicities.³¹

Hawthorne claims that Black life is inherently spatial and Black geography scholarship aims to explore the ways Black people historically and in the present day have created space, used space, and found a sense of place in various environments: plantations, neighborhoods, prisons, etc.

Furthermore, in a 2018 study “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” Bledsoe and Wright discuss the various practices of Black self-determination by exploring the spatial politics of three organizations: the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (PGRNA). The study explores the differences between “how Black communities create their own spaces distinct from the anti-Blackness of US society.”³² First, Bledsoe and Wright discuss

³¹ Camilla Hawthorne, “Black matters are spatial matters: Black geographies for the twenty-first century,” *Geography Compass* 13, no. 11 (2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12468>.

³² Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” *Antipode* 51, no. 2 (2018): 420, doi: 10.1111/anti.12467.

the spatial politics of the UNIA, which was founded in 1914 by Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey. The organization was created with the intent to unite all Black people across the globe, establishing a country and government of their own in Africa. Garvey argued, “no ‘slave race’ will ever rule or govern the same territory as the slave masters”³³ and urged Black people to “go out and do for yourselves, build up a nation, build up a government.”³⁴

Second, Bledsoe and Wright discuss the spatial politics of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Co-founded in 1967 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the organization sought to create spaces of Black liberation within Black communities. The Black Panther Party approached Black liberation by establishing self-defense practices and survival programs, which included surveilling the police in Black communities; sickle-cell anemia testing; and clothing, shoe, and coat drives.³⁵

Lastly, Bledsoe and Wright discuss the spatial politics of the PGRNA. Founded in 1968, the organization sought to build a Black nation within the United States. The PGRNA claimed that Black Americans did not have to accept the US government as their official government because “New Afrikans were never given an opportunity to choose a governing body following their self-emancipation from enslavement.”³⁶ In addition, the organization demanded “the US government cede five states in the Black Belt (Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina) and provide financial reparations for the atrocities of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and their posthumous permutations.”³⁷ Overall, Bledsoe and Wright argue that each organization approached spatial politics, Black liberation, and Black autonomy differently, showing the diverseness in Black geographies.

³³ Bledsoe and Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” 422.

³⁴ Bledsoe and Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” 423.

³⁵ Bledsoe and Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” 427-428.

³⁶ Bledsoe and Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” 429.

³⁷ Bledsoe and Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” 429-430.

Expanding on Black geography scholarship, Black town scholarship specifies Black space-making practices in Black settlements. Norman Crockett's 1979 book, *The Black Towns*, offers a comprehensive overview of the origins, successes, and economic declines of Black towns. The book focuses on five prominent Black towns located in the US South and West: Nicodemus, Kansas; Mound Bayou, Mississippi; Langston, Oklahoma; Clearview, Oklahoma; and Boley, Oklahoma. As Crockett states in the Preface, the book details "the rhetoric and behavior of blacks – isolated from the domination of whites and freed from the daily reinforcement of their subordinate rank in the larger society – inside the limits of their own community."³⁸

First, Crockett argues that Black towns used creative ways to attract residents. Crockett details how Black town promoters "ridiculed those who seemed content to live in terror in the South, unable to protect themselves or families from white insults, discrimination, and physical harm"³⁹ to attract new residents. Furthermore, Crockett claims that many Black town residents experienced economic security for the first time. Crockett explains, "Many residents owned property, some for the first time, and even those who did not hold title to a farm, house, or town lot enjoyed an economic security unknown in their previous environment."⁴⁰

Although residents experienced economic freedom and freedom from Jim Crow laws, social stratification, colorism, and anti-blackness still existed within Black towns. Crockett shares anecdotes from Black town residents that described how upper-class residents flaunted their wealth and physically separated themselves from the lower class.⁴¹ In addition, residents both dark and light skinned, exhibited prejudice against each other. Crockett shares anecdotes of

³⁸ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, xii-xiii.

³⁹ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 43.

⁴⁰ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 57.

⁴¹ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 67-68.

dark-skinned residents facing prejudice from light skinned residents and vice versa.⁴² Even more, Black town newspaper editors saw no issue in preaching racial pride while simultaneously advertising skin lightening and hair straightening products in their newspapers.⁴³ Crockett states, “A few Black town visitors were quick to point to what they thought was a dichotomy between race pride and a desire to be white.”⁴⁴

Lastly, Crockett detailed the discrimination and economic failures that occurred in Black towns, including the political discrimination residents experienced from state governments⁴⁵ and business failures that contributed to the lack of Black town capital.⁴⁶ Altogether, Crockett offers insight on all aspects of Black town life, both positive and negative, offering a full perspective on the experiences of Black residents living in Black towns in the US South and West.

Similarly, Karla Slocum’s 2019 book *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of a Black Place in the American West* is a more recent scholarship on Black towns. The book is centered on four Oklahoma Black towns and includes historical narratives from Black town residents. Drawing from geographer Katherine McKittrick’s concept of a “Black sense of place,” Slocum argues that Black towns are more than historical objects; they are geographic futures. Slocum explains,

In a Black approach to place, for McKittrick, experiences with spatial inequality (that have their roots in the plantation experience) are turned into a different spatial experience – a geographic future. The geographic future of plantation violence is spatial freedom, freedom in place.⁴⁷

⁴² Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 69, 71-72.

⁴³ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 70.

⁴⁴ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 71.

⁴⁵ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 94.

⁴⁶ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 157.

⁴⁷Karla Slocum, “Introduction,” in *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of a Black Place in the American West*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 8-9.

Slocum is asserting that formerly enslaved Blacks who left behind plantation experiences, created geographic futures through the creation of spaces of freedom: Black towns.

Moreover, Slocum shares historical narratives from Black town residents that tell stories about how Black towns served as a place of refuge in times of terror. For example, one narrative explained how a family member was threatened with lynching, so their family fled to a Black town covered in a wagon to escape.⁴⁸ Many of the narratives Slocum included tell a similar story of how Black people escaped terror in the South by fleeing to Black towns. Additionally, Slocum discusses the economic decline of Oklahoma Black towns. Over the years, the towns declined economically and are now seen as Slocum describes, “ghost towns: denuded, depopulated, impoverished, and run down.”⁴⁹ Overall, Slocum offers contemporary insight on Oklahoma Black towns, drawing from newly conducted historical narratives of Black town residents.

Furthermore, Andrew Wiese in the article “Places of Our Own: Suburban Black Towns before 1960” examines African American suburbanization before 1960. In this article, Wiese examines the development of three Black suburban communities with hopes to offer,

a more dynamic, racially, and historically accurate understanding of the expansion of American cities in the first half of the twentieth century – an understanding that includes the efforts of working-class black families to build communities for themselves in spite of barriers erected to exclude them.⁵⁰

In contrast to Black town literature that focuses on Oklahoma, Wiese focuses on three Black suburban communities in the Midwest: Chagrin Falls Park near Cleveland, Ohio; the Eight Mile Wyoming district near Detroit, Michigan, and Lincoln Heights near Cincinnati, Ohio.⁵¹ Wiese argues that Black residents in suburban neighborhoods rejected traditional urban living and

⁴⁸ Slocum, *Black Towns, Black Futures*, 23.

⁴⁹ Slocum, *Black Towns, Black Futures*, 69.

⁵⁰ Andrew Wiese, “Places of Our Own: Suburban Black Towns before 1960,” *Journal of Urban History* 19, no.3 (1993): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009614429301900303>.

⁵¹ Wiese, “Places of Our Own,” 36.

preferred open space, ownership of land, and small livestock.⁵² Thus, Black residents defined suburbia in their own ways and created suburban Black neighborhoods that represented a living environment that was suitable for them.

Although the literature about Black towns is rich, literature specific to Robbins, Illinois is limited and inaccessible. Most Robbins literature is centered around discussions of environmental justice after a deal was struck in 1988 to build an incinerator in Robbins.⁵³ Because this thesis is covering the period of 1920-1970, that literature is not relevant to this research. In addition, the available literature relevant to this research is difficult to access because it is either not accessible to the public or only accessible in Robbins. For example, there is a non-accessible book titled, *The History of Robbins and Village Directory*.⁵⁴ The book was written by Eugene A. Brown and published in 1976. It details the origin story of Robbins but was the subject of a lawsuit and was suppressed due to its content that shared intimate details about some of the village's residents.⁵⁵ Another piece of literature that details the origins of Robbins is "The Saga of Robbins, Illinois" by Clarence E. Brown.⁵⁶ "The Saga of Robbins, Illinois" was written around 1967 and gives a 12-page historical account of Robbins leading up to its 1917 incorporation. The historical account is from the perspective of Clarence E. Brown, a former resident, and former Trustee Elect for the village. However, the document is only accessible in Robbins, Illinois. Both *The History of Robbins and Village Directory* and "The Saga of Robbins, Illinois" provide accurate, historical accounts of Robbins, Illinois; however, they are inaccessible outside of Robbins.

⁵² Wiese, "Places of Our Own," 51.

⁵³ Brian Reyes, "Environmental Racism in Historical Context: The Robbins Incinerator Debate, 1980s-1990s," *The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal*, 1, no.1 (2020): 9, <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol1/iss1/40>.

⁵⁴ Eugene A. Brown, *The History of Robbins and Village Directory* (1976), Robbins History Museum.

⁵⁵ Tyrone Haymore, Personal communication, 23 September 2022.

⁵⁶ Clarence E. Brown, "The Sage of Robbins, Illinois," (ca. 1967), Robbins History Museum.

Moreover, the accessible literature on Robbins is vague and does not offer many details about the lives and autonomous practices of residents in Robbins. For example, *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* entry on Robbins offers a brief history and geographical location of Robbins. The entry illustrates the population growth and demographics of Robbins from 1930 to 2000.⁵⁷ The entry also discusses minor details about the types of autonomous practices in Robbins such as the establishment of the *Robbins Herald* newspaper and the creation of the Robbins Airport.⁵⁸

Other literature on Robbins includes the 1965 study, “The All-Negro Town: Its Evolution and Function” by Harold M. Rose.⁵⁹ Rose’s study examines the socioeconomic development of 12 Black towns. The study’s objective is to “identify the universe of all-Negro towns on an operational basis”⁶⁰ and “detect the effects of socioeconomic development on their form and structure.”⁶¹ Included in this study is Robbins, Illinois. Rose categorizes Robbins as a suburban and dormitory town. Rose declares a town is considered dormitory when most of the population commutes to work outside of its borders.⁶² In addition, Rose notes in comparison to the other 11 Black towns included in the study, Robbins at the time had the most retail services and of better quality compared to the other communities.⁶³ Rose explains this was due to the distance and efficiency of transportation between Robbins and its closest central cities: Chicago and

⁵⁷ “Robbins, Illinois,” *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1083.html>.

⁵⁸ “Robbins, Illinois,” *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1083.html>. The *Encyclopedia of Chicago* credits Bessie Coleman to helping create the Robbins airport. However, it is not possible that she was directly involved in its creation because she was deceased when the airport was built.

⁵⁹ Harold M. Rose, “The All-Negro Town: Its Evolution and Function,” *Geographical Review*, 55, no. 3 (1965): 363, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/213134>.

⁶⁰ Rose, “The All-Negro Town,” 363.

⁶¹ Rose, “The All-Negro Town,” 363.

⁶² Rose, “The All-Negro Town,” 373.

⁶³ Rose, “The All-Negro Town,” 373.

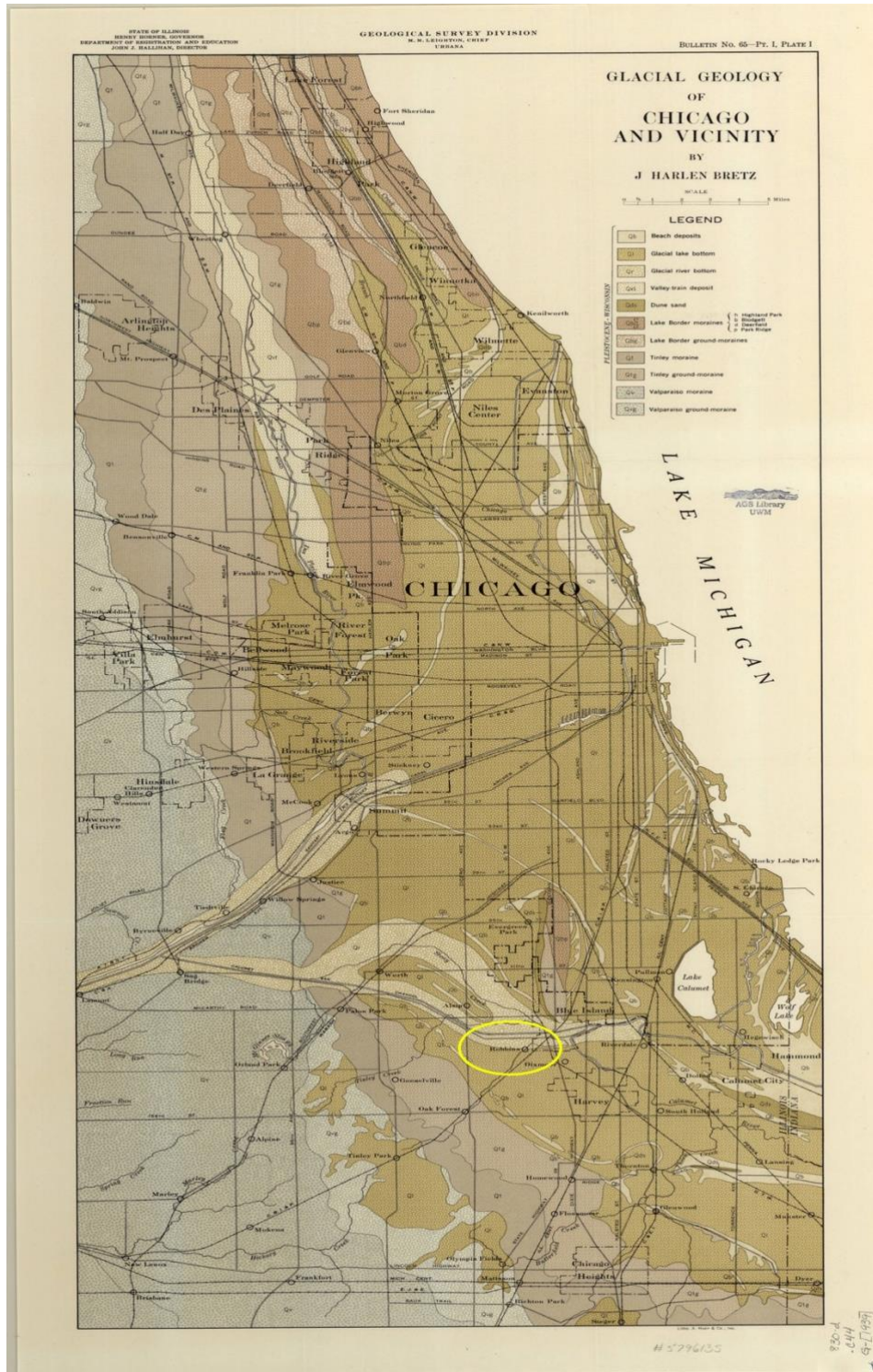
Midlothian.⁶⁴ Lastly, Rose discusses the building of new housing in Robbins since 1960 and how these changes would shift Robbins more towards suburbanization.⁶⁵

In sum, literature on Black geographies and Black towns offer insight on how Black people created spaces of their own to escape terror and discrimination. Additionally, the literature offers insight on what life was like for Black town residents. However, most of the Black town literature is centered on towns in the US South and West, leaving a gap in the literature when it comes to Black settlements in the Midwest like Robbins. Although there is literature about the history of Robbins and the socioeconomic developments in the village, that literature is scanty and mostly outside of the scope of this project. The available literature does not offer insight on the way Robbins' residents practiced autonomy to resist against discrimination during the 20th century, a pivotal time of struggle for African Americans. This thesis aims to fill that gap in the literature contributing a new, historical perspective on Robbins, Illinois, detailing the specific ways Black residents resisted against discrimination through autonomous practices.

⁶⁴ Rose, "The All-Negro Town," 372-373.

⁶⁵ Rose, "The All-Negro Town," 377.

Figure 1: Robbins, Illinois Circled in Yellow, Showing its Location in Relation to Chicago.



Source: J. Harlen Bretz, "Glacial geology of Chicago and vicinity," 1939, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/6204/rec/1>.

Black Autonomous Practices in Robbins, Illinois

Plain Talk: Black Autonomy as a Mindset

Before Black autonomous practices can exist, Black people must have a Black autonomous mindset. This means that Black people must believe they have the intelligence and power to create their own destiny in a society that reinforces messages of racial inferiority. Robbins encouraged their residents to embrace a Black autonomous mindset through messages in a newspaper column titled “Plain Talk” featured in the village’s most successful newspaper *The Robbins Eagle*. The “Plain Talk” column appeared in *The Robbins Eagle* in 1954 and 1955. It was written by Elinor White, who was a strong advocate for Black autonomy. White was the first woman elected village clerk of Robbins between 1949 to 1953.⁶⁶ Most notably, White was a Garvey loyalist.⁶⁷ She served as a speech writer⁶⁸ and special assistant⁶⁹ to Marcus Garvey, founder of the UNIA, in the early 1920s. After visiting Robbins in the 1920s, Garvey established a UNIA chapter there. Robbins historian Tyrone Haymore described Garvey’s reaction to visiting Robbins: “He was so impressed that blacks were governing their own town ‘Robbins.’ He’d never heard of a town with all black elected officials.”⁷⁰ White’s involvement in the UNIA, as Robbins village clerk, and columnist for *The Robbins Eagle* shows her commitment to advocating for Black autonomy.

Throughout *The Robbins Eagle* White’s name is listed in 5 different ways: Elinor White, Elinor Neely, Elinor White Neely, Elinor White Neeley, and Elinor White-Neeley. For clarity she will be referred as Elinor White in this writing since this is how she is referred to the most in

⁶⁶ Flyer with picture of Elinor White, “1900 Elinor White-Neely 1975,” Robbins History Museum.

⁶⁷ “I Got a Story to Tell: Black Voices in Print,” Duke University, December 22, 2022, <https://guides.library.duke.edu/black-voices-in-print>.

⁶⁸ “Marcus Garvey,” Robbins History Museum, <https://www.robbinshistorymuseum.org/services>.

⁶⁹ Flyer with picture of Elinor White, “1900 Elinor White-Neely 1975,” Robbins History Museum.

⁷⁰ “Robbins, IL, The most historic black town in America,” Robbins History Museum, <https://www.robbinshistorymuseum.org>.

the newspaper. White's "Plain Talk" column lived up to its name because it shared blunt, yet empowering messages addressing Black men about the need to shift their mindsets to be self-sufficient and successful. For example, in a September 1954 *Robbins Eagle* newspaper White shared a "Plain Talk" column titled "The Rule of Intelligence." In this column White stated, "For a man to do anything with his hands and feet he must think it out with his mind."⁷¹ Further in the same column she stated, "Don't sleep on your brains. Use it to protect yourself and your community."⁷² Similarly, in a May 1954 "Plain Talk" column titled "The Power of Man" White asserted,

Man's mind does not rule the universe, but it does rule the world And if 400 million Negroes of the world can realize that and change their subjective, slavish minds into independent minds, with outlooks of their own, views of their own, – if black men will do that, the world over in twenty-four hours will be turned to us and a new imperialism will be set up. Can we change your mind from being slaves, human underlings, to becoming men – recognizing the power divine – the power in you?⁷³

Ultimately, White encouraged Black people to believe in the power of their minds and the power within themselves.

Furthermore, White also discouraged low self-esteem from the Black community and encouraged racial love. In an October 1954 "Plain Talk" column titled "Negro Psychology" White stated, "The great trouble with our race is that everybody seems bent on pining over the white man's attitude to the race individually and collectively, as he is doing something not human or natural."⁷⁴ She continues, "There are individual Negroes who are as fit and competent

⁷¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Plain Talk - The Rule of Intelligence" by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 25 September 1954, Folder 9, p. 12, Robbins History Museum.

⁷² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Plain Talk - The Rule of Intelligence" by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 25 September 1954, Folder 9, p. 12, Robbins History Museum.

⁷³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Plain Talk - The Power of Man" by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 8 May 1954, Folder 9, p. 2, Robbins History Museum.

⁷⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Plain Talk - Negro Psychology" by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 16 October 1954, Folder 9, p. 2, Robbins History Museum.

as any individual white man or any other man for that matter.”⁷⁵ Likewise, in a February 1955 “Plain Talk” column titled “The Negro Race” White proclaimed, “We say with courage to all black men, do not be despondent, do not, even for an instant, feel yourself unfit, because if you will but fall back upon the strength and possibilities of your own mind, and the stubbornness of your own character, you can climb the highest mountains of human intellect.”⁷⁶

Not only did White encourage a healthy self-esteem among the Black community, but also racial love. In a May 1954 “Plain Talk” column titled “The Negro Must Love Himself,” White reinforces racial love to the Black community: “Negroes of the world are now realizing that to be successful and prosperous; to be happy, to be great, we must have racial love.⁷⁷” When a society has preached Black inferiority for centuries through individual and institutional racist practices such as slavery and Jim Crow, it is difficult for Black people to have high self-esteem, racial love, and racial pride within themselves and for their community. However, White encouraged Black people to reclaim the power to love themselves and their community.

Additionally, White encouraged Black people to be self-sufficient and to create their own destiny. In a February 1955 “Plain Talk” column titled “Racial Weakness” White stated referring to Black men, “He must always be governed, instead of governing. This has been the past weakness of the Negro in modern times, and every sensible member of the race must realize that it has taken him nowhere.”⁷⁸ In the same column she continues, “We must determine on the policy of owning where we settle; of controlling the environment in which we place ourselves.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk – Negro Psychology” by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 16 October 1954, Folder 9, p. 12, Robbins History Museum.

⁷⁶ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk – The Negro Race” by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 27 February 1954, Folder 9, p. 2, Robbins History Museum.

⁷⁷ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk – The Negro Must Love Himself” by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 15 May 1954, Folder 9, p. 2, Robbins History Museum.

⁷⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk - Racial Weakness” by Mrs. Elinor White-Neeley, 26 February 1955, Folder 9, p. 2, Robbins History Museum.

⁷⁹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk - Racial Weakness” by Mrs. Elinor White-Neeley, 26 February 1955, Folder 9, p. 9, Robbins History Museum.

Furthermore, in a February 1954 “Plain Talk” column titled “The Negro Race” White expands on Black self-sufficiency. White declared,

When will the black man create his world? When will he blast the hills and conquer the plains? When will he harness the rivers and bring under his subjection and seas? When will he negotiate the air and find out the mysteries therein? When will he delve independently into the realms of science and philosophy and pick out an independent invention that transcends any yet known to the world? Not until these things are done with the mastery of the human minds and by the Negro – will he be transferred from the foot of the human race to the top.⁸⁰

Overall, White encouraged Black men to transform their minds, to be self-sufficient, and to love themselves through her “Plain Talk” columns. Because the columns were mostly directed to Black men and not the entire Black community, it is possible that White held a patriarchal mindset and saw Black men as the leaders of the Black community. Possibly she looked to them to create change and create a new destiny in the Black community. Ultimately, White showed that Black autonomy is not only the physical work of creating Black owned organizations and businesses, but it’s also the mental transformational work.

Newspapers

The Robbins Eagle was a primary example of Robbins residents practicing Black autonomy through starting their own newspaper and printing company. Marion L. Smith, an entrepreneur and community leader who established businesses in Robbins, was one of the founders of *The Robbins Eagle*. In fact, he gave the newspaper its name.⁸¹ A statement included in *The Robbins Eagle* explained the purpose of the newspaper declaring, “Published in Robbins for the citizens of Robbins to encourage and help them in the betterment of our community; to

⁸⁰ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk – The Negro Race” by Mrs. Elinor Neely, 27 February 1954, Folder 9, p. 2, Robbins History Museum.

⁸¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 14 June 1958, p.4, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19580614-01.1.4&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-Marion+L.+Smith----->.

stimulate civic pride and cultivate a neighborly interest in the welfare and well-being of every citizen in this village.”⁸²

Preceding *The Robbins Eagle* was *The Robbins Herald* which was the first newspaper published in Robbins in 1920. A 1954 newspaper column about *The Robbins Herald* explained, it “ceased publication after about 3 years.”⁸³ Similarly, *The Robbins Eagle* was not initially successful. The first edition of *The Robbins Eagle* was published on February 17th, 1951⁸⁴ but circulation of the newspaper ended soon after it first began. A 1954 *Robbins Eagle* newspaper story explained, “The first venture in publishing *The Robbins Eagle* lasted only a few months.”⁸⁵ Initially, it was challenging sustaining *The Robbins Eagle* because it was difficult to get news, and advertisers were not interested in the newspaper. In addition, *The Robbins Eagle* was initially printed outside the village where the printer was described as “not-too-cooperative;” therefore, it was difficult to get the paper out on time.⁸⁶

Eventually, *The Robbins Eagle* became the most notable and successful newspaper in Robbins. It was not only published in Robbins, but also in Chicago. Even more, it was published internationally and across the United States in Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and Michigan.⁸⁷ During the first venture in publishing *The Robbins Eagle*, the newspaper was printed outside of the village and was only four pages. When the newspaper was revived, Robbins residents established their own printing company “The Robbins Press,”⁸⁸ and the paper expanded to 12 pages. A 1954 *Robbins Eagle* publication celebrated the newspaper

⁸² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 26 March 1955, p.6, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19550326-01.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

⁸³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Our Next Door Neighbors” column by Robinson Pelzona, 8 May 1954, Folder 9, p. 7, Robbins History Museum.

⁸⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 15 May 1954, Folder 9, front page, Robbins History Museum.

⁸⁵ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 15 May 1954, Folder 9, front page, Robbins History Museum.

⁸⁶ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 15 May 1954, Folder 9, front page, Robbins History Museum.

⁸⁷ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 15 May 1954, Folder 9, front page, Robbins History Museum.

⁸⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 28 March 1953, p.5 <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19530328-01.1.5&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

expansion stating, “Today, *The Robbins Eagle* is strictly a Robbins enterprise – a 12-page newspaper, compiled, composed, made-up and printed under one roof right here in the village. It’s official staff, reporters, and its 28 newsboys are residents of the village.”⁸⁹

The Robbins Eagle was an example of the challenges that come with Black autonomy but also the success that comes with perseverance. Starting a newspaper for the village was a Black autonomous practice within itself, but the success of *The Robbins Eagle* came when the village established its own printing company to have the freedom to print the newspaper inside the village without relying on outside vendors. Notably, *The Robbins Eagle* became more successful when they became more autonomous. All in all, Robbins residents practiced Black autonomy by taking the fate of the newspaper into their own hands and no longer relying on printing companies from outside the village.

Local Businesses

Robbins had many Black owned local businesses inside the village that catered to resident’s needs, such as grocery stores, gas stations, laundromats and more. First, Robbins had a variety of options for residents to buy fresh food and groceries. Some examples of grocery stores included American Food Store,⁹⁰ Nick’s Grocery and Market,⁹¹ Florine’s Grocery and Meat Market,⁹² and George Walker’s Groceries and Meats, which was a long-standing grocery store in Robbins that was in business for 15 years as of 1954.⁹³ American Food Store sold fresh food and vegetables as well as southern African American foods, also known as soul food. Some of these foods included black-eyed peas, chitterlings, neck bones, pig tails, and pigs’ feet.⁹⁴ Another

⁸⁹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 15 May 1954, Folder 9, front page, Robbins History Museum.

⁹⁰ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 9 January 1960, Folder 31, p.4, Robbins History Museum.

⁹¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 17 April 1954, Folder 9, p.10, Robbins History Museum.

⁹² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 17 April 1954, Folder 9, p.12, Robbins History Museum.

⁹³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 6 February 1954, Folder 9, p.8, Robbins History Museum.

⁹⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 9 January 1960, Folder 31, p.4, Robbins History Museum.

business that sold fresh food was the 137th Street Poultry and Vegetable Farm which sold turkeys, duck, hens, eggs and more, by the pound and dozen.⁹⁵ Furthermore, Robbins also had gas stations, such as the Mayberry's Service Station⁹⁶ and Chris and Mac's Arrow Service Station.⁹⁷ Lastly, Robbins had a laundry facility called the Robbinite Laundromat.⁹⁸ Other various businesses included a 24-hour cab service,⁹⁹ notary office,¹⁰⁰ flower shop,¹⁰¹ funeral home,¹⁰² credit union¹⁰³ and a record store selling blues, jazz and gospel,¹⁰⁴ among many other businesses. Overall, the residents of Robbins built businesses that catered to their needs. Surely, all these businesses were not created overnight, but as residents recognized their needs, they built businesses to fulfill them. However, not all business needs were fulfilled. Robbins never had a shopping center, even though there were discussions about building one,¹⁰⁵ nor a hospital.

Health Services

Although the village of Robbins never had a hospital to serve its residents, they found alternative ways to deliver health services. Robbins delivered health services to its residents through frequent health clinics. The Robbins Health Center offered maternal, infant, dental,¹⁰⁶

⁹⁵ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 6 February 1954, Folder 9, p.8, Robbins History Museum.

⁹⁶ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 9 January 1960, Folder 31, p.3, Robbins History Museum.

⁹⁷ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 17 April 1954, Folder 9, p.5, Robbins History Museum.

⁹⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 9 January 1960, Folder 31, p.7, Robbins History Museum.

⁹⁹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 19 November 1960, p.6, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19601119-01.1.6&srpos=147&e=-----en-20-TRE-141-byDA-img-txIN-hospital----->.

¹⁰⁰ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 3 March 1951, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.2&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹⁰¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 3 March 1951, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.2&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹⁰² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 2 August 1958, p.10, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19580802-01.1.10&srpos=5&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-jazz----->.

¹⁰³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 3 March 1951, p.4, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.2&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹⁰⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 21 February 1953, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19530221-01.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹⁰⁵ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 25 July 1959, p.1, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590725-01.1.1&e=-----195-en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-health----->.

¹⁰⁶ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 27 December 1958, p.5, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19581227-01.1.5&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-clinic----->.

child health¹⁰⁷ and social hygiene clinics.¹⁰⁸ The health center also held nurse's office hours¹⁰⁹ and offered what they called VD clinics,¹¹⁰ which are now known as sexual health clinics.

Clinics and office hours were offered at different times of the month. For example, the maternal clinic opened every 2nd and 4th Wednesday of each month.¹¹¹

In addition, when public health concerns arose, the Robbins Health Center opened special clinics such as a polio immunization clinic and a free chest X-ray clinic. A column in a 1954 *Robbins Eagle* newspaper stated there was a "record number of carry-over cases from the tragic 1952 Polio epidemic in this territory."¹¹² In 1957, the Robbins Health Center offered a polio immunization clinic for residents to receive polio booster injections.¹¹³ Moreover, in June of 1954 a free, mobile chest X-ray clinic was offered to Robbins residents to search for signs of tuberculosis and other chest conditions such as heart disease and lung cancer.¹¹⁴ The Tuberculosis Institute, Suburban Cook County Tuberculosis Sanitarium District (SCCTSD), Illinois' Cook County Department of Health, Robbins Health Department, and Robbins Health Council collaborated to bring the free X-ray service to Robbins.¹¹⁵ In the previous year during a health survey of 549 residents, at least eight Robbins residents revealed signs of tuberculosis. In

¹⁰⁷ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 21 February 1953, p.7, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19530221-01.1.7&srpos=4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-clinic----->.

¹⁰⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 3 March 1951, p.4 <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-clinic----->.

¹⁰⁹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 3 March 1951, p.4 <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-clinic----->.

¹¹⁰ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 21 February 1953, p.7, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19530221-01.1.7&srpos=4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-clinic----->.

¹¹¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 27 December 1958, p.5, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19581227-01.1.5&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-clinic----->.

¹¹² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 6 February 1954, p.7, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540206-01.1.7&srpos=2&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-polio----->.

¹¹³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 30 March 1957, p.4, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19570330-01.1.4&e=-----en-20-TRE-21-byDA-img-txIN-clinic----->.

¹¹⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "X Ray Unit Here June 1," 8 May 1954, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540508-01.1.3&srpos=4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-tuberculosis----->.

¹¹⁵ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "X Ray Unit Here June 1," 8 May 1954, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540508-01.1.3&srpos=4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-tuberculosis----->.

addition, 1 person died, and 11 people were hospitalized; therefore, the village stressed the importance of having a free chest X-ray clinic.¹¹⁶

Lastly, Robbins residents received health services from licensed Black doctors who opened private practices. In 1951, a doctor by the name of Dr. Jarrett J. Salter opened his own doctor's office in Robbins, and it was announced in *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper. The newspaper column read, "WE NEED A DOCTOR: Robbins has for a long time needed the services of a medical doctor. The ROBBINS EAGLE is happy to announce that DR. JARRETT J. SALTER, physician and surgeon, has opened his office."¹¹⁷ In addition, two brothers who were pharmacists opened a pharmacy in Robbins:¹¹⁸ "Chandler's Claire Blvd. Drugs"¹¹⁹ also known as Chandlers' Rexall Pharmacy.¹²⁰ It became known as the neighborhood pharmacy in Robbins starting in the 1950s. The pharmacy sold prescription drugs, insulin, dietetic supplies and more.¹²¹ Although Robbins did not have a full-service hospital, the village practiced Black autonomy by offering a variety of clinics and opening private practices, showing that health was a priority. Even when public health crises arose, Robbins found ways to meet the health needs of residents so they wouldn't have to rely on health services from white providers in neighboring Illinois cities.

¹¹⁶ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "X Ray Unit Here June 1," 8 May 1954, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540508-01.1.3&srpos=4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-tuberculosis----->.

¹¹⁷ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "WE NEED A DOCTOR," 28 April 1951, p. 3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510428-01.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹¹⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 19, November 1960, p.1, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19601119-01.1.1&srpos=5&e=-----196-en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-pharmacy----->.

¹¹⁹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 21 February 1959, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590221-01.1.3&e=-----195-en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-pharmacy----->.

¹²⁰ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 19, November 1960, p.1, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19601119-01.1.1&srpos=5&e=-----196-en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-pharmacy----->.

¹²¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, 17 January 1959, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590117-01.1.3&srpos=1&e=-----195-en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-pharmacy----->.

Churches and Government Organizations

Establishing churches and operating governmental organizations were also ways Robbins residents practiced autonomy. Robbins established a plethora of denominational churches. Examples of churches include Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, Wheeler Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, Church of God in Christ (COGIC),¹²² Progressive Missionary Baptist Church¹²³ and Mt. Zion Pentecostal Church.¹²⁴ Furthermore, because Robbins was a municipality, they established and managed their own governmental organizations: police department, fire department, and political parties. Robbins' first police department consisted of seven officers in 1918.¹²⁵ As time went on, the department established routines that included nightly patrols to check on every business in Robbins. A 1954 *Robbins Eagle* column titled "Your Police Department" explains, "we have established a regular patrol system and every business place in our area is spot-checked at regular intervals between the hours of 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. each night."¹²⁶ In addition, Robbins' first fire department consisted of entirely volunteer firefighters,¹²⁷ and their first firetruck, which was man drawn, was donated to them in 1918.¹²⁸ Robbins residents practiced autonomy by establishing and operating their own police and fire departments in ways they saw best fit for the village.

Moreover, Robbins residents practiced autonomy through establishing unique political organizations that did not fall into the binary of Democratic and Republican. Robbins residents

¹²² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Church Directory," 3 March 1951, p.4, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-church+directory----->.

¹²³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Church Directory," 3 March 1951, p.4, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-church+directory----->.

¹²⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Church Directory," 21 April 1956, p.14, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19560421-01.1.14&srpos=26&e=-----en-20-TRE-21-byDA-img-txIN-church+directory----->.

¹²⁵ "Robbins' First Police Officers ca. 1918," Robbins History Museum.

¹²⁶ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Your Police Department," 25 September 1954, p.10, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540925-01&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹²⁷ "Robbins' First All-Volunteer Fire Dept," Robbins History Museum.

¹²⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Our Next Door Neighbors" column by Robinson Pelzona, 8 May 1954, Folder 9, p. 7, Robbins History Museum.

established the political organizations they desired. Examples of political organizations in Robbins included the People’s Party, the United Citizens Party, and the Non-Partisan Party.¹²⁹ The People’s Party was the oldest party in Robbins and coincides with the origin of Robbins. It is credited as being the party responsible for “the incorporation and unification of the village.”¹³⁰ The 2nd oldest party was the Citizens Party, whose origins also trace back to the early days of Robbins’ existence.¹³¹ The Citizens Party split multiple times, which resulted in the party operating under two other names over the years: the Independent Citizens Party and finally the United Citizens Party.¹³² The United Citizens Party was interested in “the progress of the village and the proper conduct and maintenance of its government.”¹³³ Lastly, the Non-Partisan Party was established in 1947 and believed “our village elections were to be free and that the shackles of County, State and National politics should not hamper the voter in voting for the best qualified men on the local tickets, regardless of the choice of national politics.”¹³⁴ However, in 1960 the Non-Partisan Party merged with the United Citizens Party operating unanimously as the United Citizens Party.¹³⁵ In sum, Robbins residents established political organizations that represented the vision they had for their community.

¹²⁹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Some Facts About Parties in Robbins,” 28 February 1959, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590228-01.1.3&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-politics----->.

¹³⁰ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Some Facts About Parties in Robbins,” 28 February 1959, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590228-01.1.3&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-politics----->.

¹³¹ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Some Facts About Parties in Robbins,” 28 February 1959, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590228-01.1.3&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-politics----->.

¹³² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Some Facts About Parties in Robbins,” 28 February 1959, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590228-01.1.3&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-politics----->.

¹³³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “New Political Party The ‘United Citizens’ Takes the Arena,” 7 February 1959, p.1, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590207-01.1.1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-%22political+parties%22----->.

¹³⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Some Facts About Parties in Robbins,” 28 February 1959, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19590228-01.1.3&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-politics----->.

¹³⁵ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Non-Partisans and United Citizens Merge Under Citizens’ Banner,” 10 December 1960, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19601210-01.1.3&e=-----en-20-TRE-1--img-txIN-%22political+parties%22----->.

Airport

The most renowned autonomous practice in Robbins, Illinois was the Robbins airport. It was the first Black owned airport in the US, built in 1931.¹³⁶ A group of Black aviators including, John C. Robinson, Cornelius R. Coffey, Harold Hurd,¹³⁷ and Janet Bragg¹³⁸ established the Robbins airport. Leading up to this, in the mid-1920s,¹³⁹ Robinson and Coffey applied to Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical University, an aviation school in Chicago but were denied entry.¹⁴⁰ A 1992 article from The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* recalls the incident, “when they showed up for classes, they were offered their money back. ‘They said we don’t accept colored students,’ said Coffey.”¹⁴¹ Coffey sued for racial discrimination; however, a Curtiss-Wright flight instructor was impressed by Robinson and Coffey after seeing them build their own plane. As a result, the administrators agreed to instruct them if Coffey dropped the racial discrimination suit.¹⁴² The men accepted this deal and were asked to teach other aspiring Black aviators after graduating. Robinson and Coffey began teaching other Black students to fly until racial hostility arose at Curtiss-Wright. Therefore, Robinson, Coffey, Hurd, Bragg, along with other Black aviators established their own organization called the Challenger Air Pilots Association to train Black pilots¹⁴³ and sought to build their own airport.¹⁴⁴ Chicago area airports did not serve Black people and did not even allow Black aviators to land on their airstrips or get fuel for their planes.¹⁴⁵ Hurd recalls, “We landed at the nearest airport . . . and taxied up to the pump. And the

¹³⁶ Matt McCall, “Robbins gave African Americans access to the skies,” *Chicago Tribune*, Feb 10, 2017, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/daily-southtown/ct-sta-robbins-airport-st-0212-20170210-story.html>

¹³⁷ “Two Black Pioneer Flyers Recall Early Days,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 9, 1992.

¹³⁸ Janita Poe, “Black woman broke double-edged barrier,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 1, 1993, 2.

¹³⁹ “Two Black Pioneer Flyers.”

¹⁴⁰ McCall, “Robbins gave African Americans.”

¹⁴¹ “Two Black Pioneer Flyers.”

¹⁴² McCall, “Robbins gave African Americans.”

¹⁴³ McCall, “Robbins gave African Americans.”

¹⁴⁴ Ken O’Brien, “Flying into history in Robbins,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov 5, 1995.

¹⁴⁵ O’Brien, “Flying into history in Robbins.”

guy looked up and saw us there and came out. He said, ‘We don’t serve you guys.’ So we had to turn around and take off.”¹⁴⁶ Even more, Chicago would not permit the creation of a Black-owned airport.¹⁴⁷ Because of this, Robinson and Coffey went to Robbins, where their idea to build an airport was welcomed with open arms.¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, a windstorm destroyed the airport in 1933, and it was never rebuilt due to finances.¹⁴⁹ However, the short-lived airport shows the resiliency of Black aviators who resisted against racial discrimination by creating a pilot training organization and an airport for aspiring Black aviators.

In conclusion, Robbins, Illinois residents practiced autonomy in a variety of ways, not only physically but also mentally. Elinor White in her *Robbins Eagle* “Plain Talk” columns encouraged Black men to adapt Black autonomy as a mindset by transforming their minds to be self-reliant and self-loving. Furthermore, Robbins residents created the businesses and organizations significant to their history, culture, values, and well-being. Determined to have their own local newspaper, they created *The Robbins Herald* and *The Robbins Eagle*. Although both struggled and ceased after initial publication, Robbins residents persevered, and *The Robbins Eagle* was revived, becoming the most successful Robbins newspaper. Establishing local Black owned businesses such as grocery stores that sold southern foods and record stores that sold jazz and gospel, shows the significance of having businesses that represented Black culture. Even more, the health clinics, churches, and political organizations they established were significant to their history and community needs. Most notably, the Robbins airport was a testament to the resiliency of aspiring Black aviators in the Midwest, who faced racial discrimination at white aeronautical institutions and Chicago airstrips. In all, Robbins residents

¹⁴⁶ “Two Black Pioneer Flyers.”

¹⁴⁷ McCall, “Robbins gave African Americans.”

¹⁴⁸ McCall, “Robbins gave African Americans.”

¹⁴⁹ “Two Black Pioneer Flyers.”

used Black autonomy as a form of resistance by overcoming racial barriers and establishing the businesses and organizations symbolic to their Black identity.

Chapter Three

Black Autonomy in Segregated Black Neighborhoods: Milwaukee Bronzeville

Milwaukee Bronzeville was an African American cultural and economic hub in Milwaukee, Wisconsin that emerged in the 1920s. The existence of Milwaukee Bronzeville in one of the most segregated cities in the United States is no coincidence. Through years of policies that denied Black Milwaukeeans equal access to fair housing opportunities and opposition to neighborhood integration by whites, Milwaukee Bronzeville was born. During the Great Migration, from 1910 to 1970, millions of African Americans moved from the American South to Northern, Western, and Midwestern states including Wisconsin.¹⁵⁰ Notably, Milwaukee had a late great migration with a dramatic increase in Milwaukee's Black population between 1940 and 1970.¹⁵¹ Because discriminatory practices such as redlining, blockbusting, racial steering, restrictive housing covenants, and general white resistance prevented African Americans from residing freely throughout cities, segregated Black neighborhoods, like Milwaukee Bronzeville, formed.

Academic scholarship affirms that residential segregation negatively impacts the overall quality of life for Black residents: affecting health outcomes,¹⁵² educational attainment,¹⁵³ job opportunities,¹⁵⁴ and more. Historically, Black residents have resisted residential segregation by challenging discrimination through civil disobedience, protests, and boycotts. However, the continued exclusion to fair housing led some Black residents to resist differently and reimagine

¹⁵⁰“The Great Migration (1910-1970),” National Archives, June 28, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>.

¹⁵¹ 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 (1998): 231, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2649025>.

¹⁵² Virginia Chang, Amy Hillier, and Neil Mehta, “Neighborhood Racial Isolation, Disorder and Obesity,” *Social Forces* 87, no.4 (2009): 2063-2092, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2825709/>.

¹⁵³ Sean F. Reardon, “School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 2, no.5 (2016): 34–57, <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/2/5/34.full>.

¹⁵⁴ Niki T. Dickerson, “Black Employment, Segregation, and the Social Organization of Metropolitan Labor Markets,” *Economic Geography* 83, no.3 (2007): 283–307, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30033127>.

equality through the lens of Black autonomy. Black residents embraced Black autonomous solutions, emphasizing self-sufficiency, and building independent Black institutions in their neighborhoods as a remedy for residential segregation.

Milwaukee Bronzeville is an example of Black autonomous resistance. The term Bronzeville is a moniker used to describe an area in a city that has a majority Black population. Milwaukee Bronzeville adapted its name from Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, a majority Black neighborhood in Chicago.¹⁵⁵ Milwaukee Bronzeville's original name was "Walnut Way."¹⁵⁶ Other monikers used for Milwaukee Bronzeville includes "Black Metropolis," "Black belt,"¹⁵⁷ and "Inner Core." The term Inner Core was coined by former Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler in a 1960 report titled, "Mayor's Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City" that detailed the problems in Milwaukee's inner-city neighborhoods.¹⁵⁸ Geographically, Milwaukee Bronzeville was bordered by four streets: "North Avenue on the north, State Street on the south, Third Street on the east, and 12th street on the west."¹⁵⁹ Walnut Street ran through the middle and was known as the economic hub of the neighborhood.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ "Bronzeville," <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/171.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Clayborn Benson, Personal Communication, 20 February 2023.

¹⁵⁷ "History: Introduction," City of Milwaukee, <https://city.milwaukee.gov/Bronzeville/History>.

¹⁵⁸ Krista Grensavitch, "Inner Core," Encyclopedia of Milwaukee, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/inner-core/>.

¹⁵⁹ "History: Introduction," City of Milwaukee, <https://city.milwaukee.gov/Bronzeville/History>.

¹⁶⁰ "History: Introduction," City of Milwaukee, <https://city.milwaukee.gov/Bronzeville/History>.

Figure 2: Map of Milwaukee Bronzeville



Source: Genevieve G. McBride and Stephen R. Byers, “The First Mayor of Black Milwaukee: J. Anthony Josey,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 91, no. 2 (2007/2008): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25482064>.

Unlike Black towns, Milwaukee Bronzeville was not a space that was intentionally created as a separate Black community. Instead, Milwaukee Bronzeville was a direct result of discriminatory policies that reinforced residential segregation and racially isolated Black residents. Milwaukee Bronzeville expanded as the Black population in Milwaukee grew during the Great Migration. Ivory Abena Black, author of *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle: A Historical Overview*, stated the inception of Milwaukee Bronzeville began in the 1920s. Black stated, “by the late 1920s to early 1930s, African Americans in Milwaukee had settled in one square mile area bound by West Brown, West Juneau, North Third and North Twelfth Streets.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, R.O. Washington and John Oliver in *An Historical Account of Blacks in Milwaukee*, stated this pattern continued into the 1940s. Washington and Oliver claimed, “by 1940 almost the entire black population of the city resided within one square mile.”¹⁶² As the Black population increased, this pattern continued.

Black Population Growth in Milwaukee 1920-1970

Year	Black Population	% Increase in Black Population
1920	2,229	127
1930	7,501	236
1940	8,821	18
1950	21,772	147
1960	62,458	187
1970	105,088	68

Source: R.O. Washington and John Oliver, *An Historical Account of Blacks in Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban Observatory, 1976), 44.

By 1940, the Black population in Milwaukee was 8,821. Another surge in Black population growth occurred in 1950 and 1960, increasing to 21,772 in 1950 and 62,458 in 1960.

¹⁶¹ Ivory Abena Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle: A Historical Overview* (United States: Publishers Group, 2006), 10.

¹⁶² R.O. Washington and John Oliver, *An Historical Account of Blacks in Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban Observatory, 1976), 55.

Washington and Oliver described how the Black population growth between 1950 and 1960 impacted racial isolation and the unintentional development of areas like Milwaukee Bronzeville.

Washington and Oliver explained,

Blocks in the city with more than 75% black residents did not exist until 1950 . . . by 1960 with the large increase in the black population, a somewhat contiguous area of high black concentration (over 50%) became evident. This area was referred to as THE INNER CORE – NORTH about that time.¹⁶³

Washington and Oliver referred to Milwaukee's area with high Black concentration as the Inner Core. It should be noted that the Inner Core and Milwaukee Bronzeville were not the same area. Milwaukee Bronzeville was an area inside the Inner Core. The *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee* describes the location of the Inner Core as “bounded by Juneau Avenue on the south, 20th Street on the west, Holton Street on the east, and Keefe Avenue on the north.”¹⁶⁴ This location reference expands beyond the area that has been determined as Milwaukee Bronzeville. This shows that Black Milwaukeeans still experienced the negative effects of residential segregation because only a portion of the entire area of Black concentration was considered a thriving community.

The inception of Milwaukee Bronzeville shows the inescapable effects of residential segregation on Black Milwaukeeans between 1920 and 1970. Although Black Milwaukeeans were confined to certain areas of the city, this did not prevent them from creating their own destiny within those areas. This chapter will discuss how Milwaukee Bronzeville residents resisted residential segregation through Black autonomous practices. In addition, this chapter will reveal how Milwaukee Bronzeville residents used Black autonomous practices simultaneously as a stepping stone towards integration and towards self-sufficiency. First, this

¹⁶³ R.O. Washington and John Oliver, *An Historical Account of Blacks in Milwaukee*, (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban Observatory, 1976), 55.

¹⁶⁴ Krista Grensavitch, “Inner Core,” *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/inner-core/>.

chapter will review relevant literature about Black Milwaukee and residential segregation. Last, this chapter will take a deeper look at the Black autonomous practices of Milwaukee Bronzeville residents between 1920 and 1970, examining how Milwaukee Bronzeville became the thriving community it is now known to be.

Literature Review

Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45 by Joe Trotter is the most comprehensive scholarship that details the history, struggles, and proletarianization of Black Milwaukeeans from 1870 to 1945, focusing on the years 1915 to 1945. Trotter's main argument in *Black Milwaukee* is a challenge to the ghetto synthesis model and advancement of the proletarianization model instead. The ghetto synthesis model was at the center of Black historical and sociological studies at the time of release of *Black Milwaukee*. The ghetto synthesis model explained the conditions of African Americans living in segregated communities. Historian Roger Biles in the article "Black Milwaukee and the Ghetto Synthesis" describes the ghetto synthesis model as, "the fundamental analytical tool for examining the circumstances of African Americans in cities, these studies principally recounted the creation of segregated living spaces and described the hostile black-white interactions that prevailed in the urban North."¹⁶⁵ On the contrary, Trotter focused on the proletarianization of Afro Americans in Milwaukee between 1915 and 1945. Trotter explains that the proletarianization model "attempts to focus our attention not merely on the 'making of the ghetto' but also upon the 'making of an Afro-American industrial working class.'"¹⁶⁶ Trotter's challenge to the ghetto synthesis model

¹⁶⁵ Roger Biles, "Black Milwaukee and the Ghetto Synthesis," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 4 (2007): 540, doi: 10.1177/0096144206298476.

¹⁶⁶ Joe W. Trotter Jr., "Preface" in *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), xii.

and proposal of the proletarianization model offers a unique historical narrative of Black Milwaukee.

Furthermore, Trotter gives a historical overview of the expansion of Milwaukee's Black population, which he states began to grow as the city shifted to an urban-industrial economy between 1870 and 1914.¹⁶⁷ Black people rapidly moved from southern states such as Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama to Milwaukee and positioned themselves better economically as a result.¹⁶⁸ Their wages were increased compared to the South and the working conditions were better; however, they still faced adversity. African Americans experienced racial barriers to economic, social, and political opportunities after migrating to Milwaukee. Due to racist attitudes, they experienced discrimination in jobs and labor unions and received unequal payment for work compared to their white counterparts.¹⁶⁹ The Milwaukee Urban League (MUL) in 1926 determined that poor housing was the main issue Black Milwaukeeans faced.¹⁷⁰ Statistics show that 90 percent of plats filed after 1910 refused to sell property to Blacks.¹⁷¹ In addition, there were health hazards, rats, overcrowding, declining births, and rising death rates because of poor housing.¹⁷² Unfortunately, Black Milwaukeeans could not finance better housing to change these conditions.¹⁷³ As a result, Milwaukee's Black community expanded northward and was concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods, becoming segregated.

Although Black Milwaukeeans faced racial barriers, the Black middle class still emerged between 1915-1932. The emergence of the Black middle class resulted in what Trotter described as a "Black Metropolis, a city within a city, that would fundamentally cater to the needs of Afro-

¹⁶⁷ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 3.

¹⁶⁸ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 45.

¹⁶⁹ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 47.

¹⁷⁰ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 70.

¹⁷¹ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 71.

¹⁷² Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 70.

¹⁷³ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 70.

Americans.”¹⁷⁴ According to Trotter, by the late 1920s approximately 150 Black businesses emerged in Milwaukee, with majority of the businesses located “west to Seventh Street and north to Walnut Street”¹⁷⁵ which is the Milwaukee Bronzeville district. Trotter stated, “the growing black population, increasingly concentrated in a sharply circumscribed area of the city, formed the basis of Afro-American business and professional expansion during the 1920s.”¹⁷⁶ Despite the successful establishment of many Black businesses, Black business owners faced challenges such as lack of capital and competition from white chains.¹⁷⁷ Another challenge was that Black businesses almost exclusively served an all-black clientele between 1915 and 1932.¹⁷⁸ With Black residents being only a minority of the population, their clientele and revenue was limited being almost exclusively Black.

Lastly, Trotter shares the different types of Black businesses and organizations that emerged in Milwaukee starting in 1920: restaurants, hotels, shoe shine parlors, grocery stores, beauty shops, funeral parlors, loan associations, drug stores, churches, and more.¹⁷⁹ In addition, Trotter provides background information about some of these Black business owners and the Black professionals who served as leaders in Milwaukee’s community. Overall, Trotters’ examination of Black Milwaukee between 1915 and 1945 is not only limited to the struggles Black Milwaukeeans faced after migrating, but also the success they achieved through their determination to establish better opportunities for Milwaukee’s Black community.

Additionally, *The Selma of the North* by Patrick Jones is a summary of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee from 1958 to 1970. Like *Black Milwaukee*, Jones begins *The Selma of*

¹⁷⁴ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 80.

¹⁷⁵ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 83.

¹⁷⁶ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 83.

¹⁷⁷ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 92.

¹⁷⁸ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 83.

¹⁷⁹ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 83-90.

the North with a historical narrative of early Black settlements in Milwaukee and how this impacted the development of segregated Black neighborhoods which Jones refers to by its various monikers: “Little Africa,” “Bronzeville,” and “Inner Core.”¹⁸⁰ Throughout the book, Jones mostly refers to the segregated Black area of Milwaukee as the Inner Core, and refers to the residents as “Inner Core residents.”¹⁸¹ Jones describes the several protests starting in 1958 organized by Inner Core residents, Milwaukee leaders, and organizations that challenged racial injustices affecting Milwaukee’s Black community: police violence, school and housing segregation, and employment discrimination. Housing and school segregation were the major issues Black Milwaukeeans challenged with the support from three notable Milwaukee civil rights leaders: Lloyd Barbee, Father Groppi, and Vel Phillips.

Lloyd Barbee, an attorney, advocated for school integration through legal action, his leadership in the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC), and through boycotting Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Father Groppi, a Milwaukee priest, also served as a leader in Milwaukee’s school desegregation movement, leading protests with the NAACP Youth Council,¹⁸² becoming vice president of MUSIC, and advocating for more militant action within the movement.¹⁸³ Groppi’s advocacy for more militant action led to the creation of the Commandos and the emergence of Black Power politics in Milwaukee. The Commandos was an unarmed, “not-violent,”¹⁸⁴ militant NAACP group¹⁸⁵ that aimed to protect protestors from violent white hostility and harassment.¹⁸⁶ Black Power politics were not easily embraced or

¹⁸⁰ Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 19.

¹⁸¹ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 35.

¹⁸² Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 111.

¹⁸³ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 101.

¹⁸⁴ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 133.

¹⁸⁵ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 131.

¹⁸⁶ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 132-133.

accepted among whites and some Black leaders in Milwaukee; however, Groppi fully embraced the Black Power ideology and clarified that the message of Black Power was not anti-white but equal opportunities for Black people in economics, politics, and education.¹⁸⁷

Not only this, but also Groppi advocated for fair housing alongside Vel Phillips. Phillips, the first African American and first woman elected to Milwaukee's Common Council, fought for fair housing in Milwaukee through proposing legislation and participating in open housing protests. Groppi and Phillips among other civil rights leaders and community members participated in the August 1967 to March 1968, 200 consecutive day marches for open housing in Milwaukee.¹⁸⁸ With the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. occurring on April 4th, 1968, the month after the open housing protests ended, the federal government proposed a fair housing bill which persuaded Milwaukee's Mayor Henry Maier, to endorse a fair housing ordinance for Milwaukee.¹⁸⁹ Altogether, Jones provides an in-depth historical narrative of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee from 1958 to 1970, describing the several impactful protests, marches, and campaigns used to challenge racial injustice in Milwaukee.

The scholarship of Trotter and Jones provides a detailed historical narrative of Black Milwaukee between 1870 to 1970, providing accounts of Black Milwaukee and its residents. However, literature written for more public audiences such as *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle: A Historical Overview, Milwaukee's Bronzeville, 1900-1950, Wisconsin* and *Voices of Milwaukee Bronzeville* are specific historical accounts focusing solely on Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhood.¹⁹⁰¹⁹¹¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 137-139.

¹⁸⁸ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 200.

¹⁸⁹ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 208.

¹⁹⁰ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*.

¹⁹¹ Paul H. Geenen, *Milwaukee's Bronzeville, 1900-1950* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006).

¹⁹² Sandra E. Jones, *Voices of Milwaukee Bronzeville* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2021).

First, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle: A Historical Overview* by Ivory Abena Black provides a historical account of the Milwaukee Bronzeville neighborhood, its community members, economic success, and destruction due to urban renewal and the construction of the I-43 freeway. Black credits C.L. Johnson and Bernice Copeland Lindsay as the mother and father of the Milwaukee African American community.¹⁹³ C.L. Johnson was the founder of the Booker T. Washington YMCA, leader in the St. Mark AME Church, and owner of a tailoring business in Milwaukee.¹⁹⁴ Bernice Lindsay was the first Black director of the YMCA and founder of the Hillside Terrace apartment community.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, Black shares details about the numerous businesses located in the heart of Bronzeville, which was Lower Walnut Street. The businesses located in Lower Walnut Street included Black-owned restaurants, nightclubs with a thriving jazz scene, hotels, barber shops, cafés, and more.¹⁹⁶ In addition, Black includes images of advertisements from the 1951-1952 “Negro Business Directory of the State of Wisconsin.” The directory included advertisements of Black owned businesses and Black churches located in Milwaukee Bronzeville.¹⁹⁷ In addition, Black includes a supplement titled “Milwaukee Black Heritage Part I” published in 1973 by the Black newspaper the *Milwaukee Courier*. The supplement includes accomplishments made by Black Milwaukeeans especially the many firsts of the Milwaukee Black community: first Black doctor, first Black policeman, first Black mortician, and more.¹⁹⁸ Lastly, Black discusses the destruction of Milwaukee’s Bronzeville neighborhood due to the Urban Renewal Act and construction of the I-43 freeway. The Urban Renewal Act, enacted in 1949, aimed to improve inner city neighborhoods through the

¹⁹³ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 14.

¹⁹⁴ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 14.

¹⁹⁵ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 13-14.

¹⁹⁶ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 15.

¹⁹⁷ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 25-31.

¹⁹⁸ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 33-49.

revitalization of homes and buildings. As a result of the Urban Renewal Act, buildings in Lower Walnut Street were removed. Not only this, but simultaneously, the construction of the I-43 freeway cut through the Bronzeville community and destroyed 8,000 homes.¹⁹⁹ Overall, Black provides readers with a detailed history of Milwaukee Bronzeville from its origin to its unfortunate destruction.

Second, *Milwaukee's Bronzeville, 1900-1950, Wisconsin* by Paul H. Geenen illustrates the several components that made up Milwaukee Bronzeville through images: churches, schools, sports, entertainment, community relations, and community leaders. Each chapter focuses on a specific component of Milwaukee Bronzeville and includes a brief history of each component before displaying the images. The images in the book are paired with descriptions that explain who or what the image is illustrating and its significance to the Milwaukee Bronzeville community.

Third, *Voices of Milwaukee Bronzeville* by Sandra Jones is the most recent scholarship written about Milwaukee Bronzeville. The book includes profiles of eight former Milwaukee Bronzeville residents. Each profile is a biography of the resident, detailing when they were born, where they grew up in Milwaukee Bronzeville, and experiences growing up there. Residents described the experiences growing up in Milwaukee Bronzeville that shaped their lives: community gatherings at Lapham Park, nightlife on Walnut Street, church services, receiving mentorship, and attending the schools within their neighborhood boundaries. Altogether, the three books provide a comprehensive narrative on the origins, economic success, residents, community relations, and destruction of Milwaukee Bronzeville.

¹⁹⁹ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 20-21.

Similarly, Black geography scholarship details how Black residents created thriving communities within cities. Brand and Miller's 2020 study "Tomorrow I'll Be at the Table: Black Geographies and Urban Planning" examines Black geography literature and its significance to urban planning. Brand and Miller examined works that illustrate Black communities' resistance in urban neighborhoods. First, Brand and Miller reviewed Carol Stack's 1974 book *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. *All our Kin* emphasizes the survival techniques of Black residents living in segregated neighborhoods. Brand and Miller argued, "Stack's analysis shows that while black communities suffer economically, socially, and politically, their kinship networks provide a powerful mechanism to counter the socioeconomic consequences of racial segregation."²⁰⁰ Second, Brand and Miller reviewed Stephen Gregory's book *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community*. *Black Corona* examines politics and activism in a Black community in New York. Brand and Miller argued, "Gregory challenges the notion that black neighborhoods are 'socially disorganized,' instead fleshing out the myriad ways that poor black residents learn to navigate an urban world that has largely left them behind."²⁰¹ Lastly, Brand and Miller reviewed Marcus Hunter's book *Black City Makers: How The Philadelphia Negro Changed Urban America*. *Black City Makers* examines the district previously known as Philadelphia's Black Seventh Ward and is a continuation of W.E.B DuBois' 1899 study *The Philadelphia Negro*. Hunter examines Black activism in response to racially targeted neighborhood changes such as the construction of an urban renewal project expressway in the district. Brand and Miller argued that Hunter's analysis reveals "blacks have played active, rather than passive, roles in the changing dynamics of their neighborhood."²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Anna Livia Brand and Charles Miller, "Tomorrow I'll Be at the Table: Black Geographies and Urban Planning: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Planning Literature* 35, no 4 (2020): 463, doi:10.1177/0885412220928575.

²⁰¹ Brand and Miller, "Tomorrow I'll Be at the Table," 464.

²⁰² Brand and Miller, "Tomorrow I'll Be at the Table," 464.

Overall, Brand and Miller’s study featured Black geography literature that examined Black residents’ resistance while living in segregated communities.

Furthermore, in the article “Black Placemaking: Celebration, Play, and Poetry,” Hunter et al. offers a counternarrative to existing literature that negatively depict urban Black neighborhoods as toxic environments.²⁰³ Using Chicago as their case study, Hunter et al. define what Black placemaking practices are and provide examples of Black placemaking practices in neighborhoods like Chicago’s Bronzeville district. Hunter et al. define Black placemaking as “the ability of residents to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics.”²⁰⁴ Hunter et al. explain that Black placemaking occurs because of residential segregation, and it is a practice used to resist against it. They stated, “black placemaking occurs within a context of racial residential segregation, high unemployment, bad schools, urban violence, police brutality and a broad array of destructive urban policies . . . we recognize black placemaking as a form of resistance to those offensives.”²⁰⁵ Lastly, Hunter et al. explain how Black Chicagoans practice placemaking to create their own thriving neighborhoods stating, “black Chicagoans have always transformed segregated and often violently enforced neighborhood boundaries into a ‘Black Metropolis.’ They have turned ‘segregation into congregation.”²⁰⁶ In all, “Black Placemaking” offers a positive narrative about Black segregated communities, describing how residents shift oppressive spaces to spaces of freedom.

Although the historical scholarship on Black Milwaukee and Black geographies offers positive narratives about how Black residents resisted and thrived in segregated Black communities, not all literature shares this same narrative. Other scholarly literature reveals how

²⁰³ Marcus Anthony Hunter et al., “Black Placemaking: Celebration, Play, and Poetry,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 33, no.7-8 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416635259>.

²⁰⁴ Hunter et al., “Black Placemaking,” 4.

²⁰⁵ Hunter et al., “Black Placemaking,” 5.

²⁰⁶ Hunter et al., “Black Placemaking,” 4.

Black residents' quality of life is negatively impacted growing up in segregated Black communities.

Sociologists Douglas Massey, Gretchen Condran, and Nancy Denton conducted a 1987 study titled, "The Effect of Residential Segregation on Black Social and Economic Well-Being." They studied the detrimental effects of residential segregation on Black residents in Philadelphia. In this study Massey et al. found that upper class Blacks who resided in integrated areas of better quality had better outcomes such as higher housing values, less physical dilapidation, lower crime rates, better public schools, and better mortality rates.²⁰⁷ In addition, Massey et al. detailed the differences between segregated Black communities and majority white communities stating, "patterns of residential segregation have separated blacks and whites into two vastly different environments: one that is poor, crime-ridden, unhealthy, unsafe, and educationally inferior, and another that is markedly richer, safer, healthier, and educationally superior."²⁰⁸

Moreover, Massey continued this argument in a 2017 article titled, "Why Death Haunts Black Lives." Massey argued that high levels of Black residential segregation cause disadvantaged neighborhood circumstances, resulting in Black Americans having poorer health and mortality outcomes compared to their white counterparts.²⁰⁹ Massey stated, in metropolitan areas like Milwaukee, "blacks display substantially diminished life chances compared with whites and other groups."²¹⁰ Also, Massey shared a list of neighborhood disadvantages Black residents face as a result of residential segregation: high rates of violence, crime, infant mortality, homicide, interpersonal connection, political efficacy, low life expectancy rates, and

²⁰⁷ Douglas S. Massey, Gretchen A. Condran, and Nancy A. Denton, "The Effect of Residential Segregation on Black Social and Economic Well-Being," *Social Forces* 66, no.1 (1987): 41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2578899>.

²⁰⁸ Massey et al., "The Effect of Residential Segregation," 42.

²⁰⁹ Douglas S. Massey, "Why Death Haunts Black Lives," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 114, no.5 (2017): 801, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26479090>.

²¹⁰ Massey, "Why Death Haunts Black Lives," 800.

higher exposure to environmental hazards.²¹¹ In summary, Massey, Condran, and Denton's research show how residential segregation negatively affects many areas of Black residents' lives.

Altogether, the literature examines Black residents' resistance and experiences living in segregated Black neighborhoods in Milwaukee and other American cities; however, there are gaps in the literature to fill. Both Trotter and Jones in their historical accounts of Black Milwaukee discussed Black resistance in Milwaukee entirely, not specifically in Milwaukee's Bronzeville district. This thesis will focus solely on Black resistance within the boundaries of Milwaukee's Bronzeville district and the people who lived there. In addition, this thesis will analyze Black autonomous practices as forms of resistance in Milwaukee Bronzeville between 1920 and 1970. Trotter's historical account did not cover past 1945, which was when Milwaukee had a large surge in Black population growth. Lastly, this thesis will frame Milwaukee Bronzeville as a space of resistance and analyze it as its own separate entity to compare it to a Black town. The literature specific to Milwaukee Bronzeville has encompassed the space as an economic hub and a joyous cultural community. However, this thesis will focus on how Black autonomous practices represent not only economic opportunity and pleasure, but also, resistance against white supremacy.

Black Autonomous Practices in Milwaukee Bronzeville

Local Businesses and Community Organizations

Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy by establishing a plethora of Black-owned businesses and organizations that catered to the community. Three influential businesses

²¹¹ Massey, "Why Death Haunts Black Lives," 800.

and organizations were the Columbia Loans and Savings Association, the Carver Memorial Homes Inc., and Larry's Lunch-ette.

The Columbia Loans and Savings Association was a Black-owned financial institution that provided loans to Milwaukee Bronzeville residents.²¹² Founders Wilbur and Ardie Halyard began preparing to open the financial institution in April of 1923, and it officially opened for business on January 2nd, 1925.²¹³ The Halyards established the financial institution because they recognized the poor housing options available to Black residents and the inability to finance better housing due to the lack of capital in the Black community.²¹⁴ An advertisement declared the goals for the financial institution stating, “the objective of a savings and loan association in any community is to teach thrift, the values of home ownership, and the means by which it may be accomplished.”²¹⁵ The Halyards were committed to helping Black residents climb the socioeconomic ladder through home and business ownership,²¹⁶ and they knew establishing a financial institution that gave Black residents equal access to loans would accomplish that. The Columbia Loans and Savings Association is an example of how Milwaukee Bronzeville used Black autonomous practices to integrate into the larger society and for self-sufficiency. During a time when Black Milwaukeeans were excluded from housing opportunities because of discriminatory financial lending practices, the Columbia Loans and Savings Association offered Milwaukee Bronzeville residents financial opportunities that would better position them to integrate into non-Black neighborhoods. At the same time, the Columbia Loans and Savings Association gave Milwaukee Bronzeville residents opportunities to practice self-sufficiency through home and business ownership.

²¹² Paul H. Geenen, *Milwaukee's Bronzeville, 1900-1950, Wisconsin*.

²¹³ Mary Ellen Shadd, “Negro Business Directory of the State of Wisconsin,” (Milwaukee, WI: Mary Ellen Shadd, 1950), 40.

²¹⁴ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 12.

²¹⁵ Mary Ellen Shadd, “Negro Business Directory,” 40.

²¹⁶ Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 12.

Another local organization that practiced Black autonomy in Milwaukee Bronzeville was Carver Memorial Homes Inc. The organization was established in 1943 and sought to secure housing for Black workers and Black war veterans.²¹⁷ Members of the organization were strong advocates for Black autonomous solutions and self-sufficiency to address issues in the Black community. One of the members stated, “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.”²¹⁸ Bernice Lindsay, who was one of the founders and served as secretary for the organization, was also a strong advocate for Black autonomy. Lindsay played an integral role in establishing housing projects for Black residents in Bronzeville and across the city of Milwaukee. There were two housing projects Carver Memorial Homes Inc. established in the Bronzeville district. The first housing project was located on the southeast corner of North Seventh and West Galena Streets.²¹⁹ The second was located on the 1800 block of North Fourth street; it was a 10-unit family housing project that opened in 1944.²²⁰ In addition, Lindsay independently purchased lots to build homes as well as purchased dilapidated homes and renovated them for Black residents outside of the Bronzeville area.²²¹ In contrast to the Columbia Loans and Savings Association, Bernice Lindsay and Carver Memorial Homes Inc. did not focus on housing opportunities that supported integration. Instead, Lindsay and Carver Memorial Homes Inc. fully embodied Black autonomy and self-sufficiency to offer better housing for Black Milwaukeeans in Bronzeville and across Milwaukee.

²¹⁷ Bernard Apeku, “They Were Not Sitting Ducks: Rethinking Black Activism in Housing and Urban Renewal in Late Nineties Milwaukee,” *History and Urban Studies 971: Seminar on the History of American Urban Problems* (2022): 7, https://dc.uwm.edu/history_hist97/5.

²¹⁸ Bernard Apeku, “They Were Not Sitting Ducks,” 8.

²¹⁹ Bernard Apeku, “They Were Not Sitting Ducks,” 7.

²²⁰ Bernard Apeku, “They Were Not Sitting Ducks,” 8.

²²¹ Bernard Apeku, “They Were Not Sitting Ducks,” 7-8.

Lastly, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy through establishing restaurants such as Larry’s Lunch-ette that served southern cuisine. Formerly known as Larry’s Chicken Shack, Larry’s Lunch-ette was a popular Bronzeville restaurant located on West Walnut Street. The restaurant was established in 1946 by Lawrence “Larry” Victor Hill.²²² The restaurant specialized in southern fried chicken and frozen custard stating in its tagline, “where chicken is king and frozen custard queen.”²²³ At the time, Hill was one of the first Black restaurant owners in Milwaukee.²²⁴ Ray Hill, the granddaughter of Larry Hill revealed the support the restaurant received from Black celebrities stating, “Boxers like Joe Lewis would come, Duke Ellington, to help support.”²²⁵ Larry’s Lunch-ette was not only known for its chicken and custard but also its welcoming environment. Ray Hill confirmed the restaurant was “a spot and opportunity for young people to come and enjoy themselves in a place where they felt comfortable.”²²⁶ Larry’s Lunch-ette along with Columbia Loans and Savings Association and Carver Memorial Homes Inc., were all businesses and organizations that helped Bronzeville residents build community. Through Black autonomy, Columbia Loans and Savings gave Bronzeville residents access to financial loans to build wealth. Carver Memorial Homes Inc. gave Bronzeville residents access to better housing, and Larry’s Lunch-ette gave residents a comfortable environment with a taste of the South.

Health Services

²²² Kitonga Alexander, “Larry Hill – Larry’s Lunch-ette,” Milwaukee’s Bronzeville Histories, <https://milwaukeebronzevillehistories.org/items/show/27>.

²²³ Mary Ellen Shadd, “Negro Business Directory,” 66.

²²⁴ Kitonga Alexander, “Larry Hill Larry’s Lunch-ette,” Milwaukee’s Bronzeville Histories.

²²⁵ “Melissa Barclay, “Milwaukee’s Bronzeville Neighborhood celebrates a rich history with a bright future,” WTMJ, February 7, 2022, <https://wtmj.com/wisconsins-afternoon-news/2022/02/07/milwaukees-bronzeville-neighborhood-celebrates-a-rich-history-with-bright-future/>.

²²⁶ Melissa Barclay, “Milwaukee’s Bronzeville Neighborhood celebrates a rich history with a bright future.”

Furthermore, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy by establishing Black-owned health care practices. These Black owned health care practices catered to the health needs of the community when Black residents faced discrimination from local health care facilities. Black health care professionals such as doctors, dentists, surgeons, and pharmacists ran practices in Milwaukee Bronzeville to serve the community. According to the 1950-1951 Negro Business Directory of Wisconsin, there were four Black dentists,²²⁷ two pharmacists,²²⁸ and six physicians/surgeons²²⁹ practicing in Milwaukee Bronzeville. Among the doctors and dentists practicing in Milwaukee Bronzeville were Dr. Malcolm M. King, Dr. Peter C. Murrell, Dr. Vernon Moore, and Dr. Fred D. Bobo. Dr. King was a Black physician who practiced near North Sixth and West Walnut Street starting in the late 1920s and into the 1950s.²³⁰²³¹ On the other hand, Dr. Murrell, Dr. Moore, and Dr. Bobo were Black dentists who all graduated from Marquette University with their degrees in dentistry. Dr. Moore graduated from dental school in 1919 and opened his private dental practice on North Tenth Street in 1920.²³² Dr. Bobo graduated from dental school in 1926 and opened his private dental practice on West Walnut Street in 1929.²³³ Lastly, Dr. Murrell graduated from dental school in 1947 and began his private dental practice around 1950 on North Seventh Street.²³⁴

In addition, community health services such as the Community Drug Store and mobile chest X-ray clinics were other ways Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy. The

²²⁷ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 65.

²²⁸ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 79.

²²⁹ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 79.

²³⁰ Jill Florence Lackey PhD, "Yesterday's Milwaukee: The Rise and Fall of Bronzeville," Urban Milwaukee, August 5, 2017, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2017/08/05/yesterdays-milwaukee-the-rise-and-fall-of-bronzeville/>.

²³¹ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 79.

²³² Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 33.

²³³ Kitonga Alexander, "Fred D Bobo Dental Office in Bronzeville," Milwaukee's Bronzeville Histories, <https://milwaukeebronzevillehistories.org/items/show/22>.

²³⁴ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 33.

Community Drug Store was a Black owned drug store that opened in 1925 on North Seventh and West Cherry Streets. Dr. P. Jay Gilmer, a pharmacist, supervised the store; however, the store's board members consisted of Black professionals such as business owners, attorneys, doctors, and pastors.²³⁵ In addition, due to the increase in deaths of tuberculosis, mobile X-ray clinics were established in Bronzeville. An advertisement promoting the health clinics stated, "did you know that the death rate from tuberculosis in Milwaukee's Negro Community is over four times as high the rate for the state of Wisconsin?"²³⁶ The X-ray clinic stopped in Milwaukee Bronzeville on the corner of Eighth and Walnut the first Wednesday of every month.²³⁷ In sum, the establishment of the Community Drug Store, free X-ray clinics, and physician and dental practices by Black health care professionals were some of the ways Milwaukee Bronzeville catered to the health needs of the community while facing exclusion from health care facilities in the city.

Black Newspapers

Other ways Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy was through establishing Black newspapers. Two Black newspapers located in the Milwaukee Bronzeville district were *The Milwaukee Globe* and *The Milwaukee Star*. *The Milwaukee Globe* was a weekly newspaper published from 1948 to 1949. The newspaper operated on West Walnut Street near North Ninth, and it was established by Sanford Carter, Vincent Bevenue, Lawrence Saunders, and John Williams.²³⁸ In the 1960s, the *Milwaukee Star* was born because of the need for a quality Black newspaper.²³⁹ The *Star* was established in 1962 by publisher Kenneth C.

²³⁵ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 86.

²³⁶ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 114.

²³⁷ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 114.

²³⁸ Richard G. Carter, "Milwaukee Star Blazed a Trail for Black Journalism in the Early 1960s," *Shepherd Express*, March 16, 2022, <https://shepherdexpress.com/culture/milwaukee-history/milwaukee-star-blazed-a-trail-for-black-journalism-in-the-ca/>.

²³⁹ Carter, "Milwaukee Star Blazed a Trail for Black Journalism in the Early 1960s."

Coulter who assembled the initial staff which included editors Jay Anderson and Walter Jones.²⁴⁰ The *Star* was located on North Third Street. The *Star* became known as the “Voice of the Negro in Wisconsin”²⁴¹ and “the civil rights paper.”²⁴² The *Star* had the opportunity to interview Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in January of 1964, which was a pivotal opportunity for them.²⁴³ Both the *Milwaukee Star* and the *Milwaukee Globe* saw a gap in the representation of Black voices in newspaper; therefore, they practiced autonomy and created Black owned newspapers to change that.

Freedom Schools

On the other hand, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced Black autonomy in their schools. Residential segregation not only impacted where residents lived but also where they attended school. Because of this, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were confined to 10 schools,²⁴⁴ and Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) were hypersegregated. Fourth Street School (now known as Golda Meir), Ninth Street School, Roosevelt Junior High, and North Division High School were among 4 of the 10 schools Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were confined to. 1965 Milwaukee school board data revealed how segregated MPS was. Of the 147 public schools, 106 had more than 90% white enrollment and 17 had more than 90% Black enrollment. The data revealed, “at least 86 of the city’s elementary schools, all 15 junior high schools, and all but 2 of the city’s high schools are segregated schools, either white or Negro.”²⁴⁵ The percentage of non-white enrollment at schools in the Milwaukee Bronzeville district support this data.

²⁴⁰ Carter, “Milwaukee Star Blazed a Trail for Black Journalism in the Early 1960s.”

²⁴¹ Carter, “Milwaukee Star Blazed a Trail for Black Journalism in the Early 1960s.”

²⁴² “News Agencies | March on Milwaukee - Libraries Digital Collection,” <https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/news-agencies/>.

²⁴³ Carter, “Milwaukee Star Blazed a Trail for Black Journalism in the Early 1960s.”

²⁴⁴ Geenen, *Milwaukee’s Bronzeville*, 39.

²⁴⁵ Yellow Pamphlet with a quote by James B. Conant, Box 22, Folder 17. Vel Phillips Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries’ Archives Department / Milwaukee Area Research Center.

Between 1966 and 1967 the percentage of non-white enrollment at 4 Milwaukee Bronzeville district schools were as follows: North Division High School 99.67%; Roosevelt Junior High 99.32%; Fourth Street School 99.18%; Ninth Street School 98.78%.²⁴⁶ Residential segregation was a direct result of school segregation, limiting the educational options for Milwaukee Bronzeville residents.

Although Milwaukee Bronzeville resident's educational options were limited, Milwaukee leaders and Bronzeville residents resisted school segregation through Black autonomous solutions. One of the main leaders of the Milwaukee school desegregation effort was Lloyd Barbee. Barbee was a civil rights leader, state legislator, and attorney. In addition, Barbee was the head of the organization Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) which was dedicated to ending school segregation. Under Barbee's leadership, MUSIC on occasion coordinated Freedom Day Schools (also abbreviated as Freedom Schools). Freedom Schools protested school segregation and the inferior education Black students were receiving in segregated public schools. Freedom Schools were defined as "public and peaceful protest against unequal educational opportunities in Milwaukee."²⁴⁷ Freedom Schools were one-day protests that encouraged parents to withdraw their children from school and bring them to a Freedom School closest to their home.

MUSIC held Freedom Schools across the Milwaukee community on May 18th, 1964, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*

²⁴⁶ Poor Ratings and Assigned to Other Black Schools, "Non-White Enrollment Percentages 1966-67," Box 112, Folder 6. Lloyd Barbee Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries' Archives Department / Milwaukee Area Research Center.

²⁴⁷ Seventh to twelfth grade schedules and curriculae [sic] page 6, ca. 1964-965, Box 1, Folder 6, Barnhill Papers, School Curricula, Schedules, and Records of MUSIC (selections), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries' Archives Department / Milwaukee Area Research Center.

that declared racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional on May 17th, 1954.²⁴⁸ MUSIC provided a list of 33 churches and community centers that would serve as Freedom Schools for the day.²⁴⁹ University professors and students, artists, and musicians, were among the teachers who taught at Freedom Schools.²⁵⁰ Freedom Schools were offered to primary grade levels to twelfth grade. Each Freedom School location specified the grade level it served: elementary, junior high school, and senior high school.²⁵¹ This allowed parents to choose which location to send their children to, based on their age and proximity to their home. In addition, each grade level had its own curriculum and activities; however, as a whole, the curriculum of Freedom Schools focused on students, teachers, and the community learning new ways to liberate each other.²⁵² An informational sheet about Freedom Schools summarized what the curriculum encompassed, “the meaning and responsibility of freedom; Negro heritage; history and techniques of non-violent direct action; the civil rights movement in the nation and in Milwaukee.”²⁵³ Even more, Freedom Schools provided creative learning instruction that encouraged expression through art, dance, drama, and debates to discuss these topics. In sum, Freedom Schools allowed students to learn about Black liberation and express themselves while fighting for freedom in the public school system.

Furthermore, a Milwaukee Bronzeville district school, North Division High School, held its own Freedom School protest on March 28th, 1966. North Division High School led its own

²⁴⁸ 9 Freedom Day School, keep your children out of school,” ca. 1964-1965, Box 1, Folder 3, MUSIC Records, Freedom Day School, May 18, 1964, and Public School Boycott, October 1965, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries’ Archives Department / Milwaukee Area Research Center.

²⁴⁹ 19-1 Freedom Day parent instructions side 1, ca.1964-1965, Box 1, Folder 3, MUSIC Records, Freedom Day School, May 18, 1964, and Public School Boycott, October 1965.

²⁵⁰ 3 What is a Freedom School - Informational Sheet No.2, ca. 1964-1965, Box 1, Folder 3, MUSIC Records, Freedom Day School, May 18, 1964, and Public School Boycott, October 1965.

²⁵¹ 19-1 Freedom Day parent instructions side 1, May 18, 1964, Box 1, Folder 3, MUSIC Records, Freedom Day School and Public School Boycott, October 1965.

²⁵² Seventh to twelfth grade schedules and curriculae, [sic] page 2, ca. 1964-1965, Box 1, Folder 6, Barnhill Papers, School Curricula, Schedules, and Records of MUSIC (selections).

²⁵³ What is a Freedom School - Informational Sheet No.2, page 3, ca. 1964-1965, Box 1, Folder 3, MUSIC Records, Freedom Day School, May 18, 1964, and Public School Boycott, October 1965.

Freedom School protest because of the unequal education and decline in extracurricular activities offered at the school due to the increase of Black enrollment.²⁵⁴ The North Division Freedom School protest was held at 3 different clubs and churches in the Milwaukee community.²⁵⁵ A flyer promoting the boycott stated, “this will be North Division’s victory for freedom. It will show the nation, the state, and the city that North Division students are ready to stand up and be counted because they want FREEDOM now – for themselves, for their brothers and sisters, and for all Milwaukee students.”²⁵⁶ This student-led Freedom School boycott allowed Black youth who were directly impacted by school segregation to practice autonomy, creating their own ways to liberate themselves when fighting against an unliberated school system.

Overall, Freedom Schools are an example of how Milwaukee leaders and Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy to resist the segregated school system. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were receiving an inferior education in their district schools. As a result, Freedom Schools were established to create their own educational opportunities. This exemplifies how Milwaukee Bronzeville residents simultaneously practiced autonomy and advocated for integration by creating separate, one-day schools centered on Black liberation. Freedom Schools show the determination of Milwaukee Bronzeville residents who were denied equal, educational opportunities from the public school system and therefore created their own.

Faith Institutions

Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy by establishing several faith institutions in the Bronzeville district. Among these faith institutions were at least 2 African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches, 13 Baptist churches, 1 Catholic church, 2 Methodist

²⁵⁴ MUSIC press release, page 1, December 4, 1965, MUSIC Records, Box 1, Folder 6, Press Releases, 1965-1966.

²⁵⁵ Student boycott flier, March 28, 1966, Box 1, Folder 4, North Division High School Boycott, MUSIC Records.

²⁵⁶ Student boycott flier, March 28, 1966, Box 1, Folder 4, North Division High School Boycott, MUSIC Records.

churches, and 7 Church of God in Christ, also referred to as Pentecostal churches.²⁵⁷ This section will highlight two faith institutions where Bronzeville residents worshipped: St. Mark AME and Morris Memorial Church of God in Christ.

St. Mark AME is the oldest African American church in Milwaukee, founded in 1869. Ezekiel Gillespie and his wife Catherine were two of the founders of the church.²⁵⁸ Ezekiel Gillespie was a mixed-race man born to a Black woman and her white enslaver.²⁵⁹ Outside of Gillespie's involvement in founding St. Mark AME, he was also an advocate for Black suffrage. He helped secure the right to vote for Wisconsin African American residents in 1866.²⁶⁰ As the Black population grew in the 1900s, the church's congregation also grew with St. Mark AME, reaching 1000 members after 1945.²⁶¹ Since its founding, St. Mark AME has had nine locations,²⁶² one of them being in Bronzeville. Its Bronzeville location was near Eleventh Street and West Reservoir Avenue in 1953.²⁶³ Bronzeville residents were among those who worshiped at St. Mark AME,²⁶⁴ and it became known as "the friendly church" and "a guiding light to the community."²⁶⁵ St. Mark AME is significant to Milwaukee's Black History as well as Milwaukee's Bronzeville community, providing a friendly place for Black residents to worship freely.

Furthermore, Morris Memorial Church of God in Christ is another faith institution where Bronzeville residents worshipped. Morris Memorial was established in 1942 by Bishop and

²⁵⁷ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 53.

²⁵⁸ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Book Reviews," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 60, no. 3, (Spring, 1977) 183.

²⁵⁹ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Book Reviews," 180.

²⁶⁰ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Book Reviews," 182.

²⁶¹ Jenna Jacobs, "African Methodist Episcopalians," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/african-methodist-episcopalians/>.

²⁶² Jenna Jacobs, "African Methodist Episcopalians."

²⁶³ Jenna Jacobs, "African Methodist Episcopalians."

²⁶⁴ Reuben Harpole and Joseph B. Walzer, "Bronzeville," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/bronzeville/>.

²⁶⁵ Mary Ellen Shadd, "Negro Business Directory," 20.

Mother Morris. It prides itself in being a “hand clapping, foot stomping ministry.”²⁶⁶ The church had several locations within the Bronzeville district. The church’s first location in 1942 was on 1035 West Walnut Street. As the congregation grew, the church moved to a bigger location in 1945 at 537 West Vine Street. By 1949, the congregation saw it was best to build their own church building from the ground up to fit the needs of their continuously growing congregation. As a result, Bishop Morris bought two lots on Seventh Street and broke ground in 1949, making Morris Memorial Church of God in Christ the first Black church built in Milwaukee.²⁶⁷ St. Mark AME and Morris Memorial Church of God in Christ are examples of Black autonomous practices, showing how Bronzeville residents established faith institutions of cultural significance where they could worship freely.

Entertainment District

Moreover, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy by creating their own entertainment district. Because Black Milwaukeeans were not allowed in white clubs, they established their own clubs, taverns, and live music venues in Bronzeville.²⁶⁸ These venues offered entertainment such as comedy, dancing, and most notably jazz music. Milwaukee Bronzeville became known as a hub for jazz entertainment. Some of Bronzeville’s earliest venues offering live jazz music were the Metropole, established in 1922, and the Blue Room, established in the late 1920s.²⁶⁹ Bronzeville continued to establish more live music venues, and by 1950, there were 16 that offered live music in the area.²⁷⁰ Thelma’s Back Door was one of the spots that emerged in the 1950s. An advertisement for Thelma’s Back Door described it as a

²⁶⁶ “History: Morris Cathedral Church of God in Christ Milwaukee,” <https://www.morriscathedral.org/history>.

²⁶⁷ “History: Morris Cathedral Church of God in Christ Milwaukee.”

²⁶⁸ Geenen, *Milwaukee’s Bronzeville*, 57.

²⁶⁹ Benjamin Barbera, “An improved World: Jazz and Community in Milwaukee, 1950-1970,” *Theses and Dissertations* (2012) 42.

²⁷⁰ Benjamin Barbera, “An improved World,” 42-43.

place that specialized in mixed drinks, nightly entertainment, and “where your cares steal silently away.”²⁷¹ Even more, Bronzeville’s jazz scene attracted famous performers such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday. These performers resided with local Bronzeville residents during their visits since Black people were not allowed to stay in Milwaukee downtown hotels.²⁷² Although Black Milwaukeeans were excluded from white entertainment venues, they practiced Black autonomy by establishing their own thriving entertainment district in their community.

Politics and Black Power

J. Anthony Josey: Mayor of Bronzeville

Although the Milwaukee Bronzeville district was a neighborhood and not its own municipality, residents still practiced Black autonomy through political engagement and activism. For example, in 1945 Milwaukee Bronzeville residents elected its first mayor: Jarius Anthony Josey. Josey was a pioneer in Black journalism in Wisconsin. Prior to becoming the mayor of Bronzeville, Josey attended the University of Wisconsin Law School for two years and was one of the earliest African Americans to enroll there.²⁷³ In 1916, Josey along with L.J. Quisely, Z. P. Smith, and George DeReef, debuted the *Wisconsin Weekly Blade*, the first Black newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin.²⁷⁴ That same year, the newspaper merged with the Milwaukee based newspaper the *Wisconsin Enterprise*, creating a new name for the newspaper: the *Wisconsin Enterprise-Blade*. Josey became the sole editor and publisher of the merged newspaper after he purchased it in 1917.²⁷⁵ In 1925, Josey moved the newspaper to the

²⁷¹ Mary Ellen Shadd, “Negro Business Directory,” 88.

²⁷² Black, *Bronzeville A Milwaukee Lifestyle*, 15.

²⁷³ Kitonga Alexander, “J. Anthony Josey Mayor of Bronzeville,” Milwaukee Bronzeville Histories, <https://milwaukee-bronzevillehistories.org/items/show/14?tour=1&index=4>.

²⁷⁴ Library of Congress Chronicling America, “About the Wisconsin weekly blade. [volume] (Madison, Wis.) 1916-1925,” <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84025842/>.

²⁷⁵ Genevieve G. McBride and Stephen R. Byers, “The First Mayor of Black Milwaukee,” 9.

Milwaukee Bronzeville district, operating on 471 N Seventh Street.²⁷⁶ Josey became known for his unapologetic and outspoken journalism that challenged racial injustices in Wisconsin. Josey challenged segregation in Milwaukee, racially biased Wisconsin journals, advocated for Black women's voting rights, and more.²⁷⁷ Because of this reputation, Josey was unofficially elected as the mayor of Bronzeville in 1945 for his decades of advocacy in the Black community. As the mayor of Bronzeville, Josey represented the Milwaukee Bronzeville community in various ways: "Josey was selected to serve as a 'official greeter' for the district, leader of social affairs, unofficial spokesman of the Negro population, and a 'friend in need' to any and all of his constituents."²⁷⁸ Milwaukee Bronzeville residents could not hold an official election because their district was a neighborhood and not a municipality; however, this did not stop residents from practicing autonomy through political engagement and activism by choosing J. Anthony Josey as their mayor.

Vel Phillips

As the Black Power Movement emerged in the 1960s, Milwaukee's Bronzeville community adapted a Black autonomous mindset by embracing the ideology of Black Power especially in politics. The Black Power Movement was ignited by a 1966 speech by Stokely Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi.²⁷⁹ The slogan and philosophy of Black Power does not have one definition, but overall, it emphasizes racial pride, self-sufficiency, and liberation for all people of African descent.²⁸⁰ In 1968, Carmichael defined Black Power in his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* as "a call for Black people in this country to unite, to

²⁷⁶ Kitonga Alexander, "J. Anthony Josey."

²⁷⁷ Genevieve G. McBride and Stephen R. Byers, "The First Mayor of Black Milwaukee," 5-10.

²⁷⁸ Genevieve G. McBride and Stephen R. Byers, "The First Mayor of Black Milwaukee," 4.

²⁷⁹ Joseph Peniel, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006), xiii.

²⁸⁰ Lakisha Odlum, "The Black Power Movement," July 22, 2020, DPLA, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-black-power-movement>.

recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for Black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations.”²⁸¹ Black Milwaukee politicians such as Vel Phillips were influenced by the Black Power ideology and promoted it to Milwaukee’s Black community.

Vel Phillips, who was a Milwaukee Bronzeville district native and first Milwaukee Alderwoman, embraced a Black autonomous mindset as she struggled to pass a fair housing law in Milwaukee. Phillips was a strong advocate for fair housing in Milwaukee and consistently pushed for the Common Council to pass an ordinance. Phillips first advocated for a fair housing law in Milwaukee when she introduced an ordinance to the Milwaukee Common Council in February 1962²⁸²; however, the council voted against the ordinance 18-1.²⁸³ In the following years, Phillips continued to advocate for a fair housing law. In July of 1966, she made a second attempt to enact fair housing legislation through the Common Council and was turned down again.²⁸⁴ Phillips’ third attempt was in October 1966. She proposed an ordinance that would go beyond Wisconsin state law and apply to all housing in the City of Milwaukee; however, this ordinance was turned down as well.²⁸⁵ In December of 1967, the Common Council did pass a fair housing ordinance; however, the ordinance was a duplicate of the state housing law which Phillips stated “already covered Milwaukee, and would have continued to do so, with or without the city ordinance. So you see, the bill that was passed here actually does nothing, and means

²⁸¹ History.com Editors, “Stokely Carmichael,” HISTORY, June 10, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/stokely-carmichael>.

²⁸² Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 7, Vel Phillips Papers. UW-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives / Milwaukee Area Research Ctr.

²⁸³ Wisconsin Historical Society, “Vel Phillips and the Struggle for Fair Housing,” n.d,” <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS16490>.

²⁸⁴ Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 7, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁸⁵ Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 7, Vel Phillips Papers.

nothing.”²⁸⁶ By January of 1968, Phillips had introduced a fair housing bill before the Common Council five times, and it was turned down four out of five of those times.²⁸⁷

Amid constant rejection from the Common Council, Vel Phillips began publicly promoting Black autonomy during radio broadcasts in 1967. First, on April 17th, 1967, Phillips discussed the Black autonomous practices of an Indianapolis Black school teacher named Mattie Rice Coney. Coney applied principles of the Black Power Movement to improve her community in Indianapolis. Phillips shared statements from Coney about her community work because she thought her suggestions would be impactful in Milwaukee just as they had been in Indianapolis. A statement Phillips shared from Coney bluntly emphasized Black autonomy from the Black community:

We Negroes should quit feeling sorry for ourselves and take advantage of our opportunities. We should get out and work and do the best we can with what we have. I think we’ve taken the wrong approach in attacking the problem of the ghetto. First, we’ve got to learn to live in the house where we are. Then, when we get into a better one, we’ll appreciate it. Slums are made by people, not by plaster or bricks. Bad neighborhoods develop because individuals who live in them fail to do what they can . . . be independent. Instead of sitting down and waiting for something to happen, we’ve got to get up and do something for ourselves.²⁸⁸

Coney passionately declared independence and Black autonomy for the Black community. Moreover, Phillips shared the Black autonomous practices of Dr. James Comer, a well-known Black psychiatrist of Yale University on another radio broadcast on May 17th, 1967. Dr. Comer believed the most important need of the Black community was a positive group image. Phillips shared Dr. Comer’s thoughts on the tangible forms Black autonomy could take that were rooted in forming independent Black institutions and developing racial pride:

Suggestions range from developing housing and business cooperatives owned by Negro people and institutions – churches, fraternal groups, civil rights groups, athletes,

²⁸⁶ Letter addressed to Dave Jacobs from Vel Phillips, 04 January 1968, Box 10, Folder 4. Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁸⁷ Letter addressed to Dave Jacobs from Vel Phillips, 04 January 1968, Box 10, Folder 4. Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁸⁸ Radio script, 17 April 1967, Box 2, Folders 1-2, Vel Phillips Papers.

entertainers, and professional people, for example – to conducting Negro culture schools to improve the Negro child’s self-image and prepare him for high level academic work and citizenship achievement.²⁸⁹

Furthermore, Phillips expressed her approval of the Black Power Movement while giving the keynote address at the 1969 Annual Conclave of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority. Phillips stated, “The truth about the Black Power concept is that it may not be a very good concept for some folk, but for us – Black people – it is truly the best there is!”²⁹⁰ Phillips continued, “The concept of Black power is one of the most legitimate and healthy developments that has come upon the American political scene in a long time. And we should do more than merely welcome it.” As much as Phillips embraced the concept of Black Power and promoted Black Power activists’ ideologies of independent Black institutions and self-sufficiency, she still believed integration was the main goal. Later in the same keynote address Phillips stated, “Now, I too like perhaps most of you believe in color blindness – and therefore integration must be our ultimate goal.”²⁹¹ All in all, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy through political activism by electing their own mayor and by embracing Black Power politics as an alternative solution to gaining equality.

In conclusion, Milwaukee Bronzeville was a segregated Black neighborhood that formed, during the Great Migration, as the Black population in Milwaukee increased. Discriminatory practices that upheld residential segregation forced Black Milwaukeeans to reside in certain areas of the city. However, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents protested residential segregation through Black autonomous practices that promoted integration and self-sufficiency. The Columbia Loans and Savings Association and Carver Memorial Homes Inc. expanded Black Milwaukeeans’

²⁸⁹ Radio script, 17 May 1967, Box 2, Folder 12, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁹⁰ Keynote address transcript, 10 July 1969, Box 67, Folder 5, p. 3-4, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁹¹ Keynote address transcript, 10 July 1969, Box 67, Folder 5, p.13, Vel Phillips Papers.

housing and business ownership opportunities which simultaneously promoted integration and self-sufficiency. Similarly, Freedom Schools advocated for the integration of Milwaukee Bronzeville district schools while also using self-sufficiency to create one-day schools. Black led health services and other Black owned establishments such as newspapers, churches, entertainment venues, and restaurants provided Black Milwaukeeans with spaces where they could receive health care from Black professionals, voice their beliefs about civil rights issues, worship, eat southern cuisine, and enjoy jazz entertainment freely. Lastly, with leadership from J. Anthony Josey and Vel Phillips, they advocated for the integration of Milwaukee through political change, but also encouraged Milwaukee Bronzeville residents to practice autonomy. Overall, Milwaukee Bronzeville represented not only a thriving economic hub but also a place of resistance where residents used Black autonomy to challenge segregation and be self-reliant.

Chapter Four

Comparing Black Autonomy in a Black Village and Segregated Black Neighborhood

The previous chapters examined how Black residents practiced autonomy in the Black village Robbins, Illinois, and the segregated Black neighborhood Milwaukee Bronzeville. This chapter will compare Black autonomous practices in Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville, analyzing how Black autonomy is practiced similarly and differently in an involuntary segregated Black neighborhood and an intentionally created Black village. Even more, this chapter will examine racially targeted acts against Black communities and criticize the relationship between Black autonomy and Black liberation. Because Black towns were separate municipalities, they had the authority to practice more autonomy than segregated neighborhoods. However, this chapter will argue that more Black autonomy does result in more Black liberation. Also, this chapter will discuss how both Black towns and segregated Black neighborhoods can be subject to acts of racially targeted destruction, racial violence, and be viewed as racially inferior. Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that Black residents experience more liberation in Black towns and racially targeted acts against Black communities occur in different ways; however, total Black liberation is unachievable under a capitalistic system.

Similarities

The Influence of Heritage and Culture

First, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents incorporated African American heritage and southern culture into their Black autonomous practices. Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville were Black spaces that emerged during the Great Migration; therefore, some of the early Black settlers in Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville migrated from the South. As a result, residents in both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville established businesses and faith

organizations that were salient to their African American identity and southern roots. Robbins residents established a food store named American Food Store which sold soul food such as black-eyed-peas, chitterlings, neck bones, pig tails, and pigs' feet. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established restaurants such as Larry's Lunchette that served southern cuisine. Furthermore, Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established businesses that sold and played jazz music, a genre with origins in New Orleans.²⁹² Robbins residents established a record store selling blues, jazz, and gospel music, and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established a jazz entertainment district. Lastly, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established churches rooted in Black history and identity. Robbins residents established churches such as Bethel AME Church and Church of God in Christ.²⁹³ Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established St Mark AME²⁹⁴ and Morris Memorial Church of God in Christ.²⁹⁵ Both AME and Church of God in Christ are denominations founded by African Americans. The AME church was founded by Richard Allen in 1816, a formerly enslaved African American.²⁹⁶ The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) was founded in 1907 by an African American man, Charles H. Mason.²⁹⁷ Overall, the Black autonomous practices of both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were influenced by their African American culture and southern upbringing, allowing Black southern migrants to rebuild lifestyles familiar to the ones they had in the South.

²⁹² Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-5.

²⁹³ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, "Church Directory," 3 March 1951, p.4, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19510303-01.1.4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-church+directory----->.

²⁹⁴ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Book Reviews," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 60, no. 3, (Spring, 1977) 183.

²⁹⁵ "History: Morris Cathedral Church of God in Christ Milwaukee," <https://www.morriscathedral.org/history>.

²⁹⁶ "Richard Allen," *Negro History Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1941): 62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44246641>.

²⁹⁷ Clarence E. Walker, "The A.M.E. Church and Reconstruction," *Negro History Bulletin* 48, no.1 (1985): 10-12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44176613>.

Survival and Sustainment

Second, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established businesses that fulfilled needs specific to their community. Robbins residents established a newspaper, health clinics, and an airport. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established a newspaper, health clinics, financial institution, and housing developments. The newspapers established by Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were spaces to express themselves freely and share their perspectives. In *The Robbins Eagle* column “Plain Talk” by Mrs. Elinor White, she encouraged the Black community to be self-sufficient, love themselves, and have a healthy self-esteem, negating the racial inferior discourse shared about Black people in society. Similarly, *The Milwaukee Globe* known as “the civil rights paper,” gave a space for Milwaukee Bronzeville residents to share their perspectives about civil rights issues and interview civil rights leaders.

Moreover, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established health clinics and Black health professionals established private practices. Neither established a Black hospital, but this did not prevent them from establishing health services to serve the needs of the community. Both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville recognized the health disparities in tuberculosis cases among Black residents; therefore, free X-ray clinics were offered to community members. After a health survey was taken of 549 Robbins residents, at least eight had signs of tuberculosis, which was considered enough cases to cause concern for a small village.²⁹⁸ The death rate of tuberculosis in Milwaukee’s Black community was four times higher than the rate for the state of Wisconsin.²⁹⁹ Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established clinics to address health disparities in the community when establishing a hospital

²⁹⁸ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “X Ray Unit Here June 1,” 8 May 1954, p.3, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540508-01.1.3&srpos=4&e=-----en-20-TRE-1-byDA-img-txIN-tuberculosis----->.

²⁹⁹ Mary Ellen Shadd, “Negro Business Directory,” 114.

was not feasible. In addition, Black health care professionals established private practices and pharmacies in Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville. As racial discrimination and prejudice persisted, this probably influenced Black health care professionals to establish private practices, so they did not have to worry about racial discrimination when applying for jobs at major hospitals or while working at major hospitals in Milwaukee and Chicago. Simultaneously, Black health care professionals were able to serve a majority Black clientele, which also probably helped Black residents feel more comfortable knowing they could visit Black health care professionals in their own community without the fear of being discriminated against, misdiagnosed, or declined health services.

Finally, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy to fulfill specific needs in their communities. Black aviators established the Robbins airport because they were unable to use Chicago airstrips or build their own airport in Chicago. On the other hand, residential segregation and fair housing were major issues impacting Milwaukee Bronzeville residents; therefore, the Columbia Loans and Savings Association and Carver Memorial Homes Inc. were established to give Milwaukee Bronzeville residents access to better housing opportunities. All in all, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents established businesses, services, and organizations that catered to the needs of their communities and were necessary for their survival and sustainment. Altogether, Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents shared some of the same needs such as X-ray clinics, Black health care professionals, and Black newspapers, while other needs such as an airport and housing opportunities were specific to each community.

Black Capitalism as Black Liberation

You can't operate a capitalistic system unless you are vulturistic; you have to have someone else's blood to suck to be a capitalist. You show me a capitalist, I'll show you a

bloodsucker. He cannot be anything but a bloodsucker if he's going to be a capitalist. He's got to get it from somewhere other than him self, and that's where he gets it – from somewhere or someone other than himself.
Malcolm X, “At the Audubon”³⁰⁰

Lastly, both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents embraced Black capitalism as the gateway to Black liberation. There is an ongoing debate about the relationship between Black liberation and Black capitalism. Supporters of Black capitalism argue that it is the solution for African Americans to gain equality, while others believe it is a myth. Arguments supporting Black capitalism state that it benefits Black people in four ways: enhanced group power, improved consumer welfare, increased income, and increased Black pride.³⁰¹ Historically, the Black upper class were the main advocates for Black capitalism and advocated for a separate Black economy as early as 1850.³⁰²

The debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois is an early example of the divide about Black capitalism. In his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Speech known as “The Atlanta Compromise” Booker T. Washington advocated for Black self-sufficiency and racial solidarity. Washington encouraged Black people to elevate themselves through their economic achievements and in return they would earn the approval and respect of white Americans.³⁰³ On the other hand, DuBois advocated for political action, civil rights, and education, claiming that “The Talented Tenth” of college educated Black people would be the leaders in social change.³⁰⁴ DuBois, who critiqued capitalism and engaged in Marxian ideas,³⁰⁵ believed that “The Talented

³⁰⁰ Malcolm X and George Breitman, “At the Audubon,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 121.

³⁰¹ Wayne J. Villemez and John J. Beggs, “Black Capitalism and Black Inequality,” *Social Forces* 63, no.1 (1984): 123, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2578861>.

³⁰² Wayne J. Villemez and John J. Beggs, “Black Capitalism and Black Inequality,” 118.

³⁰³ Frontline PBS, “The Debate Between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington,” FRONTLINE. January 18, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/debate-w-e-b-du-bois-and-booker-t-washington/>.

³⁰⁴ Frontline PBS, “The Debate Between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington.”

³⁰⁵ Christa Buschendorf, “‘Race’ as a Function of Capitalism and Imperialism: W.E.B. Du Bois’s Appropriation of Marxian Ideas in ‘The Black Flame,’” *American Studies* 62, no.4 (2017): 567-569, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45134293>.

Tenth” would put aside their personal interests and endeavors to provide leadership to the Black community.³⁰⁶ Although DuBois held Marxian ideals, I disagree with both Washington and DuBois’ approaches to Black liberation. “The Talented Tenth” of educated Blacks would most likely be a part of the Black middle or upper class because their educational achievements would give them access to greater financial opportunities. I believe the increase of the Black bourgeoisie through educational attainment or through economic achievement is not the solution to Black liberation because Black liberation is unachievable under a capitalistic system that is inherently racist.

Before diving into my argument about why Black liberation is unachievable under Black capitalism, I will define three terms: capitalism, Black capitalism, and racial capitalism. Capitalism as defined in Arthur Tolson’s study, “Historical and Modern Trends in Black Capitalism,” is “a system of economic organization featured by the private ownership and the use of private profit of man-made and nature-made capital.”³⁰⁷ Similarly, in the same study Tolson defines Black capitalism as, “a segregated economic system, which exists alongside of or within the larger United States capitalistic system as a whole.”³⁰⁸ Lastly, racial capitalism defined by Nancy Leong is “the process of deriving social or economic value from the racial identity of another person. A person of any trace might engage in racial capitalism, as might an institution dominated by any racial group.”³⁰⁹ All three of these terms are interconnected. Racial capitalism ties all the terms together showing that capitalism is inherently a racial and white power system. It is the same system that commodified Black bodies through enslavement, yet

³⁰⁶ Juan Battle and Earl Wright II, “W.E.B. Du Bois’s Talented Tenth: A Quantitative Assessment,” *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no.6 (2002): 654, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3180968>.

³⁰⁷ Arthur L. Tolson, “Historical and Modern Trends in Black Capitalism,” *The Black Scholar* 6, no.7 (1975): 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41066364>.

³⁰⁸ Tolson, “Historical and Modern Trends in Black Capitalism,” 9.

³⁰⁹ Nancy Leong, “Racial Capitalism,” *Harvard Law Review* 126, no.8 (2013): 2153, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23415098>.

Black Americans adopted this system and desired to make it their own with hopes that it would bring them liberation. This is not logical. A system that once kept Black people in bondage will continue to keep them in bondage because the system is unchanged. Although the Civil War broke the slave system, remnants from the slave system were embedded into the new systems that followed it: sharecropping, Jim Crow Laws, and the criminal justice system. These systems continued to oppress Black Americans in similar ways, especially since Black Americans were not given reparations following the abolition of slavery to help them integrate into society. Even more, placing the word Black in front of the word capitalism does not remove the exploitative nature of capitalism. Black capitalism still exploits Black people; the only difference is that Black people are exploiting other Black people. James Foreman, in a 1969 speech titled “Total Control as the Only Solution for the Economic Needs of Black People,” supported the argument that Black capitalism exploits Black people. Foreman declared,

the people must be educated to understand that any black man or Negro who is advocating a perpetuation of capitalism inside the United States is in fact seeking not only his ultimate destruction and death but is contributing to the continuous exploitation of black people all around the world.³¹⁰

The exploitative nature of capitalism creates social stratification, allowing some Black people to climb the socioeconomic ladder while others remain stagnant. This is another reason why Black liberation is unachievable under Black capitalism. Black capitalism benefits individuals, not the entire Black community. The wealth that Black individuals gain from their economic achievement does not have a trickle-down effect to the entire Black community. Barry Bluestone in his 1969 article “Black Capitalism: The Path to Black Liberation?” supports this

³¹⁰ Robert E. Weems Jr. and Lewis A. Randolph, “The National Response to Richard M. Nixon’s Black Capitalism Initiative: The Success of Domestic Détente,” 70.

claim and argues that Black capitalism does not benefit lower income Black people but increases the Black bourgeoisie. Bluestone states,

The result, inevitably, of black entrepreneur capitalism is not the creation of an inner city economic infrastructure, but the development of a larger black bourgeoisie, which, given rising income, will quickly emigrate from the ghetto taking along both a large part of the wage bill and all of the profit . . . income will flow outward in great quantity, leaving the bulk of the ghetto residents no better off, save for a few more low wage jobs and a few more black faces across the drugstore counter. Profits are reaped by an enlarged black middle class, while the losses continue to be borne by the poor.³¹¹

Lastly, Robert L. Allen, in his book *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, also supports the claim that Black capitalism does not guarantee benefits to the entire Black community. Allen stated, "Simple transference of business ownership into black hands, either individually or collectively, is in itself no guarantee that this will benefit the total community. Blacks can exploit one another just as easily as whites."³¹² Overall, Black capitalism is beneficial to Black residents, but it is not enough to reach Black liberation. Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents reaped benefits and opportunities through Black capitalism. They used Black capitalism as a survival mechanism against racial discrimination and hostility. However, operating under a system that was not designed for Black people to prosper will never lead to Black liberation in the end, only temporary fulfillment, and exploitation.

Differences

Limited Autonomy and Contrasting Goals

Now that the similarities between the Black autonomous practices in Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville have been examined, this section will explore the differences. The most obvious difference is that Milwaukee Bronzeville's autonomy was limited compared to Robbins. Robbins was a village of its own and Milwaukee Bronzeville was a segregated neighborhood

³¹¹ Wayne J. Villemez and John J. Beggs, "Black Capitalism and Black Inequality," 122.

³¹² Robert E. Weems Jr. and Lewis A. Randolph, "The National Response to Richard M. Nixon's Black Capitalism," 77-78.

within a city. This determined how residents practiced autonomy. Robbins had its own government, police force, fire department, schools, as well as opportunities to practice Black autonomy on a larger scale with the development of the Robbins airport. On the other hand, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents had to rely on the Milwaukee city government, police, fire departments, and schools. Although Milwaukee Bronzeville unofficially declared J. Anthony Josey as their mayor, Josey was not a Milwaukee elected official; therefore, his political influence was limited. In sum, Milwaukee Bronzeville being a city within a city limited how Black residents practiced autonomy compared to Robbins.

Furthermore, Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents had contrasting goals in relation to Black liberation, which affected how they practiced autonomy. The goal for Robbins residents was to self-isolate, whereas Milwaukee Bronzeville residents did not have a unitary goal. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy, advocated for integration, or used a combination of both to approach Black liberation. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy as a means of survival when denied equal access to opportunities in the city, but some residents still expressed their desire to integrate. Examples of this include Vel Phillips being elected to the Common Council to advocate for fair housing while also voicing her support for the Black Power Movement and Black autonomous practices. Another example is Freedom Schools. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents created Freedom Schools to protest the segregated school system while concurrently advocating for the integration of Milwaukee Public Schools.

Conversely, in Robbins the mindset was to self-isolate and maintain a space of their own without the need to integrate. In general, Black towns were spaces Black people created to isolate themselves, escape from racial discrimination, and fulfill their aspirations for freedom. Robbins was no different. A 1930s interview, conducted by the U.S. Works Progress

Administration (WPA), made it clear that Robbins was a village intended for Black people: “But the dweller in Robbins is a true Negro suburbanite. This southwest suburb of Chicago is inhabited and run exclusively by (and for) the colored race.”³¹³ In addition, in *The Robbins Eagle* “Plain Talk” newspaper column, Elinor White encouraged the Black community to be self-sufficient. This also made it clear that Robbins advocated for self-isolation. White stated in a 1955 “Plain Talk” column “He must always be governed, instead of governing. This has been the past weakness of the Negro in modern times, and every sensible member of the race must realize that it has taken him nowhere. We must determine on the policy of owning where we settle; of controlling the environment in which we place ourselves.”³¹⁴ Ultimately, Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents had opposing visions for their communities which affected how they practiced Black autonomy.

Community Characteristics and Racially Targeted Acts

Lastly, the community characteristics of Milwaukee Bronzeville and Robbins were different. Milwaukee Bronzeville was an urban neighborhood whereas Robbins was a suburban village. These community characteristics also affected residents’ lifestyles and how they practiced autonomy. For example, Milwaukee Bronzeville was known for its jazz entertainment and venues. Venues like these were not as common in Robbins because of the suburban lifestyle.

The 1930s WPA interviewee explained why there were no jazz clubs in Robbins:

There are no jazz clubs, swing bands, or night clubs; and such limited social activities as prevail are strictly those of a small home-loving community. For, as previously stated, the Robbins' Negro is a true suburbanite and has little in common with the Harlan swingster or the South Side night club devotee.³¹⁵

³¹³ Alfred O. Philipp, *Robbins, Ill.--A folklore in the making*, p.3-4, <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh000078/>.

³¹⁴ *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Plain Talk - Racial Weakness” by Mrs. Elinor White-Neeley, 26 February 1955, Folder 9, p. 2 and 9, Robbins History Museum.

³¹⁵ Alfred O. Philipp, *Robbins, Ill.--A folklore in the making*, 5.

In sum, Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents practiced autonomy differently because of distinct community characteristics and desired lifestyles.

In addition, differences in community characteristics affected the racially targeted acts against Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville. Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were affected by racially targeted urban renewal and an interstate highway construction project. However, Robbins residents were not affected by urban renewal but were impacted by an interstate highway construction project. Urban renewal and the highway construction cut the life of the original Milwaukee Bronzeville neighborhood short. According to Sandra Jones, author of *Voices of Milwaukee Bronzeville*, the life span of the original Milwaukee Bronzeville was only 40 years, between 1920 and 1960.³¹⁶ Milwaukee Bronzeville still existed after 1960; however, the interstate construction destroyed the original boundaries of the neighborhood and created new boundaries. Milwaukee Bronzeville was one of many Black neighborhoods impacted by urban renewal and interstate construction during this time. James Baldwin most famously translated the process of urban renewal as “negro removal” because of how urban renewal targeted Black neighborhoods.³¹⁷ Raymond Mohl in his study “Race and Housing in the Postwar City” explains,

Urban renewal and interstate expressway construction usually targeted inner-city black areas, demolishing housing on a massive scale. By the 1960s, for instance, federal highway construction alone destroyed some 35,000 housing units each year. Urban renewal had similarly devastating consequences in the inner cities: within little more than a decade after urban renewal legislation in 1954, over 400,000 residential units had been destroyed in the inner cities - a process that soon came to be labeled “Negro removal.”³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Sandra E. Jones, *Voices of Milwaukee Bronzeville*, 30.

³¹⁷ Myka Toker Abramson, “Blueprints: ‘Invisible Man’ and the Housing Act of 1949,” *American Studies* 54, no.3 (2015): 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24589532>.

³¹⁸ Raymond A. Mohl, “Race and Housing in the Postwar City: An Explosive History,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 94, no.1 (2001): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40193532>.

On the other hand, between 1920 and 1970 Robbins residents did not face any racially targeted urban renewal to their village, but the I-294 highway was constructed from 1956 to 1958, and it cuts through Robbins.³¹⁹ The highway was constructed so drivers could access suburban communities outside of Chicago easily. It is not clear if the construction of the highway was a racially targeted act against Robbins. However, it is believed that the highway was built through Robbins because they did not have respect for the Black village, and it was used to set boundaries between Robbins and surrounding white communities.³²⁰³²¹ In addition, surrounding white communities expressed racially inferior opinions about Robbins. A 1954 *Robbins Eagle* column describes when Robbins was ridiculed by surrounding white communities. The column stated, “the very name of ‘Robbins’ was the laughing stock of all Chicago as well as surrounding communities.”³²² This signifies that Robbins was seen as inferior by their white counterparts because it was a majority Black village.

Although it is unclear if the construction of the I-294 highway was a racially targeted act against Robbins, there is a history of racially targeted violence against other Black communities during this period. The 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma Massacre and 1923 Rosewood, Florida Massacre were two Black communities destroyed by acts of racial violence. White terrorists destroyed the predominantly Black Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921 and the Black town Rosewood, Florida in 1923.³²³ Thankfully, Robbins was not subjected to racially targeted destructive acts of this kind. Because of this, the Black autonomous practices of Robbins residents were not impacted. However, the Black autonomous practices of Milwaukee

³¹⁹ “Interstate 294 Highway – History,” <https://www.interstate-guide.com/i-294-il/>.

³²⁰ Personal Communication. Hubert Morgan, 16 March 2023.

³²¹ Personal Communication. Tyrone Haymore. 13 March 2023.

³²² *The Robbins Eagle* newspaper, “Throwing Rocks and Hiding Your Hands,” 8 May 1954, p.8, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=TRE19540508-01.1.6&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

³²³ Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, “Getting to Reparations: Japanese Americans and African Americans,” *Social Forces* 83, no.2 (2004): 833, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3598349>.

Bronzeville residents were impacted because the urban renewal and interstate construction destroyed part of their neighborhood. These racially targeted projects not only destroyed Milwaukee Bronzeville homes, but also businesses and local stores.³²⁴ Racially targeted acts against Black communities occur in different ways and sometimes do not occur at all. Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville were both subject to racially targeted acts or opinions, but these acts impacted the longevity of one community and not the other.

In conclusion, the ways Black residents practiced autonomy in Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville had several similarities but also some major differences. Both Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents embraced Black capitalism with end goals of achieving Black liberation. Conversely, Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents viewed Black liberation differently. Robbins residents' goal was to self-isolate, whereas Milwaukee Bronzeville residents did not have one unifying goal, but supported both Black autonomy and integration. Also, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents were impacted by racially targeted urban renewal and interstate construction projects. Robbins residents were impacted by interstate highway construction, but it did not impact the village long-term like it did in Milwaukee Bronzeville. Overall, Black is not a monolith, and the ways Black residents practice autonomy in predominantly Black spaces are similar but will never be identical to each other.

³²⁴ Sandra E. Jones, *Voices of Milwaukee Bronzeville*, 111-112.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Black autonomous practices in Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville show the resistance and resilience of Black residents who faced exclusion because of racism. Even in the face of adversity, Robbins, and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents experienced prosperity through self-determination by establishing and operating their own local businesses, churches, financial institutions, governmental organizations, health practices, airport, and more. Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents fulfilled their desires of freedom and liberation in a society that was disinterested in their well-being. Although Robbins was a suburban village, and Milwaukee Bronzeville was an urban neighborhood, residents still practiced autonomy similarly. Residents incorporated their African American heritage and culture into their autonomous practices. Most importantly, they practiced autonomy in ways that resonated with their community's needs and goals. Robbins like many other Black towns, adopted a separatist ideology and created Robbins with the intention for it to be a separate community for Black people. However, Milwaukee Bronzeville residents did not have a choice in deciding if they wanted to create a separate community. They were forcibly segregated because of racial discrimination; therefore, the community's goals varied.

Despite this, both communities saw fit to use Black capitalism as an approach to Black liberation. Black capitalism helped Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents access financial and economic opportunities they were denied. Still, long-term Black capitalism did not eliminate inequalities for Black residents because capitalism is an inherently racist and exploitative system that was not made to create equity. Unfortunately, Black autonomy also came with risks because it was seen as rebellious by white counterparts who did not want to see

Black communities thrive. There was total disrespect exhibited in response to the Black autonomous practices of Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents. This disrespect was demonstrated through racially targeted urban renewal and interstate highway construction that destroyed parts of the communities. It was also demonstrated through unsolicited opinions about Black communities that reinforced racial inferiority. This research exemplifies that majority Black communities may face adversity, but they are not passive bystanders when adversity arises. Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents did not allow racism to determine their destiny. The resistance of Robbins and Milwaukee Bronzeville residents is admirable; however, it is unfair that Black residents had to constantly operate out of a place of resistance to secure access to freedom that already belonged to them. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable rights that always belonged to Black people, yet they had to work for them. If human existence truly guarantees these rights, then Black liberation will be achieved when Black people can exist without having to resist.