

## Wisconsin academy review

[◀ Previous section](#)

[p. 14]

[Next section ▶](#)

### Blues, Bebop, and Bulldozers

#### *Why Milwaukee never became a Motown.*

By Alexander Shashko

The roots of rock and roll are in the American South, but the music blossomed in the industrial Midwest. In the '50s, Chicago's Chess Records introduced Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, the Moonglows, and Chuck Berry to the world, while Windy City residents Sam Cooke and Curtis Mayfield shaped the sound of '60s and '70s soul. Cincinnati was the home of the Isley Brothers, and King Records produced a vibrant array of artists including such vocal groups as the Platters and the Dominoes, blues guitarists Albert King and Johnny "Guitar" Watson, songwriter Hank Ballard, and soul singer James Brown. Cleveland was home to deejay Alan Freed, who played a crucial role in popularizing rhythm and blues among white audiences.



Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum

**When Dinah Washington stepped up to the microphone, everybody listened.**

**Washington was one of the many greats ---  
along with such musicians as Duke  
Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, and  
Billie Holiday --- to play the clubs of Walnut  
Street.**

Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Black Historical  
Society/Museum

And, of course, there was Detroit, home to Berry Gordy's Motown Records, which assembled a remarkable constellation of stars including Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, the Jackson Five, and the Supremes. Detroit also produced many seminal rockers in the '60s and '70s, including the MC5 and the Stooges. In the '80s and '90s, Chicago and Detroit gave birth to house and techno dance music, which has since become an international phenomenon, while Minneapolis rose to prominence with the emergence of Prince, R&B producers Jimmie Jam and Terry Lewis, and alternative rock groups like Husker Du and the Replacements. By any measure, the cities of the industrial Midwest formed vital musical communities in the second half of the twentieth century.

All of them, that is, except Milwaukee. Unique among its urban neighbors along the Great Lakes, Milwaukee never produced a popular music reputation of significant proportions during the rock era's heyday. Throughout this period, Milwaukee had no artist, record label, or major music district to rival its Midwestern peers. Milwaukee emerged from the '50s and '60s without an active, interracial music community that produced artists of international renown and cultural significance, like those from Chicago, Detroit, or even such similar-sized Midwestern cities as Cincinnati or Minneapolis.

Milwaukee does have a popular music legacy. The city was a center for the production and consumption of polka and other ethnic European music during much of the twentieth century. Paramount Records in Grafton and Port Washington produced many historically significant "race records" by blues singer Ma Rainey at its studios during the 1920s. At the dawn of the rock era, Waukesha native Les Paul introduced many of the technical and sonic innovations that popularized the electric guitar. The echoes of rockabilly's powerful influence on Milwaukee in the late 1950s can still be heard in the contemporary sounds of the city's most successful bands, the rootsy Bodeans, whose sound honors the arrangements and themes of early rock and roll, and the Violent Femmes --- arguably Milwaukee's most influential musical export --- whose acoustic folk-punk honors rockabilly's rebellious politics. The rockabilly aesthetic also lives on, in transmuted form, through the angry punk and heavy metal music for which Milwaukee is a minor but significant center.

What is interesting about Milwaukee's postwar legacy is how different it is from other cities in the Midwest. Without idealizing race relations in other cities, black communities were sturdier and more inventive in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland than they were in Milwaukee. Not coincidentally, most industrial Midwestern cities saw much greater interaction between whites and blacks, especially in the arts, enabling the exchange of musical ideas and traditions that has been the hallmark of rock and roll. By comparison, Milwaukee's postwar music culture has been small, segregated, and relatively insignificant.

**A musical center destroyed**

Why did Milwaukee's musical culture evolve so differently from its neighbors? The answer can be unraveled through a story of lost opportunity at the dawn of postwar America, when one neighborhood in Milwaukee struggled to create an environment for local blues and jazz musicians, only to be destroyed by political and social forces swirling around the city just as the era of rock and soul began.

Walnut Street was Milwaukee's "Bronzeville." From just after World War One until the late '50s, a six-block stretch of Walnut Street north of downtown was black Milwaukee's economic and social center. For Milwaukee's small, heavily segregated African-American community, Walnut Street's grocery stores, doctors' offices, restaurants, taverns, law offices, and clubs not only offered local goods and services, but provided employment and capital for a community often strapped for both.

Walnut Street's jazz and blues clubs were the cultural heart of the black community. Club owners provided entertainment, gave housing to visiting artists, and offered space for local musicians to organize unions. Often the music clubs were connected to social clubs, which raised money for the needy while providing daytime social space for locals. In addition, music clubs were the first institutions to bring significant white money into the black community, dating back to Dixieland jazz clubs in the 1920s. This was important not only as a source of capital, but as a precedent for creating social interaction between blacks and whites that was rare outside of the city's factories.

Starting with the Metropole club in the late 1920s, the Walnut Street area dominated Milwaukee's jazz and blues scene. By the 1930s and '40s, the names had changed --- the Club Congo, the Flame, Art's, and Moon Glow took turns as the place to be --- but the environment remained the same. Most weeknights, local bands played in concerts or dances. Several local artists went on to careers as side players in some of jazz's biggest bands. And national stars showed up at least once a week. *Everyone* who mattered in jazz and blues played Walnut Street. Duke Ellington, Louis Jordan, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Jimmy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday, Nat "King" Cole, Cab Calloway, "Gator Mouth" Moore, Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Lionel Hampton, and Gene Krupa all performed on Walnut Street on numerous occasions. Ellington was particularly fond of Walnut Street, playing often at the Flame, including a 1957 concert for the club's anniversary.

Jazz and blues drew whites into an otherwise deeply segregated black neighborhood. On weekends local kids from such suburbs as Bayside, Whitefish Bay, and Shorewood swarmed onto Walnut Street to eat, drink, listen to music, and patronize the blues and jazz record shelves at local shops. Stores like Arthur Gibson's and The Bop Shop spun records for black and white teens, and occasionally Harlem Record's owner Mannie Maudlin Jr. would deejay for WEMP live from [p. 16] his store. Walnut Street was unique in the city's history: a place where blacks and whites not only worked together on stage, but relaxed and enjoyed their free time together as well.

Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum



The Club Congo, the Flame, Art's, Moon Glow . . . the Walnut Street hot spots changed, but during the '30s and '40s, they all had their time in the spotlight. This shot of the Regal, another Walnut Street club, dates from the late 1940s.

Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum

Unfortunately, the growth of Walnut Street's music scene --- and Milwaukee's music scene as a whole --- was dramatically affected by demographic and geographic factors. African Americans lived in Milwaukee since the city's founding, but in comparison to other Midwestern cities their numbers remained small well into the twentieth century. In 1930, only 7,501 blacks lived in Milwaukee, and by 1945, the height of the Great Migration of southern blacks to northern cities, there were still only 13,000 African Americans in the city. Milwaukee had its Great Migration belatedly, as the city's black population exploded to more than 105,000 by 1970. Still, even this delayed migration was largely due to secondary migration from Chicago to Milwaukee. And Milwaukee's black middle class remained miniscule. Finding capital to finance institutions in the black community was almost impossible, particularly for clubs and musicians who often relied on the gray and black markets to raise money.

Milwaukee's satellite relationship to Chicago played an important role in its cultural development. Since World War I, when nationwide anti-German sentiment crushed the unique German-American arts culture in the city, Milwaukee looked south for culture. This was as true in both the fine and popular arts: the Chicago Symphony traveled to Milwaukee annually for performances until 1959. With Chicago only ninety miles away, musicians---especially black musicians --- had little incentive to live in Milwaukee. African Americans made up only 3.4 percent of Milwaukee's population in 1950. In Chicago, the figure was 13.6 percent. Even musicians who made a living playing in Wisconsin could easily commute from Chicago, where they were supported both culturally and economically by a vibrant community of musicians, both black and white.

## The black community dismantled

But it took more than geography and demography to destroy Walnut Street. In the 1950s and '60s, Bronzeville was demolished by a combination of national and local political decisions, some malicious and others benign. These decisions denied a future for such traditional downtown neighborhoods as Walnut Street and brought an end to the multiracial musical culture Walnut Street fostered.



The Music Café on West Walnut: Even when no music was playing, the clubs and cafes provided a comfortable gathering place.

Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum

[p. 17]

Urban renewal practices played a crucial role in the destruction of Walnut Street. First codified into federal law under the Housing Act of 1937, urban renewal programs provided assistance to local governments for slum clearance and low-rent public housing construction. By the Housing Act of 1949, millions of federal dollars were provided to clear away slums. As a result of ignorance or thoughtlessness, however, few government officials distinguished between vibrant inner-city communities and blighted ones. Even fewer considered the consequences of demolishing local institutions to make way for low-rent government housing.

In Milwaukee and across the nation, urban renewal led to the destruction of self-sustaining neighborhoods in the name of improving living conditions. Local urban renewal efforts focused on Walnut Street after the *Milwaukee Journal* ran a series of articles in 1954 entitled "The Blight Within Us." The series targeted the 98 percent black Hillside area adjacent to the Walnut Street business district as the most blighted part of the city. Black leaders and musicians, sensing danger, organized the Walnut Street Advancement

Association to protest the imposition of urban renewal plans without community involvement. Their efforts culminated in an eighty-person demonstration at city hall. But their voices were not heard, and three years later the Hillside Redevelopment Project was underway. The project was in the heart of the black business district, where more than 100 black businesses and 1,400 African Americans resided. By the time Elvis Presley burst upon the national scene in 1957, Walnut Street was under siege, no longer a place frequented by whites and blacks, but a symbol --- in the white community, at least --- of civic shame.



"Good mornin' blues/Blues, how do you do?"  
Louis Jordan and Tympany Five graced Walnut  
Street with "Hard Lovin' Blues" and other  
classics.

Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Black Historical  
Society/Museum

Walnut Street was devastated by urban renewal. Better housing was built, but there were fewer places to live, forcing many black homeowners to move. The racist practices of local real estate dealers and the surge of local neighborhood associations around the city with restrictive covenants made relocation a nearly impossible task. Ultimately, the housing shortage scattered the black population, its talent, and its capital. By the time a more liberal relocation payment plan was enacted in the late '60s, most families were already displaced. In addition, urban renewal destroyed the economic base of Walnut Street. Local businesses were held responsible for moving or selling their own businesses, and since they often had nowhere to move and no way to pay for it, most businesses failed instead. The small but growing black community of Milwaukee was being dismantled.

Urban renewal displaced thousands of households in Milwaukee's core. Still, Walnut Street struggled on until another symbol of postwar progress --- the interstate highway --- dealt it a mortal blow. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 authorized the federal government to provide up to 90 percent of the cost of building highways across the nation, highways intended to serve the needs of commerce and defense in addition to clearing the increasingly congested roads in urban areas. Despite public complaints from Mayor Frank

Zeidler that freeway construction was progressing without any plan for the displaced, ground was broken in 1952 for the construction of Milwaukee's segments of the interstate freeway system. By 1959, construction of the North-South freeway began. This segment ran directly through the heart of the black commercial district, through West Walnut Street along Seventh and Eighth Streets. Construction lasted into the '70s, but it did not take that long for the freeway --- which later became known as Interstate 43 --- to destroy Bronzeville.

The damage was extensive. According to historian William Vick, "Four hundred twenty-six businesses were displaced for [p. 18] the North-South Freeway, including 57 taverns, 34 grocery stores, 28 furniture stores, 26 automobile shops, 16 restaurants; 106 service retailers, 22 small manufacturers and 9 wholesale firms, along with 33 vacant buildings. Borchert Field, used by an Afro-American semipro baseball team, the Milwaukee Brown Brewers, was taken out, along with portions of Carver Park and many other playgrounds." The last music club, the Moon Glow, was razed in 1966. Walnut Street, and all of its possibilities for the future of Milwaukee's music culture and race relations, was gone.

### Reconstructing the past?

One can only speculate about how Milwaukee's music scene would have been different had Walnut Street survived. But we do know what happened in its absence. The factors that initially stunted Milwaukee's music culture prevented it from flourishing in the '60s and '70s. The combination of Milwaukee's relatively small black population, the city's segregated housing situation --- severe even by the standards of the North --- and the destruction of the Walnut Street district created a vicious pattern of destruction even more pernicious than elsewhere in the Midwest, where black communities, no matter how devastated, had relative geographic flexibility and capital to rebuild. In Milwaukee, there were no longer black lending associations, banks, or middle-class citizens to underwrite a revival of Bronzeville elsewhere in the city. Even if money had been available, there was nowhere to build it. Until the fair housing protests of the late '60s, African Americans were red-lined into an area controlled by federal bureaucrats and freeway planners. With little to see or do in the city, whites stopped visiting, inflaming their fears and stereotypes, while many in Milwaukee's black middle class --- including many musicians --- fled for greener pastures.



Photo courtesy ofTVT Records.

Milwaukee still breeds music --- but the top musicians don't tend to stay there. Milwaukee native Todd Thomas, otherwise known as "Speech," moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta in 1987. There he formed the rap group Arrested Development, and produced their 1992 critical and commercial hit album, *3 Years, 5 Months, and 2 Days in the Life of . . .*, which won several Grammys and helped usher in an entire genre of hip-hop. (Speech's latest: an album called *Hoopla*.) Other renowned Milwaukee natives include Al Jarreau and Eric Benet.

Photo courtesy of TVT Records.

That's what happened to Milwaukee native Todd Thomas, otherwise known as "Speech," who moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta in 1987. There he formed the rap group Arrested Development, and produced their 1992 critical and commercial hit album *3 Years, 5 Months, and 2 Days in the Life of . . .*, which won several Grammys and helped usher in an entire genre of hip-hop. Milwaukee does create talent --- Al Jarreau and Eric Benet are other examples --- but, like Speech, they had to leave to nurture their careers.

Their departures and subsequent success are emblematic of the exodus that Milwaukee's civic leaders are now trying to confront --- by returning to the ideals of Walnut Street. In February, several Milwaukee redevelopment groups announced plans for a "21st Century Bronzeville" to be located between Fourth and Seventh Streets along West North Avenue. Using private funding and supported by influential politicians, the goal is to create a black entertainment district filled with black-owned nightclubs, taverns, restaurants, and theaters, which would revive both local and tourist interest in the central city. The planners' intent is clear: to revive the spirit --- and avoid the tragedy --- of Walnut Street. By providing a place where Milwaukee's blacks might once again have a cultural district to call their own, and where blacks and whites might come together to share musical ideas, then perhaps someday Milwaukee will join its neighbors in the pantheon of Midwestern musical culture.

### Sources

- Luhrssen, Dave, with research by William Vick. "Walnut Street Rhythm." *Milwaukee Magazine*. August, 1993.
- Thomas-Lynn, Felicia. "Walnut Street: A Glory Bygone." *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, February 8, 1998, sec. 1, p. 1.
- Trotter, Joe William Jr. *Black Milwaukee: The Making of An Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Vick, William Albert. "From Walnut Street to No Street: Milwaukee's Afro-American Businesses, 1945-1967." Master of arts thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1993.



**[◀ Previous section](#)**

**[Next section ▶](#)**

---

**[▲ Top of Page](#)**

Copyright © 2000 by the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

**[Content/Navigation Questions](#)** | **[Technical Assistance](#)** | **[University of Wisconsin Digital Collections](#)** |  
**[Accessibility Information](#)**

# African Americans, Civil Rights, and Race-Making in Milwaukee

CONFERENCE PAPER DRAFT -- REVISED VERSION September 27, 2004

prepared for the  
Symposium on Milwaukee History  
to be held on October 7-8, 2004  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Jack Dougherty  
Assistant Professor of Educational Studies  
Trinity College, Hartford CT  
jack.dougherty@trincoll.edu

Please email comments, criticisms, and corrections to the address above

Over fifty years ago, African Americans were largely excluded from White Milwaukee's official history.<sup>1</sup> Bayard Still's comprehensive volume, *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, published by Wisconsin's Historical Society for the state centennial in 1948, mentioned Blacks on only five pages out of six hundred. On those occasions when the topic did arise, Still's narrative blurred the roles that White racism and African American agency played in shaping this history. A half-sentence about Milwaukee founder Solomon Juneau's "colored cook," Joe Oliver, states that he was "pressed to participate" with all of the other men in Milwaukee's first election in 1835, rather than voluntarily casting his ballot. One hundred pages later, when detailing White disputes over Wisconsin's free soil status leading up to the Civil War, the text partially mentions one African American (by last name only), "a fugitive slave named Glover" who White abolitionists removed from the county jail. Skipping another three hundred pages to the early twentieth century, Still begins to use active verbs when discussing African Americans, but casts them into the role of shadowy antagonists. His sketch of Milwaukee's ethnic neighborhoods depicts a "Jewish community," "a colony" of Slavs and Greeks, and Italians who "shared" territory on the city's near Northside. But the northward migration of Blacks into the city represented a "colored invasion" that prompted some previous inhabitants to leave the area. A few pages later, Still identifies the exact streets where Milwaukee's Black community and its assortment of small businesses were "almost exclusively" located, but fails to mention anything about White segregationist activity that contributed to these boundaries. The author's

---

<sup>1</sup> Following contemporary usage, the terms "African American" and "Black" are used interchangeably in this paper, while the term "Negro" appears only in direct quotes and titles from an earlier period. Furthermore, the terms "Black" and "White" are capitalized as proper nouns representing specific racial group identities.

portrayal of African Americans was incomplete, at best, for 1948. But one also could argue that it perpetuated the White supremacist views of its time by writing Blacks as secondary characters into the margins of Milwaukee's history.<sup>2</sup>

Much has changed about the state of the field during the five decades that have passed. A rich body of historical literature on Black Milwaukeeans has emerged in both the academic and popular press. Its creation has been driven in part by the 1960s civil rights movement, which still evolves -- and reframes our views of the past -- as structural and social factors continue to reshape racial identities and communities in the city and the metropolitan region. This paper attempts to draw insights on the past, present, and future of this literature from the wealth of historical works (both published and unpublished) and the most relevant social science, organizational reports, and journalistic accounts that are available. Its three sections analyze the transformation of Milwaukee's African American community, the evolution of the city's long civil rights movement, and the historical construction of racial identity.

### **The Transformation of Milwaukee's African American Community**

Some of the earliest and most important works on Milwaukee's Black history, when read sequentially, tell a fascinating tale of a community's evolution over one hundred and seventy years. The story begins with the earliest Black pioneers arriving with White settlers in the 1830s and establishing themselves as a small but relatively prosperous population scattered across the city during the Civil War era. Yet as the number of Black workers and professionals grew during the turn of the century, increasing competition and racial hostilities with White immigrants and natives gradually led to the formation of an identifiable "Negro district" in the near Northside. When thousands of Southern migrants doubled and tripled the city's Black population during the mid-twentieth century, intensive residential segregation in the impoverished "Inner Core" shaped the struggles of the 1960s. Yet Black Milwaukeeans also divided themselves along social class lines throughout this period, to the extent that those who could afford to take advantage of civil rights gains left the inner city for outlying neighborhoods and suburbs to the north and west, eventually creating a hyper-segregated region with not one, but multiple Black communities by the twenty-first century.

In comparison to other industrial Midwestern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, the relatively small size of Milwaukee's Black population during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes this story somewhat distinctive. African Americans comprised less than 2 percent of Milwaukee's total population until World War II, less than 15 percent until the 1970s, and then reached 37 percent in the 2000 census. Black political clout has lagged behind what its population size might suggest in Milwaukee, due to the disproportionate number of children below voting age, and the limited number of adults who connect with the electoral process. Furthermore, in the realm of Wisconsin politics, the city has made up approximately three-quarters of state's entire Black population throughout the twentieth century, in a state legislature dominated by White rural and suburban interests.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Bayrd Still. *Milwaukee: The History of a City*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948, pp. 33, 151, 454, 471-72.

<sup>3</sup> Doris Peyser Slesinger and Eugene Howard Grigsby. *African Americans in Wisconsin: A Statistical Overview, Population Series 90-6*. Madison, WI: Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin-

**Table 1: Black Population in the City of Milwaukee, 1840-2000<sup>4</sup>**

Year	Black population	Black percent of total population
1840	23	< 0.5%
1850	101	< 0.5%
1860	122	< 0.5%
1870	165	< 0.5%
1880	304	< 0.5%
1890	449	< 0.5%
1900	862	< 0.5%
1910	980	< 0.5%
1920	2,229	< 0.5%
1930	7,501	1.3%
1940	8,821	1.5%
1950	21,772	3.4%
1960	62,458	8.4%
1970	105,088	14.7%
1980	145,832	22.9%
1990	191,255	30.5%
2000	222,933	37.3%

One of the earliest histories of African American pioneers in Milwaukee was written by William T. Green in 1896 (decades before Bayard Still's volume). Green, the city's only practicing Black attorney of that era, based his account on memories that others had passed along as well as his personal recollections from his arrival in 1887. His account traces back to the arrival of the first Black resident, Joe Oliver, employed as a cook for Solomon Juneau's family in 1835. Green described other free Blacks and escaped slaves who settled in the area, their religious observances, and the effects of emancipation on their lives. Early Black settlers had been gainfully employed in various trades, and many men began to acquire significant amounts of real estate, perhaps more than White Milwaukeeans imagined. "It would surprise some of our citizens who pay their rent to the real estate agent if they knew who their landlords were," observed Green, himself a Black landlord who discreetly rented to Whites. Yet in the late nineteenth century, he perceived a new challenge faced by Blacks in an increasingly competitive job market marked by rising European immigration. "The Negro thrives best among native-born Americans," he wrote. "It has in this country always been difficult for them to obtain employment in cities whose population is principally made up of foreign-born American citizens."<sup>5</sup>

---

Madison/Extension, 1997, pp. 2-6; William F. Thompson. *The History of Wisconsin: Volume 6, Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*. Madison, WI: State Historical Society, 1988, pp. 306-7.

<sup>4</sup> [••Compiled from various census reports and secondary sources; need to double-check early numbers and give proper citations; Census 2000 data is those reporting single-race only••]

<sup>5</sup> William T. Green. "Negroes in Milwaukee," *Milwaukee Sentinel* 16 October 1895, reprinted in *The Negro in Milwaukee: A Historical Survey*, 5-11. Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1968, p. 10-11.

An alternative account of Milwaukee's earliest Black settlers, written by Ruth Kohler (with Bernice Lindsay) in 1948, traces the story back to Henry and Georgiana Anderson. According to this account, the husband "came to Milwaukee about 1830," then moved to Green Bay, but soon returned with his wife, a "tall, handsome, and well educated [woman] for her time." Their extended family members, led by patriarch Sully Watson (who had purchased his freedom from slavery years earlier), soon joined them and became relatively prosperous members of Milwaukee's pioneer community. Although subsequent research places the date of Henry Anderson's arrival somewhat later, perhaps in 1841, he and Georgiana still hold the title as the first African American family to permanently reside in the city. Regardless of whether one accepts Joe Oliver or the Andersons as the first Black residents, all accounts characterize these early settlers as free Blacks with some degree of marketable skills and economic means.<sup>6</sup>

The Black community's transition from 1835 to 1870 is the subject of William Vollmar's thesis, based on his close reading of census manuscripts, city directories, and the White press from that era. In 1850, the city's small Black population of approximately one hundred was highly literate, and included several barbers, cooks, and waiters, as well as storeowners, clerks, and a skilled machinist. Together, they owned "moderate amounts of property . . . on some of the best land in the city and alongside of some of Milwaukee's most prominent citizens." Five marriages were bi-racial, and relations between the races "were exceptionally good." But this climate chilled over the next two decades. Kidnappings sanctioned by the Fugitive Slave Law prompted some Black settlers to depart for Canada, and those who remained came into closer job competition with lower-class Irish and German workers. An 1861 fight between two Irishmen and two Black men over "a derogatory remark about white women with 'd--- niggers'" led to one White dying from a knife wound and one of the Blacks, Marshall Clark, being hung by a White lynch mob. The accumulation of events like these made a dramatic change in Milwaukee's Black population. Most of the early settlers had either died or moved away. In their place came a newer, less established Black community with lower literacy rates, fewer skilled jobs, reduced property holdings, and decreased interracial marriages.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1960s, several influential histories were published on Blacks in the urban North at the turn of the twentieth century, such as Alan Spear's *Black Chicago* and Gilbert Osofsky's *Harlem*.<sup>8</sup> Their shared focus on residential segregation and the creation of the "Negro ghetto" clearly influenced emerging scholarship on Milwaukee. According to Thomas Buchanan's study of Black Milwaukee from 1890 to 1915, the community's population tripled to 1,500, but "this growth was accompanied by the concentration of blacks into a single restricted section of town, sometimes called

---

For a biographical account, see Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. "William Thomas Green: Black Milwaukee's Lawyer-Leader, 1887-1911." *Milwaukee History* 19 (1996): 85-94.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Miriam De Young Kohler. *The Story of Wisconsin Women*. Madison[?]: Committee on Wisconsin Women for the 1948 Wisconsin Centennial, 1948, p. 14, with footnote indicating that the "material on early Wisconsin Negroes is supplied by Miss Bernice Lindsay of Milwaukee." On the Andersons and their extended family, the Watsons, see John B. Lundstrom and Albert A. Muchka. "The Legacy of Sully Watson: From Slave to Citizen of Milwaukee." *Wisconsin Academy Review* 40 (Fall 1994): 4-8.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Vollmar. "Negro in a Midwest Frontier City, Milwaukee, 1835-1870." M.A. thesis, Marquette University, 1968, pp. 25-7; 39-44, 51, 65-72, 84-87.

<sup>8</sup> Allan H. Spear. *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967; Gilbert Osofsky. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

'Milwaukee's Little Africa.'" Although it was not an all-Black neighborhood, and while dozens of Black families continued to live in other parts of the city and county, Buchanan documents the rise of an identifiable thirty-five block "colored district" in the near Northside, synonymous with the "bad lands" of brothels and gambling dens. Impoverished Black newcomers could not afford anything other than the dilapidated housing in this area, while the more "respectable" upper-class Blacks "found it more and more difficult to find desirable housing in the Negro district, and attempts to settle elsewhere where evidently thwarted by whites." Following national trends, White Milwaukeeans' attitudes toward Blacks plummeted at the turn of the century, Buchanan argues. "The benevolent paternalism and street-nodding familiarity that had once seemed to characterize relations between blacks and whites in the city had given way to a cold and formalized pattern of race relations."<sup>9</sup>

But according to Alan Spear, while the physical ghetto was the product of White racism, Black civic leaders and entrepreneurs created an "institutional ghetto" in their determination "to make the black community a decent place to live."<sup>10</sup> Following the same logic, Buchanan found that most Black Milwaukeeans reacted to intensified White hostilities at the turn of the century by practicing self-help strategies and "band[ing] together in organizations and institutions for racial elevation." Racial solidarity was expressed through various social clubs, literary societies, and the formation of three major Black churches by 1915: St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal (founded 1869), Calvary Baptist (1895), and St. Benedict the Moor Mission (established as a separate Catholic parish in 1909). Some Black Milwaukeeans went further by explicitly adopting Booker T. Washington's racial ideologies, sometimes using it to justify the existence of racial discrimination. Editor Richard B. Montgomery preached to readers of the *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate* that "the Negro must work out his own problem" and bore the responsibility for the race's "lack of industry," much to the displeasure of other Black leaders who directly challenged White racism.<sup>11</sup>

Related historical works also trace the rise of important Black Milwaukee institutions during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Robert Weems and Rebekah Allison document the origins of Black-owned business ventures, such as the Columbia Building and Loan Association formed by Wilbur and Ardie Halyard in the 1920s to raise capital for individuals to purchase better housing.<sup>12</sup> Keith Schmitz and

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Buchanan. "Black Milwaukee, 1890-1915." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1974, pp. 1-10, 54, 78.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Spear. "The Origins of the Urban Ghetto, 1870-1915." In *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience, volume II*, eds. Nathan I. Huggins, Martin Kilson, and Daniel M. Fox. 153-66. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> Buchanan, "Black Milwaukee," p. 95, 103-05; and 119-131 on Black churches. On Black Catholics during this period and subsequent periods, see also Steven M. Avella. "African-American Catholicism in Milwaukee: St. Benedict the Moor Church and School." *Milwaukee History* 17 (1994): 70-86; Steven M. Avella. *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002. Also, for an autobiographical account of ex-slave Louis Hughes's life in Milwaukee at the turn of the century, see Louis Hughes. "Thirty Years a Slave." In *The Negro in Milwaukee: A Historical Survey*, 18-21. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1968; Michael E. Stevens. "After Slavery: the Milwaukee Years of Louis Hughes." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 86 (2002): 40-51.

<sup>12</sup> Robert E. Weems, Jr. "Black Working Class, 1915-1925." *Milwaukee History* 6 (Winter 1983): 107-14, based on his earlier work, "From the Great Migration to the Great Depression: Black Milwaukee, 1915-1929." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1982; Rebekah Allison. "Columbia Savings and Loan as a Black Financial Institution: Its Role and Contribution in Milwaukee's Black Community."

Michael Grover both analyze the origins of the Milwaukee Urban League social service organization in 1919 and debates about whether its social center promoted racial solidarity or segregation.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Iria Riley and the Wisconsin National Association of Colored Women's Clubs are working on an historical research project to document the life stories of its membership from 1896 to the present. Several Black Milwaukee women's organizations, including the Mary Church Terrell Club, the Phyllis Wheatley Club, and the Pleasant Company Needle Craft Club, were most active during this early-twentieth-century period of intensive racial solidarity within the boundaries of the emerging "Negro district."<sup>14</sup>

But the publication of Joe Trotter's *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, the first book published on the city's African American community, sharply challenged the existing historical literature on Blacks in the urban North. Trotter charged that Spear, Osofsky, and others behind the "ghetto synthesis" literature had "advanced a spatial interpretation of black urban life" that "focused primarily on questions of race contacts" between dominant Whites and minority Blacks, thereby overlooking the transition of Black agricultural, domestic, and personal service laborers into "an urban industrial working class." Indeed, Trotter acknowledged some useful qualities of the "ghetto synthesis" literature: it spotlighted "the presence of white racism" and also "destroyed the erroneous notion that blacks were simply another immigrant group destined toward upward mobility." But its prevailing focus on residential segregation unnecessarily limited the scope of Black urban history, he argued, by failing to integrate newer labor history perspectives on the White working class (by E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman) that also spoke to the experiences of Blacks making the transition from Southern farms to Northern factories.<sup>15</sup>

To counter the ghetto synthesis literature, Trotter introduced his modification of the Marxian concept of "proletarianization" to explain the changing shape of Black Milwaukee during the first half of the twentieth century. He defined the term quite broadly, meaning "the process by which blacks became urban-industrial workers" (p. xii). But gaining access to these jobs required decades of struggle. During World War I, less than a dozen of the city's 2,000 manufacturing establishments would employ Black men, and only to do "the dirty work . . . jobs that even Poles didn't want." By the end of World War II, due to public fair employment hearings and private negotiations organized by the Milwaukee Urban League, Black men broke the "job ceiling" in several of the largest plants and gradually began to move into skilled and semiskilled positions. Most important, the emergence of this Black proletariat -- and the rise of a Black bourgeoisie of elites and entrepreneurs who were dependent upon them -- resulted in the intra-racial class divisions that shaped the social and political contours of Milwaukee's expanding African American community. For Trotter, the lens of labor

---

Unpublished seminar paper, History Department, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1991. [••Need to obtain copy and cite location••]

<sup>13</sup> Keith Robert Schmitz. "Milwaukee and its Black Community, 1930-1942." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1979; Michael Ross Grover. "All Things to Black Folks: A History of the Milwaukee Urban League, 1919 to 1980." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Iria L. Riley, "The Cultural Research Project: The Historical Research of Wisconsin's National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 1896-2003." Work-in-progress. See also Ruth Miriam De Young Kohler. *The Story of Wisconsin Women*. Madison[?]: Committee on Wisconsin Women for the 1948 Wisconsin Centennial, 1948, p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> Joe W. Trotter. *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985, pp. 264-5, 276.

revealed far more about Black history than does the one-dimensional story of the ghetto.<sup>16</sup>

Although reviewers praised Trotter for challenging the ghetto synthesis, several openly questioned whether his conceptual framework was the most appropriate means of doing so. Conventional Marxism generally defines proletarianization as a shift in the workers' means of production (such as from feudalism to capitalism) and the resulting loss of skills and status. But Trotter clearly meant something different when using the term. "The proletarianization of Milwaukee blacks did not involve a fundamental prior loss of autonomy over land or skilled crafts," he wrote. Rather, the transformation of Black rural sharecroppers into a Northern industrial working class "was almost exclusively a shift upward into factory jobs."<sup>17</sup> Reviewer Kenneth Kusmer did not disagree with Trotter's presentation of the facts in Milwaukee, but rather the term "proletarianization" to describe them. "It is so far removed from the accepted usage that I question whether a rethinking of the entire concept is needed." James Grossman also questioned whether Trotter's "well-researched and insightful community study is sometimes lost in the imperatives of his theoretical framework." Both reviewers also insisted that a truly convincing labor history of Black proletarianization required more evidence about changes in actual working conditions, particularly during the transition from Southern agricultural labor to Northern industrial work. On a different note, Spencer Crew wrote favorably about Trotter's emphasis on labor history, but labeled the book's "complete concentration on proletarianization" as its one shortcoming, since it overlooked other key dimensions of African American urban life. "Black women were important contributors to the community," Crew added, "but because they fell largely outside the proletarianization process, they do not receive the attention they deserve."<sup>18</sup>

Given these criticisms, perhaps Trotter's most important contribution to the field of African American history (and Milwaukee in particular) was his fresh portrayal of Black community urbanization. Underlying Trotter's primary charge against the "ghetto synthesis" literature was an equally important secondary critique: the bulk of this literature conveyed a "tragic portrait" of Northern Blacks, treating them "largely as victims of an increasingly hostile white population," rather than as agents of their own destinies. In the text of his book, Trotter continually reminds the reader that "Black workers themselves played an active role" in their industrial-urban transition, and despite the "external forces" of racism and capitalism, "blacks played a dynamic role in shaping their own urban economic experience."<sup>19</sup> Black autonomy (with constraints) is

---

<sup>16</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, pp. 47, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Kusmer. "Review Essay: Urban Black History at the Crossroads." *Journal of Urban History* 13 (August 1987): 464; James R. Grossman. "Making the Afro-American Working Class." *Reviews in American History* 14 (June 1986): 231; Spencer R. Crew. "Book Review: Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45." *Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987): 544. On Black women in wartime industries, see Patty Loew. "The Back of the Homefront: Black and American Indian Women in Wisconsin during World War II." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 82 (1998-99): 82-103.

<sup>19</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, pp. 273, 40, 73. Also, compare Trotter to Washington and Oliver's 1976 overview of Milwaukee's Black history, which consciously distances itself from the "Negro problem" and "black rage" literature of the time to refocus on "the identification of the unique qualities of a black community (elements of strength) and its contributions to the richness and vitality of a city," p. 3. See R. O. Washington, and John Oliver. *The Identification of Strengths in the Black Community of Metropolitan Milwaukee*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban Observatory, 1976. Note that chapter 3 is a 50-page historical



one key to his story; the other is internal cleavage. In Trotter's eyes, Milwaukee's vibrant Black community was marked by significant social class divisions-- between established elites and working-class newcomers -- amid their ongoing struggle against White power structures. Despite joint efforts to combat discrimination, "the different class interest of the black business and professional elite on the one hand and those of the black industrial workers on the other hampered the thrust for racial unity." Black self-help institutions like the Columbia Building and Home Association provided home financing that "reflected a slow shift toward better housing among the city's small black professional and business elite," and "enabled the movement of a few Afro-Americans to better areas on the edges of the expanding black district," spatially distancing themselves from lower-class Black migrants. In Black churches, the congregation of St. Mark AME represented middle-class interests and modes of worship more than the Calvary Baptist "newcomers" church in the early migration years. Looking back on Trotter's critique of the "ghetto synthesis" and his emphasis on Black autonomy amid class conflict, it should not surprise us that *Black Milwaukee* was authored by an African American historian who was personally influenced by Black self-determination movements of the late 1960s, and who entered the historical profession at a time when White historians almost exclusively dominated the writing of Milwaukee's past.<sup>20</sup>

Milwaukee's African American community rapidly expanded during the post-World War II era. Compared to other cities (such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago) that experienced the "Great Migration" of Southern Blacks in the 1910s and 20s, Milwaukee's Black population increased sharply from 1940 to 1970, earning it the title of the "Late Great Migration." In his study of this period, Paul Geib argues that Joe Trotter's proletarianization model "would have been strengthened had he continued his study into the 1950s and 1960s," during a time when "industrial jobs open[ed] up on an unprecedented scale, and black labor union activities reached unparalleled heights." In contrast to much of the existing migration literature, Geib charges that Milwaukee's Black migrants "were not backward southerners but heady urban pioneers," who possessed both industrial and agricultural skills as they made their way Northward, moving gradually from farms to small towns to large cities. Oral history interviews conducted with several Black male and female migrants bolster most of Geib's claims about migrants' geographical routes, work experiences, and sense of personal agency. While he offers a richer account of the African American transformation from farm to factory, it remains unclear whether it should be categorized under the "proletarianization" theoretical framework.<sup>21</sup>

Various governmental and academic reports published from the 1940s to the 1960s documented the changing shape and intensity of Black residential segregation, as well as deteriorating housing and health conditions, in the near Northside area labeled

---

section, sometimes catalogued as a separate title by the same authors, "An Historical Account of Blacks in Milwaukee," Milwaukee Urban Observatory, 1976.

<sup>20</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, pp. 115, 73, 128. See biographical sketch of Trotter and his generation of Black historians in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. *Black History and the Historical Profession: 1915-1980*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, pp. 211-2.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Geib. "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970." *Journal of Negro History* 83 (Autumn 1998): 229-48, based on his earlier work, "The Late Great Migration: A Case Study of Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970." M.A. thesis in History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1993. See also Roy L. Hamilton. "Expectations and Realities of a Migrant Group: Black Migration from the South to Milwaukee, 1946-1958." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1981.

as the Inner Core. According to Paula Lynagh, who compiled the "Milwaukee's Negro Community" study in 1946, nearly all of the city's Blacks lived within a one-square-mile area of the city, due to racially restrictive covenants and established White practices of refusing to sell or rent to Blacks. Inside that square mile, about three-quarters of the city's Black households lived in blocks that were more than 50 percent non-white, resulting in a level of segregation similar to Southern cities such as Birmingham and Atlanta.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1970s, geographer Harold Rose constructed models seeking to predict not only the Black population's size, but also its spatial distribution within a "Negro Ghetto" circumscribed by White refusal to sell or rent housing during the post-war decades.<sup>23</sup> His work inspired a number of geography graduate students to explore other aspects of Black community life in Milwaukee, such as the reasons behind residential choice, the racial transformation of parochial schools, and the growth of taverns within the Inner Core.<sup>24</sup>

Among historians who have paid attention to geography when writing about Black Milwaukee, one of the most innovative studies is William Vick's account of "From Walnut Street to No Street." His account reconstructs the African American business community -- including jazz clubs, gambling operations, taverns, and more reputable storefronts -- along one street from 1945 until its demise due to urban renewal in 1967. Drawing upon sources such as Black business guides, newspapers, maps, and oral history interviews, Vick challenges previous studies of "victimization" in the ghetto by emphasizing "the creative entrepreneurial spirit taken on by many black Milwaukeeans to serve their own interests and to uplift their community."<sup>25</sup>

Urban renewal (sometimes colloquially referred to as "Negro removal") dramatically changed the shape of Milwaukee's Black community in the 1960s and beyond, but it has not yet been the subject of a full-length historical study. In addition to Vick's account of the Walnut Street commercial district, Eric Fure-Slocum lays the

---

<sup>22</sup> Citizens' Governmental Research Bureau. "Milwaukee's Negro Community." Unpublished report, compiled by Paula Lynagh, 1946, p. 1. See also Thomas P. Imse. "The Negro Community in Milwaukee." M.A. thesis, Marquette University, 1942; E. R. Krumbiegel. *Observations on Housing Conditions in Milwaukee's Sixth Ward: A Report to the Mayor and Common Council*. Milwaukee: Commissioner of Health, 1944; Charles Edward Vaeth. "Milwaukee Negro Residential Segregation." Unpublished report, Milwaukee Public Library, 1948; Irwin Rinder. *The Housing of Negroes in Milwaukee: 1955*. Milwaukee, WI: Intercollegiate Council on Intergroup Relations, 1955; Charles T. O'Reilly, Steven I. Pflanzner, and Willard E. Downing. *The People of the Inner-Core North*. New York: LePlay Research, 1965.

<sup>23</sup> Harold M. Rose. "The Development of an Urban Subsystem: The Case of the Negro Ghetto." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60 (1970): 1-17; Harold M. Rose. "The Spatial Development of Black Residential Subsystems." *Economic Geography* 48 (1972): 43-65.

<sup>24</sup> Leo E. Zonn. "Decision-Making Within a Constrained Population: Residential Choice by Black Urban Households." *Journal of Black Studies* 14 (1984): 327-40, based on his earlier work, "Residential Search Patterns of Black Urban Households: A Spatial-Behavioral View." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1975; Leo C. Talsky. "Real Estate, Race, and Revenue: A Milwaukee Case Study." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1967; Sister Dolores Rauch. "The Changing Status of Urban Catholic Parochial Schools: An Explanatory Model Illustrating Demand for Catholic Elementary Education in Milwaukee County." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1971; Frank George Samuels. "The Negro Tavern: A Microcosm of Slum Life." Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois-Urbana, 1971, based on his earlier work, Frank George Samuels. "The Tavern and Negro Lower-Class Subculture." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1965; Leonard F. Pettyjohn. "Changing Structure of Selected Retail Activities in a Racially Changing Neighborhood: Milwaukee, Wisconsin." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1967.

<sup>25</sup> William Albert Vick. "From Walnut Street to No Street: Milwaukee's Afro-American Businesses, 1945-1967." MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1993, p. 1.

groundwork for the “slum clearance” campaign up to 1952, and a thesis by Roger Franks briefly outlines the subsequent political process.<sup>26</sup> Social scientist Joseph Tamney’s *Solidarity in a Slum* surveyed over 600 female homemakers in the Kilbourn town urban renewal area on their participation in voluntary associations, but did not place its limited findings in a broader historical context. By contrast, geographer Patricia House used city directories to track about 600 families, mostly African American, who lived in the near Northside and were displaced by the North-South Expressway construction in the 1960s. Her study found that forced relocation delivered mixed outcomes. Although most families reported an improvement in their living conditions, housing discrimination enabled displaced White families to move further away from the core than Black families, thereby increasing the degree of inner-city residential segregation. But the full-scale, long-term effects of urban renewal with respect to Black Milwaukee have not been addressed.<sup>27</sup>

Historians also need to account for the post-1960s deindustrialization of “rust belt” Milwaukee and its effect on inner-city African Americans, who migrated to the city for jobs that eventually disappeared. Some scholars, like Tony Orum, trace the origins of the city’s industrial decline back to early twentieth century (prior to the peak years of Black migration), as the suburbs and the sunbelt region lured factories away from the city. But the intensity of the post-1960s economic and demographic transformation of Milwaukee is unmistakable. According to Marc Levine and Gregory Squires and Sally O’Connor, the city lost over 14,000 jobs from 1970 to 1990 as manufacturers such as Allis-Chalmers, Allen-Bradley, American Motors, and Briggs and Stratton shut down or cut back their operations. At the same time, the surrounding suburbs gained more than 100,000 jobs. Milwaukee became not only a racially “hypersegregated” region, but one with an extreme concentration of poverty, the highest among the nation’s one hundred largest metropolitan areas. While these statistics clearly indicate dramatic changes, what remains unclear are the human decisions behind these transformations, in the city, the suburbs, and the global economy. Furthermore, how have Black Milwaukeeans experienced these transformations in their daily lives? Marc Levine observes that some Northside neighborhoods lost half of their population between 1970 and 2000 and asks, “Where did these inner city outmigrants go?” This next installment of Milwaukee’s “Late Great Migration” story has yet to be written.<sup>28</sup>

Historical changes in economic production have also been accompanied by shifts in consumption among African Americans, another topic that deserves closer study by Milwaukee historians. At the national level, Elizabeth Cohen argues that the post-war

---

<sup>26</sup> Eric John Fure-Slocum. “The Challenge of the Working-Class City: Recasting Growth Politics and Liberalism in Milwaukee, 1937-1952.” Ph.D. thesis, University of Iowa, 2001, chapter 7; Roger L. Franks. “A History of Urban Renewal in Milwaukee.” M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1976 [••Double-check this••]

<sup>27</sup> Joseph B. Tamney. *Solidarity in a Slum*. New York: Schenkman, 1975; Patricia A. House. “Relocation of Families Displaced by Expressway Development: Milwaukee Case Study.” *Land Economics* 46 (1978): 75-78, based on her earlier work, “Families Displaced by Expressway Development in Milwaukee: A Geographical Study of Relocation.” Master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1968.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony M. Orum. *City-Building in America*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995, chapter 7; Marc V. Levine. *The Economic State of Milwaukee’s Inner City: 1970-2000: A Report*. Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Economic Development, 2002, p. 9; Gregory D. Squires and Sally O’Connor. *Color and Money: Politics and Prospects for Community Reinvestment in Urban America*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001, p. 16-17.

pursuit of prosperity has defined the American identity, and Robert Weems' broad study of twentieth-century Black consumer activity highlights its positive and negative implications. "While collective black spending power had increased" by 1990, he contends, "the primary beneficiary of this phenomenon was not African American consumers but the corporations that sought their relatively limited dollars." Historians might test these claims for Black Milwaukee, being mindful of previous studies (such as William Vick), as well as underutilized source materials on Black economic activity. For example, how did Black consumer boycotts arise (such as the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns of the early civil rights era and the "Black Christmas" protest of 1967), and what economic or citizenship changes did they generate?<sup>29</sup>

By the close of the twentieth century, it has become more accurate to refer to Milwaukee's Black communities in the plural, rather than the singular. In 1900, the African American population numbered less than 1,000, mostly within the near Northside neighborhood whose boundaries became more clearly defined with each decade. In 2000, the city's Black population rose to over 222,000, distributed primarily across several contiguous city neighborhoods on the north and west sides. Yet despite its status as a hypersegregated area, more than 8,000 African Americans now reside in Milwaukee County's suburbs, raising the Black population to significant proportions in municipalities such as Brown Deer (13 percent), Glendale (8 percent), and Franklin (5 percent). Indeed, small enclaves of African Americans have lived in various parts of the city and county throughout the twentieth century, according to John Gurda and Eric Fure-Slocum. But historians have not yet written a detailed account of Milwaukee's Black suburban "pioneers" in the latter half of the twentieth century, and those who undertake this challenge are advised to consult national-level works by geographer Harold Rose and historian Andrew Wiese.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003; Robert E. Weems. *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: University Press, 1998, p. 116. See also Eddie V. Easley. *The Negro Businessman in the Milwaukee Inner Core*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Extension, Commerce Department, 1967; Angela M. Dentice. "The Negro Market in Milwaukee -- What, How, Why." Unpublished research paper, Marquette University [copy at Milwaukee Public Library], 1968. For discussion of Milwaukee's Negro American Labor Council consumer boycotts, see Patrick D. Jones. "'The Selma of the North': Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002, 79-88. For discussion of "Black Christmas" boycott, see Jay Anthony Wendelberger. "The Open Housing Movement in Milwaukee: Hidden Transcripts of the Urban Poor." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1996, pp. 142-44; Jones, "The Selma of the North," 424-26.

<sup>30</sup> John Gurda. *The West End: Merrill Park, Piggsville, Concordia*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Humanities Program, 1980; Fure-Slocum. "The Challenge of the Working-Class City," chapter 3; Harold M. Rose. *Black Suburbanization: Access to Improved Quality of Life or Maintenance of the Status Quo?* Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1976; Andrew Wiese. *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

**Table 2: Black Population in Milwaukee County municipalities, 2000<sup>31</sup>**

Milwaukee County municipalities	Black population	Black percentage of total population
Milwaukee City	222,933	37.3%
Brown Deer	1,522	12.5%
Glendale	1,087	8.1%
Franklin	1,520	5.2%
River Hills	80	4.9%
West Milw	147	3.5%
Bayside	123	2.8%
Shorewood	332	2.4%
Wauwatosa	965	2.0%
Oak Creek	519	1.8%
West Allis	818	1.3%
Fox Point	85	1.2%
South Milw	222	1.0%
Whitefish Bay	139	1.0%
Greenfield	348	1.0%
St Francis	84	1.0%
Cudahy	175	0.9%
Greendale	41	0.3%
Hales Corners	17	0.2%
Suburban total (excluding Milw city)	8,224	2.4%

The story of Black Milwaukee as an evolving community is deeply connected with its spatial and social class transformation over time. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, a small and geographically scattered Black population of somewhat prosperous wage earners was reshaped by early twentieth-century segregation into a physically concentrated yet socially divided neighborhood of Southern working-class migrants and a more established elite. By the late twentieth century, as more recent newcomers arrived and braved their way through a racially hostile city, urban renewal and deindustrialization intensified poverty for an increasingly isolated Black urban community, while those with economic means and motivation established new lives in Milwaukee's outlying neighborhoods and selected suburban towns. As historians continue to write new chapters of Black Milwaukee's history, they will draw both on the "ghetto synthesis" literature and Trotter's multi-faceted critique of it, since these two interpretations are intertwined and explain more in tandem than either one does alone.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 1, includes those reporting single race only.

## The Evolution of Milwaukee's Long Civil Rights Movement

When most historians think of "Milwaukee" and "civil rights," the first images that come to mind are the electrifying mass protests that rocked the city in the mid-1960s. Lloyd Barbee and the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) protesters blocked inner-city school construction and buses to denounce segregated education in 1965. Two years later, Father James Groppi and the Milwaukee National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council marched across the Sixteenth Street Viaduct to the city's Southside, where they braved hostile White crowds in their pursuit of fair housing and Black power. Scenes like these were widely photographed and televised across the nation, helping to "make Milwaukee famous" for reasons other than its breweries.<sup>32</sup>

But a broader definition of civil rights activism, one that extends to periods before and beyond the tumultuous 1960s, tells a different story about Milwaukee and how Black-led movements evolved over time. Racism does not stand still over time, nor does the shape and composition of African American communities. This approach draws upon national trends in the historical literature, to better understand what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall recently described as "The Long Civil Rights Movement," to stretch our mental boundaries beyond the traditional "Memphis to Montgomery" benchmarks of the 1955 bus boycott to the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Furthermore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard argue that rethinking the historical periodization of civil rights is most important in the urban North, where events did not follow the better-known trajectory of the Southern movement. This section outlines the existing literature on Milwaukee's long movement, beginning with mid-nineteenth-century activism on abolition and voting rights, to turn-of-the-century campaigns for public accommodations, to the shifting nature of struggles over employment, housing, police relations, and schooling during the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup>

A sequential reading of individual studies on civil rights activism reveals how the shape of these struggles were influenced by the changing local and national context faced by Black Milwaukeeans. William Vollmar describes how the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 strengthened the power of slave owners and bounty hunters in free soil states like Wisconsin, and sparked what was probably the first African American mass meeting in Milwaukee. Participants passed a resolution declaring the Law "to be repugnant to all republican principles of government" and a threat to both former slaves and freedpeople. Yet strong words and White abolitionist support -- including the dramatic 1854 mass rescue of fugitive slave Joshua Glover and subsequent acquittal of his rescuers -- did not prevent the continuation of legally-sanctioned kidnappings. In turn, Black Milwaukeeans took up the issue of voting rights in 1855, and petitioned the Wisconsin state legislature to act on the measure, which voters repeatedly opposed. Historian John Holzhuter documents how Ezekiel Gillespie, an emancipated slave backed by abolitionist supporters, directly challenged election laws and eventually won

---

<sup>32</sup> See popularized photos from this era in John Gurda. *The Making of Milwaukee*. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999, pp. 368, 375.

<sup>33</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. "The Long Civil Rights Movement: Contested Past, Contingent Future." Presidential address, Organization of American Historians annual meeting, March 27, 2004; Jeanne F. Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds. *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 5. See a fuller argument on the evolution of civil rights struggles in Jack Dougherty. *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, pp. 1-8.

a state supreme court decision in 1866 that granted suffrage to all Black men with at least one year of residency. While the court ruled that the ambiguous wording of a previous referendum meant that Blacks technically had held the right to vote since 1849, the case illustrated more favorable White opinion regarding Blacks in the immediate post-Civil War period.<sup>34</sup>

But national influences also worked in the opposite direction. Historian Leslie Fishel points to the U.S. Supreme Court's reversal in 1883 of Reconstruction-era civil rights law, marking the rise of Jim Crow segregation, and its connection to local Milwaukee disputes over public accommodations. Black Milwaukeeans of this era began facing a different kind of racism, induced by more direct economic competition with White immigrants, and rising opposition to interracial marriages. In 1889, an African American railroad porter named Owen Howell was refused seating on the main floor of the Bijou Opera House, sparking a new phase of discrimination and reaction. While Howell won his court case, he did so on the grounds of middle-class respectability as much as racial equality; the judge's remarks linked his citizenship rights to the fact that Howell was "decently dressed" and "behave[d] himself with propriety," reports historian Harry Anderson. Under the direction of attorney William T. Green, Black Milwaukeeans organized politically to gain statutory guarantees, and eventually won passage of the 1895 Civil Rights Act banning discrimination in restaurants, hotels, and other public accommodations. Enforcement of the law was not always swift. But the political experience enabled Green and other established Black Milwaukeeans to win similar battles, such as their legislative defeat of proposed anti-miscegenation bills at the turn of the century.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the civil rights victories of these nineteenth-century Black Milwaukee pioneers did not address the most pressing concerns of the early twentieth-century working-class Southern migrants who followed them. The issue was jobs. As Joe Trotter and others have described, discrimination against Blacks who sought factory work was compounded by violent attacks from White unionists and the effects of the Great Depression. Local branches of two national organizations -- the NAACP and the Urban League -- were both officially chartered in Milwaukee in 1919. But the Milwaukee Urban League played a more continuous, vibrant role in the lives of Black Milwaukeeans from the 1920s through the 1940s due to its social service (rather than protest) orientation, and its ability to negotiate with White industrialists for Black employment opportunities, as Michael Grover has documented. Black activists came together to gain passage of the Wisconsin Fair Employment Act in 1945, but enforcement provisions were lacking once again. Despite some meaningful gains in the wartime industries, historian William Thompson describes how Black Milwaukeeans struggled to win jobs in breweries, high schools, department stores, and trade unions

---

<sup>34</sup> Vollmar, "The Negro in a Midwest Frontier City," 29-44; John O. Holzhueter. "Ezekiel Gillespie, Lost and Found." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 60 (1977): 178-84. See also Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. "Wisconsin and Negro Suffrage." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 46 (1963): 180-96.

<sup>35</sup> Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. "The Genesis of the First Wisconsin Civil Rights Act." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 49 (1966): 324-33; Harry H. Anderson. "Landmark Civil Rights Decision in Wisconsin." In *The Negro in Milwaukee: A Historical Survey*, 22-29. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1968, p. 23; Buchanan, "Black Milwaukee," chapter 2. See also Fishel, "William Thomas Green."

during the 1950s. Discriminatory barriers prevailed in the clerical, skilled crafts, and professional sectors. Blacks remained relatively "powerless" within White institutions.<sup>36</sup>

Black Milwaukeeans also challenged the dismal state of inner-city housing, but the nature of this activism changed with the historical context of the twentieth century. In the immediate post-World War II era, scholars Marie Laberge and Eric Fure-Slocum explain how Black men and women joined with the League of Women Voters and other White civic organizations to lobby city officials for public housing, facing off against private real estate interests. Some gains resulted when early housing projects were constructed in outlying neighborhoods serving predominantly White working-class families. But by the early 1950s, as White Milwaukeeans perceived Black migrants as a looming crisis, White voters came to equate public housing as "Negro housing," particularly in near Northside neighborhoods. As White political support for public housing diminished by the mid-1950s, Black activists returned to self-help strategies, such as block organizations through the Milwaukee Urban League, to raise the quality of neighborhood life and to acculturate Southern newcomers to life in the urban North.<sup>37</sup>

The question of governmental intervention into the private housing market -- and its civil rights implications in a residentially segregated city like Milwaukee -- did not rise to the forefront again until the following decade. Beginning in 1962, city council member Vel Phillips (the first African American elected into this office), introduced legislation for open housing. Council members soundly defeated her proposal by a vote of 18 to 1, and did so again on three more occasions up to 1967. That same year, after an inner-city riot and massive police response left four dead, a White priest named Father James Groppi and the Black Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council led "open housing" marches for 200 consecutive days.<sup>38</sup>

But historian Jay Wendelberger underscores the subtle yet important class differences within the open housing movement. Middle-class established Blacks like Vel Phillips desired fair housing legislation to allow Blacks to move out of the inner city, while many of the working-class Black youth marchers sought to uplift the quality of

---

<sup>36</sup> Michael Ross Grover. "'All Things to Black Folks': A History of the Milwaukee Urban League, 1919 to 1980." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1994; William F. Thompson. *The History of Wisconsin: Volume 6, Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*. Madison, WI: State Historical Society, 1988, pp. 329-31; Karl H. Flaming, J. John Palen, Grant Ringlien, and Corneff Taylor. "Black Powerlessness in Policy-Making Positions." *Sociological Quarterly* 13 (Winter 1972): 126-33. See also Royal R. King. "Administration of Minority Rights in Wisconsin since 1945." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> Marie Anne Laberge. "'Seeking a Place to Stand': Political Power and Activism among Wisconsin Women, 1945-1963." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995, chapter 2; Fure-Slocum, "The Challenge of the Working-Class City," chapters 3, 6, 7. On earlier struggles for public housing, see Vivian P. Lenard. "From Progressivism to Procrastination: The Fight for the Creation of a Permanent Housing Authority for the City of Milwaukee, 1933-1945." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1967.

<sup>38</sup> On the open housing movement, see NAACP Youth and College Division. *March on Milwaukee: NAACP Milwaukee Youth Council Demonstrations for Fair Housing*. New York: NAACP, 1968; Frank Aukofer. *City with a Chance*. Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company, 1968; Henry J. Schmandt, John C. Goldbach, and Donald B. Vogel. *Milwaukee: A Contemporary Urban Profile*. New York: Praeger, 1971, chapter 6; Stephen Grant Meyer. *As Long As They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 189-196; Patrick D. Jones. "'The Selma of the North': Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002, chapter 7.



their lives within the inner city, he argues. Both he and historian Patrick Jones also argue that the open housing movement blended elements of integrationist and Black Power ideologies, perhaps to a greater degree than many other Northern cities. Father Groppi, a White Italian priest, accompanied Black youth who shaped the direction of the movement. Together, they voiced support for racial integration in the housing market and Black self-determination in political struggles. Yet marching into Milwaukee's white Southside was a means to confront racism, not necessarily an expression of one's desire to move there. Thus when viewed over the long run, Milwaukee's civil rights struggles for housing changed dramatically from the 1940s through the 1960s.<sup>39</sup>

Black community relations with the Milwaukee Police Department also have shifted during the twentieth century, though we lack a focused historical study on this topic. A starting point might be the triangle formed by Whites, established Blacks, and Southern newcomers during the post-war migration. In 1955, Isaac Cogg, the Black president of the Near Northside Businessmen's Association, posed alongside posters his group sponsored to improve policy-community relations. Their message was directed at Black migrants adjusting to this Northern city. "Milwaukee Policemen Are Your Friends," read the top line of the posters, with smiling faces of two White officers underneath. "If They Say You're Under Arrest, Cooperate. . . You'll Receive Fair Treatment by Policemen. . . And the Court." Yet this friendly promise was broken repeatedly, most notably in the 1958 police shooting of Daniel Bell and its subsequent cover-up, a story most eloquently told in an unpublished autobiography/oral history of the victim's sister, Sylvia Bell White. In the aftermath of the shooting, Cogg (now Black Milwaukee's lone representative in state government) publicly denounced the Milwaukee Police and equated their actions with the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi. Established Black civil rights and church leaders debated about how to respond. Reverend Raymond Lathan's call for a protest march was politically derailed.<sup>40</sup> Across the city, Black working-class youth and adults challenged White

---

<sup>39</sup> Jay Anthony Wendelberger. "The Open Housing Movement in Milwaukee: Hidden Transcripts of the Urban Poor." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1996, chapter 4; Patrick D. Jones. "'Not a Color, But an Attitude': Black Power Politics in Milwaukee." In *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, eds. Jeanne F. Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard. New York: New York University Press, forthcoming. Groppi has been the subject of many master's theses, but not a book-length biography, particularly one that examines his life after the headlines faded. For a selection of works, see Liane Ardell Aylward Dolezar. "Father James E. Groppi: A Case Study of Civil Rights Rhetoric." Master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1969; Thomas R. Feld. "The Rhetoric of Father James Groppi in the Milwaukee Civil Rights Movement: A Study of the Rhetoric of Agitation." Master's thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1969; Brian David Lister. "Legislative Contempt: Father Groppi and the Wisconsin Assembly: A Case Study." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1971; William E. Gulas. "A Controversial Personality in the Press: A Descriptive Study of the Milwaukee Press' Treatment of Father James E. Groppi and the Height of the Open Housing Demonstrations, August 28 - September 8, 1967." Master's thesis, Marquette University, 1972. See also interpretation by journalist Carole Malone, "Father James E. Groppi: Asset or Liability?" *Milwaukee Courier*, December 28, 1968.

<sup>40</sup> Isaac Cogg and police-community relations poster pictured in Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, *Annual Report*. Milwaukee: 1955, p. 12. On Cogg and Lathan, see Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, p. 61; Kevin David Smith. "'In God We Trust': Religion, the Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999, pp. 320-21. On the Daniel Bell shooting, see Sylvia Bell White, and Jody LePage. "Her Brothers' Keeper: A Sister's Quest for Justice." Unpublished book manuscript, 2004; Patrick D. Jones. "'The Selma of the North': Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002, chapter 1. On topic in general, see also Milwaukee Police Department. *A Guide to Understanding Race and*

police authority with fists, bottles, and defiant behavior, demanding fairness without the cover of an established civil rights organization.<sup>41</sup> Black officers who served on the predominantly White police force were caught in the middle, particularly during the riot and strong law-and-order response in 1967.<sup>42</sup> Their predicament became more intensified when civil rights activists rallied to replace Chief Harold Breier after the death of Ernest Lacy while in police custody in 1981.<sup>43</sup>

The evolution of Black struggles in public and private education has gained more attention from historians, but much work remains to be done. William Dahlk's excellent thesis traces the origins of Milwaukee's school integration movement from 1963 up to 1975, chronicling the momentum it gained with early civil rights activism, and then lost during the post-1967 open housing marches and spread of Black cultural nationalist organizations. His forthcoming publication promises to extend this analysis to 2000. My own book, *More Than One Struggle*, analyzes Black-led school reform efforts from the 1930s to the 1990s, emphasizing the multiple (and conflicting) perspectives within each generation. William Kelley and the Milwaukee Urban League broke the school district's barrier against hiring Black teachers during the Depression years. As post-war migration overcrowded the Inner Core and intensified school segregation, Lloyd Barbee launched a mass movement and legal campaign that blended demands for integration and Black history in the 1960s. After the courtroom victory, Black activists representing two different neighborhood school areas -- the all-Black inner city and the racially-mixed West side -- conflicted over the most equitable implementation of school desegregation in the 1970s, paving the way for the private school voucher movement of the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> While numerous studies have been published on these recent struggles,

---

*Human Relations*. Milwaukee, WI: Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, 1952; Bernard Toliver, and Joseph Himden. "Research in Police Community Relations, Inner Core Area Milwaukee, 1959-60." Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1960; Thomas L. Neumann. *Police Isolation and Community Needs: A Report*. Washington, DC: United States Commission on Civil Rights. Wisconsin State Committee, 1972.

<sup>41</sup> See various accounts of Black neighborhood street uprisings against police brutality during 1950s and early '60s in Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, pp. 58, 61, 77. One historical lens for interpreting these events on the "so-called margins of struggle" is Robin D. G. Kelley. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> For different interpretations of the Milwaukee riot and police response, compare Jonathan J. Slesinger. *Community Opinions of the Summer 1967 Civil Disturbances in Milwaukee*. Milwaukee: Office of Applied Social Research, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1968; H. R. Wilde. "Milwaukee's National Media Riot." In *Urban Government*, ed. Edward Banfield. 682-88. New York: Free Press, 1969; Karl H. Flaming. "The 1967 Milwaukee Riot: A Historical and Comparative Analysis." Ph.D. thesis, Syracuse University, 1970; David J. Olson. "Racial Violence and City Politics: The Political Response to Civil Disorders in Three American Cities [Newark, Detroit, and Milwaukee]." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1971; Helen Weber. *Summer Mockery*. Shorewood, WI: Aestas Press, 1986; and Myron R. Ratkowski. *What Really Happened: A Police Report*. Kearney NE: Morris Publishing, 2003 ["a law enforcement perspective on the riots of the 1960s: countering lies and legends"]. A full-length study of how Milwaukee's Black police navigated their way through these decades deserves to be written.

<sup>43</sup> On the Coalition for Justice for Ernest Lacy, see Laura R. Woliver. *From Outrage to Action: The Politics of Grass-Roots Dissent*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993, chapter 4. See also United States Commission on Civil Rights. Wisconsin Advisory Committee. *Police Protection of the African American Community in Milwaukee*. Chicago, IL: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Midwestern Regional Office, 1994. On affirmative action, see Michael G. Krzewinski. "The Historical Development and Effects of Affirmative Action on the City of Milwaukee Police Department." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> William Dahlk. *Chipping Away at the Iceberg from Barbee to Fuller: Milwaukee Blacks and Educational Proprietorship, 1963-2000*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, forthcoming, an extension of his

historically minded readers should consult Jim Carl, Barbara Wood, and Mikel Holt on the voucher movement's unique coalition between White Republicans and Black Milwaukee Democrats, and Crystal Byndloss and Diane Pollard on the concurrent African American immersion school movement within the public sector. Still, we lack a rich social history of how families of different races and social classes actually navigated their way through Milwaukee's so-called voluntary desegregation plan, or how Black teachers negotiated the racial politics of unionization and school strikes during the late twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> Future historians of these and related topics should consult the transcribed interviews in the "More Than One Struggle Oral History Project" and other underutilized oral and video source collections. In turn, oral historians and film documentarians who tape new interviews should obtain informed consent from participants and donate their materials to appropriate historical repositories.<sup>46</sup>

The leading civil rights histories are those that follow multiple agendas -- not just one struggle -- over a prolonged period of time. Ruth Zubrensky, a past member of the Milwaukee Equal Rights Commission, has written a local account of discrimination against Blacks from 1835 to the present. Although it concentrates on obstacles (rather than efforts to overcome them) and resembles a detailed chronology more than an interpretive study, it nonetheless is an invaluable guide that captures the shift from nineteenth-century fugitive slave, voting, and public accommodation disputes to twentieth-century employment and housing discrimination. Legal historian Joseph Ranney outlines the parallel trajectory of Wisconsin civil rights law during the same one hundred and fifty year period.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Genevieve McBride creatively describes

---

earlier work, "The Black Education Reform Movement in Milwaukee, 1963-1975." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1990; Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*. See also historical studies by Frederic Clayton Vorlop. "Equal Opportunity and the Politics of Education in Milwaukee." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1970; Caroline Katie Goddard. "Lloyd Barbee and the Fight for Desegregation in the Milwaukee Public School System." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1985; Michael Stolee. "The Milwaukee Desegregation Case." In *Seeds of Crisis: Public Schooling in Milwaukee Since 1920*, eds. John L. Rury, and Frank A. Cassell. 42-77. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993; James Kenneth Nelsen. "Racial Integration in the Milwaukee Public Schools, 1963-2003." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003; Maxine Aldridge White and Joseph A. Ranney. "Lloyd Barbee: Fighting Segregation 'Root and Branch'." *Wisconsin Lawyer* 77 (April 2004): <<http://www.wisbar.org/wislawmag/2004/04/white.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> Jim Carl. "Unusual Allies: Elite and Grass-Roots Origins of Parental Choice in Milwaukee." *Teachers College Record* 98 (Winter 1996): 266-85; Barbara Johnson Wood. "The Legislative Development and Enactment of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999; Mikel Holt. *Not Yet "Free At Last": The Unfinished Business of the Civil Rights Movement - Our Battle for School Choice*. Oakland: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 2000; Devonne Crystal Byndloss. "Resistance, Confrontation, and Accommodation in Two Urban School Districts: Black-Led Reform Efforts in the 1960s and 1980s." Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1999; Diane S. Pollard, and Cheryl S. Ajitrotutu, eds. *African-Centered Schooling in Theory and Practice*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2000.

<sup>46</sup> The "More Than One Struggle Oral History Project" by the author consists of more than sixty transcribed interviews with spokespeople and participants from various Black-led education reform movements in Milwaukee, and has been donated to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Urban Archives and the Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum, 2004. For underutilized oral and video collections, see the Milwaukee Journal Stations collection of television and radio recordings at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee archives, several locally produced historical documentaries (especially those catalogued at the Milwaukee Public Library), and additional footage collected by long-time news cameraman Clayborn Benson, director of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum in Milwaukee.

<sup>47</sup> Ruth Zubrensky. "A Report on Past Discrimination Against African-Americans in Milwaukee, 1835-1999." Milwaukee: Author, 1999; Joseph A. Ranney. *Trusting Nothing to Providence: A History of Wisconsin's Legal System*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Law School, 1999, chapter 20.

changes in civil rights struggles (and the women's movement) while narrating the history of Milwaukee's Black press, from the Booker T. Washington-era self-help strategy embraced by the *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate* to the hard-hitting racial protest voiced by the *Milwaukee Star* and the *Courier* in the 1960s and '70s. Stephen Byers extends this narrative by examining how the city's Black press has articulated the interests of a growing and increasingly diverse African American community into the twenty-first century.<sup>48</sup>

Overall, the two most impressive civil rights histories are Joe Trotter's *Black Milwaukee* (covering the 1890s to the early 1940s) and William Thompson's sixth volume of *The History of Wisconsin* series (from the 1940s to the 1970s). Both studies concentrate on how shifts in Milwaukee's economic history influenced the size and structure of the Black community, and in turn, how its members rose up to challenge White supremacy that took on different forms over time. Thompson's volume also places Black Milwaukee's story in the context of related struggles in Madison, Racine, and the state as a whole.<sup>49</sup> Another promising work-in-progress on the latter period is Patrick Jones's dissertation, "Selma of the North," now under contract to be published. Jones traces civil rights "insurgency" from Black protests arising from the 1958 police shooting of Daniel Bell to the 1960s mass protests for integrated schooling, open housing, and welfare rights. Each dissertation chapter tells a gripping story; the historian's challenge is to craft an interpretation that links these individual episodes with a compelling argument for why activists' targets and tactics changed over time.<sup>50</sup>

Future scholarship on Milwaukee's long freedom struggle needs to focus on the intersections between civil rights insurgency and the institutions seeking to advance these goals, sometimes not necessarily in tandem with one another. We still lack a thorough history of "the NAACP" in Milwaukee, which needs to be understood as several different organizations: the Milwaukee NAACP adult branch, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, the Wisconsin NAACP state conference, and the national NAACP central office. How and why did these different entities cooperate, or fail to communicate, on their shared or divergent interests? Important works by Joe Trotter and Richard Smuckler probe these questions for certain years, but no one has taken up this question for an extended period of time. Perhaps one starting point would be a biography of individual NAACP leaders from one era who fell out of favor in a subsequent era. James Dorsey, for example, presided over a fairly inactive local NAACP branch in the 1930s, then became an outspoken protest leader in Milwaukee's "March on Washington" for wartime jobs in 1941, followed by courtroom battles against discriminatory trade unions in the 1950s. But in 1964, Dorsey and several Milwaukee NAACP supporters were discredited by Lloyd Barbee, the Wisconsin NAACP president, for refusing to embrace bold protest tactics, such as the boycott of segregated

---

<sup>48</sup> Genevieve McBride. "The Progress of 'Race Men' and 'Colored Women' in the Black Press in Wisconsin, 1892-1985." In *The Black Press in the Middle West, 1865-1985*, ed. H. Lewis Suggs. 325-48. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996; Stephen Robert Byers. "Diverse Community, Diverse Newspapers: How Milwaukee's Black Press Reflected Its Diversity, 1968-2002." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Joe W. Trotter. *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985; William F. Thompson. *The History of Wisconsin: Volume 6, Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*. Madison, WI: State Historical Society, 1988. ••include chapter number and title••; see also Thompson's valuable "Essay on Sources," pp. 771-77.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick D. Jones. "'The Selma of the North': Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002.

schools. How did individuals like Dorsey and Barbee understand the history of “the NAACP” in Milwaukee over time? Did they tend to see it as continuous -- or contradictory?<sup>51</sup>

We also need further study on the intersections between Black Milwaukee and its Socialist heritage. Did leading Social Democrats like Victor Berger and Mayor Dan Hoan (1916-1940) and Mayor Frank Zeidler (1948-1960) contribute to the growth of the Black-led civil rights movement -- or not? The partial evidence that historians have uncovered is mixed. Sally Miller argues that Milwaukee’s early twentieth-century Socialists may have “stood for Negro suffrage when the issue arose,” but in practice most of them “doubted Negro equality and undertook no meaningful struggles against second-class citizenship.” At a Socialist National Convention in 1910, for example, Victor Berger spoke in blatantly racist terms about Africans and Asians as a threat to European civilization. In the 1920s, Dan Hoan improved relations by serving on the Milwaukee NAACP board and speaking out against the city’s rising Klu Klux Klan movement. The NAACP branch secretary described the *Milwaukee Leader* Socialist press as the newspaper “most favorable to us.” But at a 1932 Socialist convention, Hoan delivered his speech with a condescending “darky story” that drew passionate criticism from Black activists. In the 1950s, Mayor Frank Zeidler, also a resident of the near Northside, was publicly identified as being sympathetic to Black interests, to the extent that his political opponents targeted him as a “nigger lover.” But researcher Tony Orum charged Zeidler’s 1960 Inner Core commission as seeking merely to adjust Southern black migrants rather than challenging the policies and practices that segregated them. Furthermore, Kevin Smith points out that Zeidler personally intervened to block Reverend Raymond L. Lathan’s “prayer of protest” march after the 1958 Daniel Bell shooting, declaring that “As long as I am mayor there will be no race war here,” and sending his subordinates to block plans for the demonstration. Although Milwaukee’s White Socialists gradually became more engaged with Black community concerns, it is not entirely clear whether their actions promoted or detracted from the civil rights movement.<sup>52</sup>

Scholars should also conduct a parallel study of Black Milwaukee, the Communist Party, and the “Red Scare.” How did Communist efforts to organize Black Milwaukeeans, and also the anti-Communist movement (particularly Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy), influence the city’s civil rights history? The evidence is not yet clear. Historian Keith Schmitz argues that the Communist Party failed to organize the Black masses in the 1930s, and the Wisconsin Civil Rights Congress also appears to have had limited results in the 1940s. Was this due to widely publicized anti-Communist actions taken by Black attorney James Dorsey? Or to Milwaukee Urban

---

<sup>51</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, pp. 125, 215-17; Richard Charles Smuckler. “Black Power and the NAACP: Milwaukee, 1969: A Case Study.” M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1970. On Dorsey, see his papers at the Milwaukee County Historical Society, and Schmitz, “Milwaukee and its Black Community,” pp. 90-97.

<sup>52</sup> Sally M. Miller, ed. *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism*. New York: Garland, 1996, chapter 2; Mr. LaJoyeaux Stanton, Milwaukee NAACP branch secretary (1926), in NAACP branch files, Milwaukee WI (1915-1938), Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch files, 1913-1939, Series C: The Midwest (reel 27); Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 118-9, 138; Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 235-6; Schmitz, “Milwaukee and its Black Community,” 71-75; Jim Arndorfer. “Cream City Confidential: The Black-Baiting of Milwaukee’s Last Pink Mayor.” *The Baffler* number 13 (Winter 1999): 69-77; Orum, *City-Making in America*, pp. 127-140; Kevin David Smith. “In God We Trust’: Religion, the Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963.” Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999, pp. 318-21.

League director William Kelley's confidential FBI reports about their activities? Or were Milwaukee Communists simply unable to cross cultural barriers to build bridges with Southern Black migrants?<sup>53</sup>

Black Milwaukee's relationship with Democratic Mayor Henry Maier (1960-1988) also deserves closer study. Historian William Thompson contends that Maier "was out of touch with the city's blacks . . . his position on civil rights accurately represented the majority of his white constituency, and he probably believed he could safely ignore black voters, who had not been among his strongest supporters." But Maier argued that passing civil rights legislation (such as open housing) in the city of Milwaukee alone would be to the detriment of the movement; the higher goal, he claimed, was regional or statewide legislation, to prevent White suburbanites from further distancing themselves from Black city residents. Resolving this puzzle requires sorting out Maier's words from actions that he took and the options he did not. One starting point might be to closely examine the Mayor's Commission on Community Relations (also known as Inter-Racial Relations, Human Rights, or Equal Rights under different administrations). The Commission was not recognized as being very influential under Maier's watch. Why was this the case, and what actions did Maier take -- or fail to do so -- that might have changed its course?<sup>54</sup>

The intersections between the Milwaukee's Black churches and civil rights organizations also merit further study, because the norms of the Southern movement literature do not necessarily fit those of the North. For instance, sociologist Aldon Morris contends that the Southern civil rights organizing was deeply supported by Black churches and ministerial networks in the 1950s and '60s. In Milwaukee, individual pastors (like Reverend B.S. Gregg) and specific "movement centers" (such as Reverend Lucius Walker at the Northcott Neighborhood House, or Father James Groppi at St. Boniface Church) did play a crucial role. But Milwaukee's civil rights organizers seem to have spent almost as much time fighting with conservative Black ministers who opposed or slowed down their efforts, a topic examined more closely in Kevin Smith's thesis. Furthermore, key Milwaukee civil rights leaders like Lloyd Barbee (an avowed atheist) had strained relationships with many Black clergy. Taken together, these facts raise more interesting questions: Why did so many Black church leaders agree to open their doors to the 1964 MUSIC Freedom Schools organized by Barbee and Marilyn Morheuser (a former White nun)? How did the stance taken against MUSIC by James Dorsey, the most prominent Black Catholic during this period, influence the White Catholic hierarchy's position on social justice? Understanding when and where Black churches and civil rights groups agreed and disagreed in the post-1963 years is a question to be taken up by future scholars.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Schmitz, "Milwaukee and its Black Community," pp. 68-71; James Dorsey Papers, Milwaukee County Historical Society; Robert A Hill, ed. *The FBI's RACON: Racial Conditions in the United States during World War II*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995, pp. 160-66.

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, *History of Wisconsin*, p. 378; Henry W. Maier. *Challenge to the Cities*. New York: Random House, 1966; Henry W. Maier. *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography*. Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1993; Schmandt, *Milwaukee: A Contemporary Urban Profile*, chapter 6.

<sup>55</sup> Aldon D. Morris. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press, 1984; Fielding Eric Utz. "Northcott Neighborhood House." *Milwaukee History* (Winter 1983): 115-24; Smith, "In God We Trust," pp. 305-321. On Milwaukee Catholics and civil rights, see Steven M. Avella. *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002, part IV.

Was there a lasting Liberal-Labor-Black coalition in Milwaukee's post-World War II years -- or not? This is a subject of intense debate in other Northern cities. In Detroit, for instance, educational historian Jeffrey Mirel argues that this type of interracial alliance came together in 1949 to advocate for more public school finances, then collapsed due to racial strife in 1964. But urban historian Thomas Sugrue, whose account highlights Detroit's contentious race relations that were fueled by the segregated and unequal labor and housing market of the 1950s, suggests that an authentic Liberal-Labor-Black coalition may never have existed. Although the Detroit NAACP and the United Auto Workers joined hands to create equal employment in wartime industries, their post-war paths drifted apart as the latter embraced symbolic civil rights legislative victories but ignored shop-floor discrimination.<sup>56</sup>

The answer is not quite clear for Milwaukee. In the labor sector, historians Joe Trotter and Keith Schmitz point to significant Black involvement in selected White union locals in the 1930s, but White unionists also attacked Black workers in settings like the Wehr Steel Strike. Perhaps the best example of a Black-Labor alliance was United Auto Workers local 248 at Allis Chalmers, which welcomed Black membership and actively challenged job discrimination in the 1940s. But the local's militant leadership was attacked by anti-Communists and also suffered a crisis when its rank-and-file membership rebelled against them in 1946. Eric Fure-Slocum's dissertation, "The Challenge of the Working-Class City," makes some headway on this question through a detailed reading of Milwaukee County Industrial Union Records, the *Wisconsin CIO News*, and the Frank Zeidler Papers. From the 1930s to the early 1950s, Milwaukee CIO union leaders stood at the forefront of the public housing movement, whose interests coincided with Black workers living in abysmal Northside homes. But what remains somewhat unclear is the concrete actions taken by the same leaders when various CIO and non-CIO unions dragged their feet or refused to hire Blacks well into the 1950s. Marie Laberge's dissertation raises similar questions regarding the relationship of women's civic organizations to Black Milwaukee. Laberge documents how the predominantly White and middle-class League of Women Voters built an active Liberal-Black coalition around the post-World War II housing crisis, the greatest "domestic scandal" of its time. But after passage of the National Housing Act of 1949 and a steep increase in new home construction in the city's outlying neighborhoods and suburbs, these middle-class White women's organizations drifted away from the interracial alliance. Black women returned to pre-war self-help strategies, through the Milwaukee Urban League and colored women's clubs, in their local efforts to uplift the race. Finally, Kevin Smith's thesis explores the religious dimension of the Liberal-Black coalition, highlighting the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish participation in post-war civil rights activity that led up to the 1963 Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race, which drew an interracial crowd of 4,500. But at this crucial moment, Smith concludes, "the delegates balked at a proposal to take direct action" on a local civil rights controversy: the case of Fred Lins case, a white anti-poverty program commissioner who publicly voiced racist comments. The Conference's inability to act impaired its ability to serve as an interracial coalition organization. In sum, many pieces

---

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Mirel. *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, chapter 5; Thomas F. Sugrue. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 170-74.

of evidence exist on the Liberal-Labor-Black question in Milwaukee, but we await historical interpretations that can put it all together.<sup>57</sup>

A related question is to ask how the federal government, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, influenced civil rights activism in Milwaukee over time. The three-way relationship between Black Milwaukeeans, White Milwaukee politicians, and Washington, D.C. deserves closer study. During Franklin Roosevelt's term, James Dorsey and William Kelley appear to have leveraged the federal Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to win Black jobs from White corporations. Does the same relationship work for Blacks to gain federally sponsored public housing during the Truman administration -- or not? Likewise, we need more historical context about how Milwaukee's civil rights movement changed with the Economic Opportunity Act and Model Cities programs of the 1960s. Important studies by Jenann Olsen, Henry Schmandt, Kathy Kuntz, and especially Mark Braun detail how the federal requirements for "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in policy-making decisions opened the door for Black community groups to challenge White power structures. Groups like the Organization of Organizations (Triple O) deserve closer study. Finally, how did Republican initiatives, such as the Reagan-era devolution of federal power to states (such as block grants), and conservative support for vouchers and welfare reform affect Milwaukee's civil rights agenda? Studies currently exist for most of these individual programs, but what we lack is an historical interpretation that explains how the federal government carved out (or cut back) opportunities for local civil rights organizing over time.<sup>58</sup>

While some historians divide the civil rights movement into a period of early-1960s "growth" and late-1960s "decline," the "long civil rights movement" interpretation suggests that it may be more fruitful to look at these as stages of transformation. For instance, Julius Modlinski studied the Commandos, a leadership group within the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, as they transformed from a militant protest organization to a social service agency. We could benefit from a closer examination of the Black (and White and Hispanic) women who shifted from race-based civil rights to the class-based welfare rights movement in the 1960s and '70s.

---

<sup>57</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, chapter 5; Schmitz, "Milwaukee and its Black Community," pp. 36-54; Stephen Meyer. "Stalin Over Wisconsin: The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900-1950. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992, pp. 142-48; Eric John Fure-Slocum. "The Challenge of the Working-Class City: Recasting Growth Politics and Liberalism in Milwaukee, 1937-1952." Ph.D. thesis, University of Iowa, 2001, chapter 3; Marie Anne Laberge. "'Seeking a Place to Stand': Political Power and Activism among Wisconsin Women, 1945-1963." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995, chapter 2; Kevin David Smith. "'In God We Trust': Religion, the Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999, p. 330. See also Peter K. Eisinger. *Patterns of Interracial Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the City*. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Edmund Kersten. *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000; Jenann Olsen. "Administrative Change in Milwaukee Municipal Government." Master's thesis, Department of Urban Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1969; Henry J. Schmandt, John C. Goldbach, and Donald B. Vogel. *Milwaukee: A Contemporary Urban Profile*. New York: Praeger, 1971, pp. 157-168; Kathy Kuntz. "A Lost Legacy: Head Start's Origins in Community Action." In *Critical Perspectives on Head Start*, eds. Jeanne Ellsworth, and Lynda J. Ames. 1-48. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998; Mark Edward Braun. *Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor: Poverty Representation in Milwaukee's Community Action Programs, 1964-1972*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001; Michael Bonds. *Race, Politics and Community Development Funding: The Discolor of Money*. New York: Haworth Social Work Practice Press, 2004. On the role played by one of Milwaukee's long-term Democratic Congressman, see Stephen M. Leahy. *The Life of Milwaukee's Most Popular Politician, Clement J. Zablocki: Milwaukee Politics and Congressional Foreign Policy*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.



Exactly how and why did these transformations occur -- and what might a gendered analysis of women and men's activism during this period tell us? Furthermore, we need to look for intersections between Black-led civil rights efforts and those led by other racially identified groups. Historian Marc Rodriguez, for example, recounts how Chicano farm workers migrating between Texas and Wisconsin came into contact with Milwaukee's broader civil rights movement in the 1960s, mutually transforming both parties.<sup>59</sup>

To be sure, the "long civil rights movement" is not simply a smooth transition from one entity to the next. We desperately need more research on Black organizations that consciously distanced themselves from the early 1960s integration movement, such as the United Black Community Council, or Milwaukee's Black Muslim organizations (whose roots go back before the 1960s). Sometimes local community research makes more sense when placed in a comparative context with other Midwestern cities.

Andrew Witt's thesis, for instance, seeks to trace the rise of the Milwaukee chapter of the Black Panther Party and its self-help and self-defense philosophy. But perhaps a more interesting question would be to investigate why Milwaukee's Panthers failed to flourish to the same degree as chapters in comparable cities. At the national level, historian William Van Deburg argues that Black Power was more influential as a cultural rather than a political movement. Does this claim hold true for Milwaukee?<sup>60</sup>

By definition, should a "long civil rights movement" have an endpoint -- or not? Journalist Mikel Holt interprets the contemporary private school vouchers campaign as the "unfinished business" of the 1960s civil rights movement, while several (but not all) Black Milwaukeeans who identify with the school integration movement strongly disagree with this perspective. While it is premature to give a definitive answer to this particular question, future historians would be wise to reflect on this issue as they decide whether or not the "long movement" model illuminates more about the past than it obscures.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Historical Construction of Race in Milwaukee**

Most historians accept the premise that race is socially and politically constructed. Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies," is compatible with much of the recent literature. But relatively little historical writing has examined precisely how these racial categories have been created and transformed over time in the urban North, particularly in Milwaukee, a fertile

---

<sup>59</sup> Julius John Modlinski. "Commandos: A Study of a Black Organization's Transformation from Militant Protest to Social Service." Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978; Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization. *Welfare Mothers Speak Out: We Ain't Gonna Shuffle Anymore*. New York: Norton, 1972; Marc S. Rodriguez. "A Movement Made of 'Young Mexican Americans Seeking Change': Critical Citizenship, Migration, and the Chicano Movement in Texas and Wisconsin, 1960-1975." *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Autumn 2003): 275-99.

<sup>60</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, pp. 124, 172; Andrew Richard Witt. "Self-Help and Self-Defense: A Reevaluation of the Black Panther Party with Emphasis on the Milwaukee Chapter." M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1999; William L. Van Deburg. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; Maureen Elizabeth Simpson. "Afro-American Cultural Consciousness: Dance Perspective in Milwaukee, 1965-1975." Master's thesis, UCLA, 1986.

<sup>61</sup> Mikel Holt. *Not Yet "Free At Last": The Unfinished Business of the Civil Rights Movement - Our Battle for School Choice*. Oakland: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 2000.

ground for such a study. While journalists like Jonathan Coleman have written thoughtful, details accounts of race relations in recent years, the topic deserves an historian's long-term perspective to trace how African American, White, and other racial and ethnic identities have been constructed amid intergroup conflict and consensus.<sup>62</sup>

Milwaukee historians (and everyday observers) have occasionally written passages or brief chapters on cross-racial encounters that could reveal much more if compiled together and analyzed over time. William Vollmar's thesis identifies how the formerly "Anglo-Saxon, Yankee dominated town" of Milwaukee received significant numbers of working-class Irish and German immigrants in the 1850s, heightening economic competition with African Americans and also lowering their status in White ethnic eyes.<sup>63</sup> Louis Swichkow and Lloyd Gartner's history of Milwaukee's Jews documents the concerns behind their departure from the near Northside neighborhood in the 1920s. "Our sidewalks are filled with Jewish boys and girls mingling with non-Jewish youth from the fast deteriorating neighborhood -- a mixture of Negroes, Slavs, Italians, Greeks, and other nationalities," wrote the acting director of the Abraham Lincoln House, soon to be converted in the Milwaukee Urban League's social center.<sup>64</sup> John McGreevy and Steven Avella both discuss similar encounters in their histories of Catholic parishes and racial boundaries.<sup>65</sup> An intriguing article by John McCarthy discusses the policy motivations which led the Milwaukee Boys Club to construct an interracial youth recreation center in a racially transitional area, rather than an outlying predominantly White neighborhood, in the 1950s. Historians should seek source materials that give a glimpse of life inside institutions undergoing racial transition, such as the anonymous published article by a White graduate of North Division High School, which shifted from majority-White to majority-Black in the late 1950s. While we have learned much about Black migrants arriving into the Northside during the mid-twentieth century, we know very little about the Whites who fled and those who stayed. Even when Mayor Zeidler's Commission officially labeled the boundaries of the Inner Core in 1960, where the vast majority of Black Milwaukeeans lived, the area was still nearly 40 percent White, though their stories of racial formation remain largely untold.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup>Michael Omi, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, second edition. New York: Routledge, 1986, p. 55; Jonathan Coleman. *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997.

<sup>63</sup> Vollmar, "The Negro in a Midwest Frontier City," p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> Louis J. Swichkow and Lloyd P. Gartner. *The History of the Jews of Milwaukee*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963, p. 227, 423 (footnote 77). See also Buchanan, "Black Milwaukee," pp. 13-14; Schmitz, "Milwaukee and its Black Community," pp. 4-5. For a national perspective, see Maurianne Adams and John Bracey, eds. *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.

<sup>65</sup> John T. McGreevy. *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [••Check which pages discuss Milwaukee••]; Steven M. Avella. *In the Richness of the Earth: A History of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1843-1958*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002, pp. 627-631.

<sup>66</sup> John McCarthy. "Providing Integrated Youth Recreation in a Transitional Neighborhood: the Milwaukee Boys Club Expands to the North Side, 1945-1960." *Milwaukee History* 23 (2000): 37-47; "I Spent Four Years in an Integrated High School," *U.S. News and World Report*, November 7, 1958: 40-45, cited in Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 49-50.

Historians of the late 1960s open housing protests have told us a great deal from the perspective of Black marchers, but relatively little from the viewpoint of White defenders, and how the racial identities of the two groups were intertwined. A generation earlier, most residents of this Southside neighborhood identified themselves as Poles, but by the 1960s, most of their protest signs shouted "White Power," a linkage to the more established Whites on the city's Northside. How did this racial transformation occur -- and how deeply was it connected to their hostile opposition to African Americans whose civil rights demands threatened their rights of homeownership? Some answers may be derived from a spatial analysis of source materials. According to historian Stephen Leahy's preliminary study of Congressman Clement Zablocki's correspondence from constituents from 1949 to 1964, the author argues that "there is no correlation between living in historically Polish American space and opposition to Civil Rights" during this period of time. Further research might draw on related studies of other contexts, such as Ronald Formisano's *Boston Against Busing* and Kathleen Blee's *Women of the Klan*. Peter Kolchin wisely cautions against accepting findings from the many recent "Whiteness" studies without rigorously examining their evidence. But the history of race in Milwaukee cannot be understood solely through the African American experience, and we should give greater consideration to these historical intersections.<sup>67</sup>

Milwaukee also deserves a multi-racial history of the complex relations between Blacks, Whites, and Latinos, perhaps drawing inspiration from recent exemplars such as Neil Foley's study of Texas cotton culture at the turn of the century. In Milwaukee during the late 1970s, school desegregation planning required that student enrollments met specific racial percentages. But as Hispanic students rose to become 6 percent of the population, questions arose about how they should be counted in a policy context that had been framed entirely around Black and White categories. Tony Baez and his colleagues recount how Hispanic advocates opposed classifying their children as "non-Black" because "it could result in the use of Hispanic students as White to desegregate predominantly Black schools where White parents would not volunteer to send their children." Instead, advocates petitioned the court "to consider Hispanics a distinctive ethnic/racial/minority group," which the judge eventually rejected. Incidents like these, where the interests of racially-identified groups become more visible or realigned, deserve our attention.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, Milwaukee historians also might consider studying individuals who moved between different racial groups, and the broader implications of their special roles over time. In 1906, attorney William Green estimated that over two hundred Black

---

<sup>67</sup>See "White Power" protesters carrying "God is White" posters in *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 13, 1967, but also see one reference to "Polish Power" in Wendelberger, "The Open Housing Movement in Milwaukee," p. 136; Stephen M. Leahy. "A Proposal: Geographical Information Systems and the Polish American Reaction to Civil Rights in Milwaukee." Unpublished conference paper, Polish American Historical Association annual meeting, January 10, 2004; Ronald P. Formisano. *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991; Kathleen M. Blee. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; Peter Kolchin. "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America." *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002): 154-73.

<sup>68</sup>Neil Foley. *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; Tony Baez, Ricardo R. Fernandez, and Judith T. Guskin. *Desegregation and Hispanic Students: A Community Perspective*. Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1980, p. 33.

men “passed” for White while conducting daily social and business affairs in the city. Legal scholar Phoebe Williams’ biographical account of Phoebe Williams describes how the young Black college graduate became (most likely) the first public schoolteacher of her race in Milwaukee around 1918, until administrators “discovered” that she was Black and dismissed her. Four years later, Raimey became the first Black woman known to have attended law school in Wisconsin because she “passed” for White. “Nobody asked me,” she explained in a 1984 interview. “I never told.” Yet one consequence, Williams observes, is that Raimey’s affiliation with Milwaukee’s small Black community may have been questioned by some. Additionally, individuals from interracial families might be a topic of historical investigation. Finally, scholars might examine Black Milwaukee’s “ambassadors” to the White majority, those individuals (such as James Dorsey, William Kelley, or Vel Phillips) who were frequently called upon to explain one race to the other. When examining notes from their speeches and conversations, how did these ambassadors craft language to help them cross over difficult racial boundaries? How did White audiences typically respond and what questions did they pose? And how did this racial discourse change over time?<sup>69</sup>

Fifty years after the publication of Bayard Still’s *Milwaukee: The History of a City*, the most popular text on the city’s history has become John Gurda’s *Milwaukee: The Making of a City*. While the former mentioned “Negroes” on only five pages, the latter incorporates African American history into over fifty pages, with significant content on years prior to 1948, the date of Still’s original publication. While a rudimentary page count of a minority group’s history within a mainstream text tells us only so much, Gurda’s narrative reflects many of the best qualities of recent historical writing on Black Milwaukee’s community life, civil rights activism, and cross-racial interactions as exemplified above. To be sure, much work remains to be done, as this essay has suggested. But these trends clearly indicate that African American history has reshaped how Milwaukee views its past, and the literature’s influence will continue to grow as a new generation of scholars rethink past accounts, discover underutilized source materials, and carve out new directions for the future.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Buchanan, “Black Milwaukee,” pp. 3-4; Phoebe Williams, “A Black Woman’s Voice: The Story of Mabel Raimey, ‘Shero’.” *Marquette Law Review* 74 (1991): 345-76; Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, p. 50.

<sup>70</sup> Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948; John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999.