

Background

Racial covenants are legal clauses that were inserted into property deeds in the first half of the 20th century that excluded people color from purchasing property. This practice was used in Hennepin County from 1910 through the mid-1950s. This mechanism of racial segregation is being studied by the Mapping Prejudice project. Mapping Prejudice has collected data for almost all the racial covenants in Minneapolis and Hennepin County, including original covenant language associated with each property and its spatial information. While present mapping of this data has been concerned with understanding in the spatial location and extent of these restrictions, there has not been a textual analysis to determine how these mechanisms changed. We understand that conceptions of race are discursively constructed over time and the goal of this project is to begin examining how this might be reflected in the language of racial covenants.

Explanation of methods:

Although there are many variations within racial covenant language, covenants fall into two primary categories: segregation by inclusion, and segregation by exclusion. By “segregation by inclusion” I mean that racial Covenant language explicitly lists racial categories, which are allowed to purchase property. Language of this type is shown in the following example:

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5. That the said land or buildings thereon shall never be rented, leased or sold,  
transferred or conveyed to, nor shall same be occupied exclusively by person or persons other  
than of the Caucasian Race.
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Therefore the operational definition of a ‘segregation by inclusion’ covenant was any

covenant which contained the words: “White” or “Caucasian.” The presence of these words was taken to indicate that the language was constructed to indicate which racial categories *could* occupy a property.

By contrast, ‘segregation by exclusion’ language explicitly lists racial categories which *may not* occupy or purchase a property. Example of ‘segregation by exclusion’ language is given in the following example:

The party of the second part hereby agrees that the premises hereby conveyed shall not at any time be conveyed, mortgaged or leased to any person or persons of Chinese, Japanese, Moorish Turkish, Negro, Mongolian or African blood or decent. Said restrictions and covenants shall run with the land and any breach of any or either thereof shall work a forfeiture of title, which may be enforced by re-entry.

Based on this, ‘segregation by exclusion’ covenants were defined as any covenant that did not contain the word “White” or “Caucasian.”

Hypothesis and Results

The preliminary hypothesis for This research was that by exclusion was the dominant form of racial Covenant language in the earliest iterations a racial Covenants. In other words, I expected to see more frequent exclusionary text for data from the early 20th century. Also, I expected to see a growing number of Covenants which excluded based on inclusionary criteria with each passing decade. This initial hypothesis was largely correct for the data set that I analyzed. However, it is essential to keep in mind that this is only data for 'abstract' deeds. I plan to run this data for the entirety of 'abstract' deeds and 'Torrens' deeds once data collection for the overall project is complete.

Next Steps and Further Development

This criteria is the highest level binary which covenant language can be divided into. In the future, I intend to expand this program to assess more nuanced changes in the language over time. This basic framework could be used to assess the frequency of more particularized language over time. This program could also be modified in order to assess smaller timescales. In other words, if someone was interested in intervals of 5 years rather than decades and so forth.