

## MURAJ: In Focus -Unearthing Bad Deeds

By Cassie Varrige

I met with Kirsten Delegard, Project Director of Mapping Prejudice, and Kevin Ehrman-Solberg, Digital and Geospatial Director of Mapping Prejudice, in a sunlit office in the Social Sciences Building. We discussed their groundbreaking research with Mapping Prejudice and the value of interdisciplinary work. Learn more at [www.mappingprejudice.org](http://www.mappingprejudice.org).

On the surface, Minneapolis seems to be a city filled with opportunity. However, it is also the site of one of the largest racial disparities in the country. The gaps between Black and White wealth, education levels, and homeownership are at odds with Minneapolis's self-conception as a progressive city. Mapping Prejudice is an interdisciplinary project of librarians, historians, and geographers seeking to unearth the oft-ignored structural barriers that have produced these inequalities.

Researchers with Mapping Prejudice have shed new light on the structural barriers that have shaped the city. Although the formal segregation of Jim Crow was never present in Minneapolis and other northern cities, structural racism was still widespread. The New Deal era brought restrictive housing policies from the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), which categorized various neighborhoods in terms of their respective mortgage risk. HOLC designated predominantly African-American neighborhoods as hazardous investments, making it significantly more difficult for non-white residents to secure home loans.

These racist practices are commonly referred to as redlining, reflecting the red color used on HOLC maps to categorize the highest-risk neighborhoods. Redlining created areas of concentrated poverty, while keeping many communities of color from building wealth through property.

Racial covenants act as another powerful barrier to African-American homeownership in the Twin Cities. Covenants were inserted into the fine print of warranty deeds to restrict future home sales to non-white people. Housing developers in the 20th century used covenants to ensure that their developments would retain a higher value through racial exclusivity. Racial covenants enacted between 1910 and 1968 carved out exclusively white sections of the city. Today, many of the most prosperous communities in Minneapolis, including neighborhoods in close proximity to the city's renowned lakes and park systems, continue to be predominantly white. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 made racial covenants legally unenforceable, but they continue to impact housing values and neighborhood diversity nonetheless. Kevin said that the current values of identical homes, located

4. That no building shall be left with paper exposure or with the exterior incomplete.

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.

6. The forgoing covenant and restriction shall run with the land and shall bind the grantee herein and the heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns of said grantee until the first day of January A.D. Nineteen hundred and Forty.

Figure 1: An example of a racial covenant in Minneapolis  
Source: mappingprejudice.org

not only in the same neighborhood but even on the same block, differ depending on whether or not each property was covenanted in the past.

Racial covenants are understudied in comparison to redlining, but both forms of housing discrimination have shaped Minneapolis. HOLC's maps were an instrument of federal housing policy and easily accessible to researchers, whereas racial covenants were engineered by the private real estate market and dispersed into thousands of individual home deeds. A group of researchers from across the University and the Twin Cities coalesced to form Mapping Prejudice and examine the impacts of this overlooked practice in more depth. The nontraditional and interdisciplinary project quickly found a welcoming incubator in the University Libraries. Mapping Prejudice collaborated with the Borchert Map Library on the West Bank to facilitate archival work and the project's digitization efforts. The project also worked with Hennepin County to develop a memorandum of understanding and to gain access to millions of housing deeds in Minneapolis and beyond.

"As soon as you read a covenant, you understand how shocking the language is," said Kirsten. "It's the best illustration of structural racism I've ever seen." The founders of Mapping Prejudice set out to document this phenomenon.

At first, the Mapping Prejudice team considered using the same methodology as a similar project in Seattle, which sent undergraduates to the archives of the City of Seattle to sort through housing deeds and find covenants. Penny Peterson, an expert on property records in Minnesota and a co-founder of Mapping Prejudice, had looked at deeds by hand and found several thousand examples of exclusionary language. However, this came nowhere close to the total number of racial covenants in Minneapolis.

The Mapping Prejudice team harnessed technology to scale up this work and categorize every deed in Hennepin County. Using rigorous data standardization methods, the Mapping Prejudice team translated the individually scanned housing deeds into entries on Zooniverse, an online platform for crowd-sourced data collection. Optical character recognition can translate unreadable scanned files of housing deeds into legible samples. Volunteers may then go through each deed to identify any discriminatory language. These results are validated, with at least three volunteers taking a look at a deed before it is ultimately categorized. The researchers at Mapping Prejudice have amassed a comprehensive collection of spatial and economic data. With Kevin's background in geographic information systems mapping and with

collaborative assistance from programmers, Mapping Prejudice has mapped thousands of racial covenants throughout Hennepin County. The striking interactive map resembles epidemiological models, showing the spread of racial covenants over time. This visual format is a powerful tool that demonstrates the effect of Minneapolis's housing discrimination in a tangible way. Many volunteers are shocked to see the widespread practice of racial covenants in the neighborhoods where they live and work. "Real estate agents, bankers and health care providers have come up to us at our presentations and told us, 'I never knew about my history, and it's essential to my job that I know this,'" said Kirsten.

The crowd-sourced data used by Mapping Prejudice serve two important

purposes. Using Zooniverse, Mapping Prejudice can leverage the work of over 3,110 distinct volunteers to catalog more than 177,000 housing deeds in Hennepin County. Kevin and Kirsten estimated that it would take a single researcher between twenty and thirty years of full-time work to correctly categorize all of these deeds. The crowd-sourced dataset provides new opportunities for spatial and economic analyses. Using this information, researchers can better understand the ways that covenants have produced racial inequality in the material landscape. However, engaging volunteers to identify racial covenants has the added benefit of exposing community members to the extent of the racial disparities in Minneapolis. Thousands of volunteers across the Twin Cities metro area and beyond have taken part

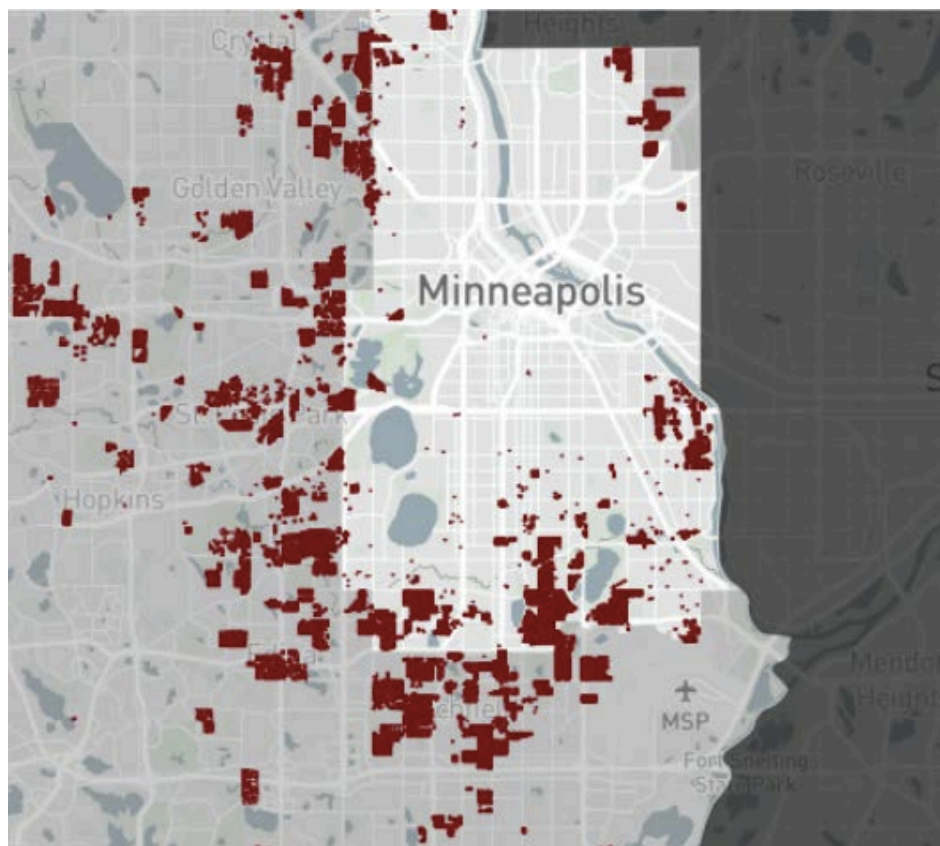


Figure 2: A map of racial covenants in Hennepin County  
(Areas associated with a deed containing a racial covenant indicated in red)  
Source: [mappingprejudice.org](http://mappingprejudice.org)

in producing this knowledge. Participating in this work changes their understanding of racism in the North, and provides a framework for policies that put racial equity at the core. “Volunteers will say things to us like ‘I read this and it made racism feel real,’” said Kirsten. While it was not necessarily their original intention, the team at Mapping Prejudice believes deeply that community engagement can be praxis. “The act of transcription has profoundly transformative political potential,” Kevin said.

“The core of our philosophy is to create a community co-created project,” said Kirsten. In contrast to more traditional methods of research that extract knowledge, their goal is to build a collaborative end-product that is useful to the communities researched by Mapping Prejudice. Kirsten, Kevin, and the other researchers have engaged in outreach with community groups as diverse as the Federal Reserve to witches’ covens. Mapping Prejudice also collaborates with teachers to create culturally relevant lesson plans about racial covenants.

In the immediate future, Mapping Prejudice will begin the task of categorizing housing deeds in Ramsey County. The team is also working with researchers in half a dozen cities across the country to develop a toolkit for crowd-sourced OCR analysis. The research team has also connected with arts and cultural organizations to share their findings through new methods. The Mapping Prejudice team worked with the creators of the documentary *Jim Crow of the North* and the Hennepin History Museum’s *Ownning Up* exhibit to expose new audiences to the concept of racial covenants.

The leaders of Mapping Prejudice hope

that the project will become a centralized repository for data on housing discrimination to enable comparative analyses in the long run. They are excited about the prospect of helping other cities produce community-engaged research. Their advice for young researchers is this: “Hold onto your questions as a researcher. Trust your own experience and perception, and the way you notice things about the world,” said Kirsten. Both researchers emphasized the value of openness in the research process and finding collaborators with unique approaches in order to enrich their projects.

Mapping Prejudice’s interdisciplinary work through the Borchert Map Library has allowed them to follow their own path of research geared towards community engagement. Kirsten said, “Research should make an impact in the world. Think about why you want to do the work- it should be more than just getting tenure. When you’re passionate about a project, don’t let your questions get hammered out of you. That will sustain you through the challenges.”

*The Mapping Prejudice team welcomes contributions to their work at [www.mappingprejudice.org](http://www.mappingprejudice.org).*

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