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Beyond the White Picket Fence: American Indians, Suburbanization, and Homeownership

Kasey Keeler

INTRODUCTION

During summer 2012, just as the nation was coming out of the Great Recession, my husband and I made the decision to transition from renters to homeowners and began the process of looking for a single-family home. We hired a realtor, were preapproved for a mortgage, and looked at nearly thirty homes across the Twin Cities, homes that were both in suburban communities and in urban neighborhoods of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota. This time-honored process of achieving the “American Dream” was certainly made distinct to me, as I am an American Indian woman and scholar whose research is grounded in American Indian suburbanization, access to homeownership, property, land, and race.¹ Highly cognizant of the legacy of Indigenous dispossession and the barriers to homeownership today for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) communities, I felt it was important that we reside in a diverse community—racially and economically. Our realtor patiently worked with us to make this a reality, even though for him it likely meant a lower commission because we maintained a very modest budget. We were not the beneficiaries of down-payment or financial support from our parents, nor did we have access to generational wealth, like many (white) first-time homeowners do, including most of our peers. Similarly, the neighborhoods we were most interested in were not those typically considered as “up and coming” or even “desirable” by our peer group of other young married couples, something I argue is closely linked to patterns of redlining

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commonplace throughout the mid-twentieth century.² We certainly were not interested in a new construction home nor leaving the metropolitan core for the “exurbs,” the growing areas of development beyond the suburbs that blur the line between rural and metropolitan.

Eventually we saw a home we loved in Crystal, Minnesota, an older, inner-ring suburb of Minneapolis where most single-family homes were constructed during the 1950s and 1960s, a time when race-based covenants were common.³ It was a Sunday in late August when we first toured our eventual home. This I easily recall, despite a decade passing, because after looking at the home that afternoon we then drove twenty minutes south, to Shakopee, to attend the annual Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community *wacipi*, or powwow. Shakopee, or Šakpe, is a southwestern suburb of Minneapolis, an inherently Indigenous place—past and present. It is a Dakota place. While Shakopee is perhaps most visible today as a predominantly white, suburban community, Shakopee also borders a contemporary Dakota community—the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. The entirety of this area has long been, and remains, Dakota homelands, despite land loss, war, and exile.⁴

While at the powwow our minds raced, thinking about the home we just saw. We had less than a day to decide if we wanted to put in an offer, as the next day the selling agent would host an open house. If the seller received an offer from us, ahead of the open house, they would, perhaps generously, grant us first rights to the home and cancel the open house. After the powwow, as we drove home to our apartment in Saint Paul, we excitedly decided to move forward with an offer and contacted our realtor. Fortunately for us, it worked out and the process to closing went smoothly. We moved into our new home the last weekend of September 2012. We loved our new neighborhood, home to white, Mexican, and African American community members. There were both nuclear families and single persons living on our block, those well past retirement and elementary school children up and down the street. While most people in our neighborhood were heteronormative, there were also those who identified as a member of the LGBTQ community. We were surrounded by economic diversity—individuals who endured economic uncertainty during the Great Recession through layoff and foreclosure and those who were able to maintain steady and secure employment, largely unscathed by the recession. Certainly, these qualities do not always make a neighborhood desirable for all peoples, but for us, it did. We were drawn to the modest sized lots and well-established tree-lined streets. Just one week after moving into our new home, a rambler built at the height of postwar suburbanization, we learned one of our neighbors was a well-respected Dakota elder; I knew we were home.

As a suburban Indian who was raised in a suburb not far from where we had purchased our new home, the process of becoming a first-time homeowner forced me to critically reflect on and consider what being a Native woman and living in a suburb, an inherently Indigenous place, meant.⁵ More specifically, I reflected on what access to “the suburbs,” as a place and homeownership as a key socioeconomic marker means for American Indian people. This article makes the case for suburban Indians as a unique subgroup of American Indians who live off-reservation and as separate from the larger

umbrella identity of “urban Indian.” In doing so, I define suburban Indians while advancing a line of inquiry that posits suburban Indian identity in relation to place, identity, and belonging. Throughout this work, it is not my intention to suggest one residential location or place-based American Indian identity is better or worse than another. Rather, I suggest these place-based American Indian identities have unique relationships to land and are often shaped by socioeconomic indicators, including homeownership.

Here, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality, particularly as it relates to the focus of this scholarship. I am not only deeply committed to research on suburban Indians but I am also invested in it as a self-identified suburban Indian and Native American and Indigenous studies (NAIS) scholar. As such, I recognize my proximity to my research and my “insider” status that privileges me to certain kinds of experiences and knowledge, cultural and otherwise. My work on suburban Indians is informed by those of other NAIS scholars who have written about knowledge production, relationality, place, oral history, quantitative data, and communities through their own experiences in recent years.⁶ More specifically, I draw on Malinda Maynor Lowery’s description of autoethnography, “a method of exploring one’s own relationship to research that begins with questioning how culture and society have affected one’s experiences” as a key method.⁷ Here, Lowery explains that, “[autoethnography] is different from autobiography. . . . I have examined my own place in my family and culture and deployed stories, like fables, to teach a lesson or address a historical question.”⁸ Similarly, I use autoethnography, a method that first appeared in the mid-1970s, to weave together my experiences with the realities of other suburban Indians that I have observed alongside stories that have been shared with me formally and informally. Here, I put my lived experience, or positionality rather, as a suburban Indian who was raised and lived much of my adult life in suburban communities across Minnesota’s Twin Cities in conversation with the experiences of other suburban Indians from the same geographic area.⁹ Methodologically, this work “challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others” by recognizing how my “personal experience influences the research process” and therefore, allows me to capture and curate stories of suburban Indians of a particular geographic over the last thirty to forty years.¹⁰

With an interdisciplinary approach that centers NAIS, I offer this study that provides an entry point to consider the contemporary lived experiences of suburban Indians and the ways in which they are a unique subset of American Indian people. In addition to autoethnography and oral history interviews, I draw on select demographic data gleaned from large datasets, including the US Census. These data provide a quantitative framework from which to examine suburban Indians alongside urban Indians and rural-reservation based Indians at the national and state level.¹¹ The research collected and shared in this article is guided by three questions: Who are suburban Indians? In what way has “place” and “land” (that is, suburbs *and* Indigenous homelands) influenced how suburban Indians thought about their own identity and belonging? And what is the role of homeownership, or access to improved housing, in establishing, recognizing, and understanding this subgroup? By weaving together

both methods and sources, this article intervenes in existing scholarship by drawing important attention to a growing and significant subgroup of American Indian people—suburban Indians (see fig. 1).

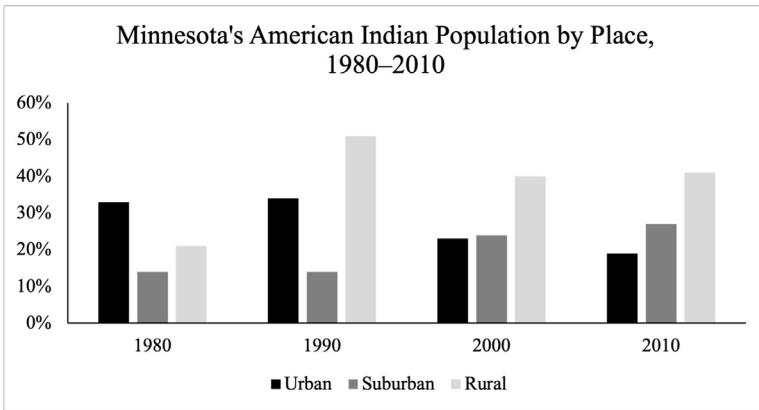


FIG. 1

This article centering suburban Indians is organized around three subsections and a conclusion. In “Defining Suburban Indians,” I offer a definition of suburban Indians that largely grows out of scholarship on urban Indians, a subgroup that really took shape in the post–World War II era of termination and relocation. The next section, “Identity, Place, and Belonging,” works to center American Indian voices and perspectives of suburban geographies. Drawing on oral histories, this section reveals the complexity and duality of being American Indian and living in a predominately white suburb. The third section of this article, “Suburban Indians and Homeownership,” returns to oral histories with suburban Indians to examine the ways housing, and more specifically homeownership, influenced the move to suburbs for American Indian people, including the challenges those same individuals and families faced and continue to face. Finally, in the conclusion I return to my key interventions and the importance of taking seriously suburban Indians as a growing and significant subgroup of American Indian people.

DEFINING SUBURBAN INDIANS

Throughout my research, I work to emphasize the ways suburban Indians, as a distinct subgroup, allows us as scholars and community members to represent and interact with today’s American Indian people more accurately. Suburban Indians are not easily encapsulated by the broad and seemingly mutually exclusive binaries of “reservation Indians” or “urban Indians.” To define suburban Indians, I draw on and refine definitions of urban Indians, an off-reservation subgroup that became recognizable during the post-Relocation years of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that other scholars of NAIS have identified. For example, in *The Urban Indian Experience in America*,

Donald Fixico defines urban Indians as “Native Americans who moved to cities and to border towns, and who experienced urban life.”¹² What is more important, in the same work Fixico recognizes that there are “at least three general types of metropolitan Indians: (1) traditionalists, (2) suburbanites, and (3) middle-class members.”¹³ Here, he defines Indian “suburbanites” as “those who lived on the cities’ perimeters and were typically laborers, forming the modern urban Indian core . . . trained professionals who gave rise to the ‘Indian middle class.’”¹⁴ My definition of suburban Indians directly builds on Fixico’s, focusing on them in my analysis.

With a focus on Chicago, James B. LaGrand describes how an urban environment can shape how individuals think of themselves, calling the relationship that exists between indigeneity and urbanity “symbiotic,” signaling the relationship between place and identity.¹⁵ He recognizes how a shift toward urban environments for American Indian people post-1950s and the Relocation program led to a move away from “strictly tribal [identities] to one focused on a larger, more diverse group of Indians . . . and political activism.”¹⁶ Similarly, while my use of the term *suburban Indians* recognizes individual tribal identities, what unites this subgroup is their collective belonging or residence in a particular geography, namely suburbs. While also centering the Chicago American Indian community, Rosalyn LaPier and David Beck draw attention to the ways this urban Indian community worked to organize and, in turn, help shape an understanding of what urban Indian communities can look like. Equally important, LaPier and Beck also recognize how, as American Indian people moved away from their home reservations, “the question of what it meant to be Indian became increasingly contested by both Indians and non-Indians.”¹⁷ This is a central question I tackle here—what does it mean to be a suburban Indian, or rather, what does it mean to live in a suburb as an American Indian person?

Suburban Indians occupy a somewhat liminal space geographically, temporally, and culturally. I define suburban Indians as those American Indian people who live away from reservation communities and within a metropolitan environment, yet outside the urban core.¹⁸ Suburban Indians are defined as such based on their residential location in a suburb, a form of group membership that operates in addition to a specific tribal identity. My definition of suburb is a geographic area outside an urban core, within a short commute to an urban “downtown”—an area that is less densely populated than its urban neighbor, comprising predominantly single-family (non-farm) homes. Although suburbs are constantly changing—becoming more economically and racially diverse, sprawling further and further away from urban centers, connected by multi-lane highways—the adage applies here: you know it (a suburb) when you see it.

When thinking specifically of who is a suburban Indian, having a tribal identity (including ties to a contemporary tribal community, whether or not one is tribally enrolled) is essential to being a suburban Indian. That is, you cannot *only* be a suburban Indian without a more specific tribal affiliation (similarly, being an urban Indian does *not* make one Indigenous). More, suburban Indians are often associated with key socioeconomic markers, including homeownership, though this is not always the case. Suburban Indians may live within their traditional homelands or the homelands of other tribal nations and may have strong ties to home reservation communities, or

not. Many suburban Indians maintain strong ties to a nearby urban Indian community and/or participate in Indian education programming. Suburban Indians may be tribal citizens or direct descendants and may identify as single-race American Indians or in combination with one or more races.¹⁹

Carolyn Liebler, a prominent scholar of American Indian demography has demonstrated that the way an American Indian person identifies (as single- or multiple-race American Indian, with specific tribal affiliation) is strongly tied to *place*—that is, a residential location and proximity to “homeland.”²⁰ Individuals who identify as single-race American Indian and also identify a tribe (or tribes) with which they are affiliated, specifically on census documents, are much more likely to live on-reservation than multiple-race American Indians or those who claim American Indian “ancestry” without tribal ties (fig. 2). Indeed, suburban Indians are much more likely to identify as multiple-race American Indians than as single-race American Indians. Therefore, the way suburban Indians identify their race, ancestry, and tribal or reservation community ties also differs from on-reservation American Indians who are much more likely to identify as single-race American Indians.

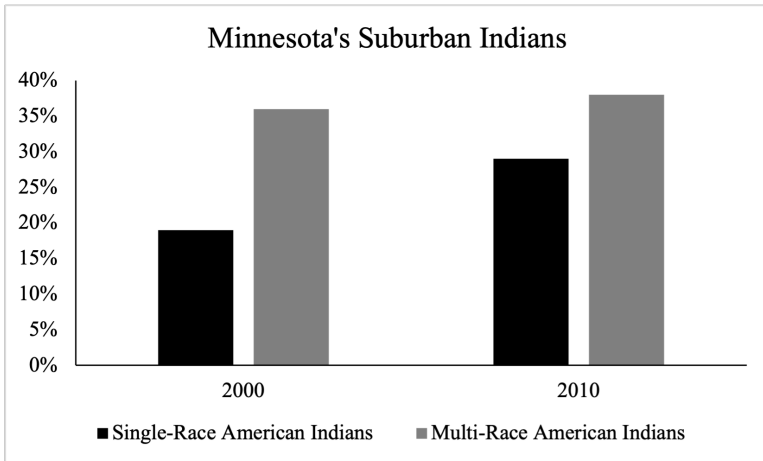


FIG. 2

IDENTITY, PLACE, AND BELONGING

My experiences across suburban geographies, histories, and experiences are not entirely unique. Indeed, nearly 70 percent of American Indian people today live off-reservation. As time passes, these individuals and families increasingly live in more metropolitan and suburban areas, areas that have long been Indigenous places and homelands.²¹ Despite the growing population of suburban Indians, we know relatively little about the American Indian people who call suburban communities home. At the same time, suburban Indians have long existed, both historically and contemporarily, in newly developing inner-ring suburban communities, particularly as mid-twentieth century mass home construction became commonplace. In *City Indian*, LaPier and

Beck highlight the reality that “many American cities have had a continuous, though small, American Indian presence throughout their history.”²² As such, it is essential to consider the complex ways American Indian people have experienced suburbs and suburbanization.

In her essay in the edited volume *American Indians and the Urban Experience*, Susan Lobo works to understand and define urban geographies, particularly as they inform American Indian identity. Here she recognizes that “urban doesn’t determine self-identity, yet the urban area and urban experiences are contexts that contribute to defining identity.”²³ Lobo recognizes the important features of urban Indian communities, those that have drawn American Indian people to metropolitan environments, including “the historic role played by the relocation program and other types of policy-driven external influences; the degree of proximity and ease of travel and communication between cities and tribal areas, reservations, and homelands; and the availability of employment, housing, and educational opportunities.”²⁴ Similar to urban Indians, suburban Indian identity has been influenced by geographic location, particularly when individuals reside away from their tribal communities and when considering the complex ways federal policies have informed individual perspectives on positionality and belonging. The *Haña Wakpadaŋ/Bassett Creek Oral History Project*, a first-of-its-kind suburban American Indian oral history project, provides valuable insight into how American Indian people relate to place and how they make sense of their identity, particularly in predominantly white suburban environments.²⁵

One of the oral history project interviewees was Diane Wilson. When her family moved to the developing suburb of Golden Valley in the mid-1950s, just west of Minneapolis, they were the first and only Native family in the neighborhood. As a youth growing up in the 1960s, Wilson and her siblings were not taught American Indian history in school, and it was not until much later that she connected her identity, as a Dakota person, to the Dakota place she was raised (much of present-day Minnesota is Dakota homelands), the place her ancestors were exiled from following the US-Dakota War.²⁶ When reflecting on what it means to be an American Indian person who was raised away from her reservation and in a predominantly white postwar suburb, Wilson reflects,

I’m enrolled on Rosebud [Rosebud Indian Reservation]. I’ll never live there. I rarely ever make it out there. And so there’s this weird disconnect of saying who you are. There’s the government identity of where you’re enrolled. But when I introduce myself, I say I’m a Bdewakantonwan Oyate descendant because that’s where my family came from . . . it’s a way of acknowledging then the diaspora that followed [due to the U.S.-Dakota War] is how we ended up in South Dakota, and that’s why our enrollment is there. But I really identify as Dakota because this is where I grew up. And that’s where my family began. So, it becomes a really complicated question around identity.²⁷

Here, Wilson specifically speaks to the legacy of Dakota exile from Minnesota that followed the US-Dakota War of 1862, when Dakota were forcibly removed from the state and sent to reservations in present-day Nebraska and South Dakota. In the

excerpt above, Wilson shares how she has navigated her tribal identity living away from her reservation community, a community that was forced out of the state after the war. This is not dissimilar from other Dakota people who call the suburban Twin Cities home.

Cathee Vick, who is White Earth Ojibwe and has lived in suburban Golden Valley from age three on, has also worked to reconcile her identity as a Native person living in a suburb, though in different ways than Wilson. Vick reflects,

It's hard to separate the [past from the present]. Of how we lived [as Native people] and what we were allowed—and that's such a sad word, allowed—to do with ceremony, with hunting, with gathering, with our medicines. And it's affected me in the way that I honor the past with it. But it saddens me that there aren't more Natives [who live in suburbs].

She also recalled that as a Native family living in a white suburb, her family had “been called every name in the book . . . because we were different growing up.”²⁸ Vick makes direct connections between policies that were applied to Native people and her experience as a Native woman living in a suburb, and even having access to suburban space. More, Vick describes the racism she has experienced living off-reservation in a predominantly white environment as well as that she has observed. For Vick, living in a predominantly white space, suburban Golden Valley, came with challenges, but she has worked to find comfort in her home and neighborhood while building relationships in her local community and with the larger urban Indian population in neighboring Minneapolis.

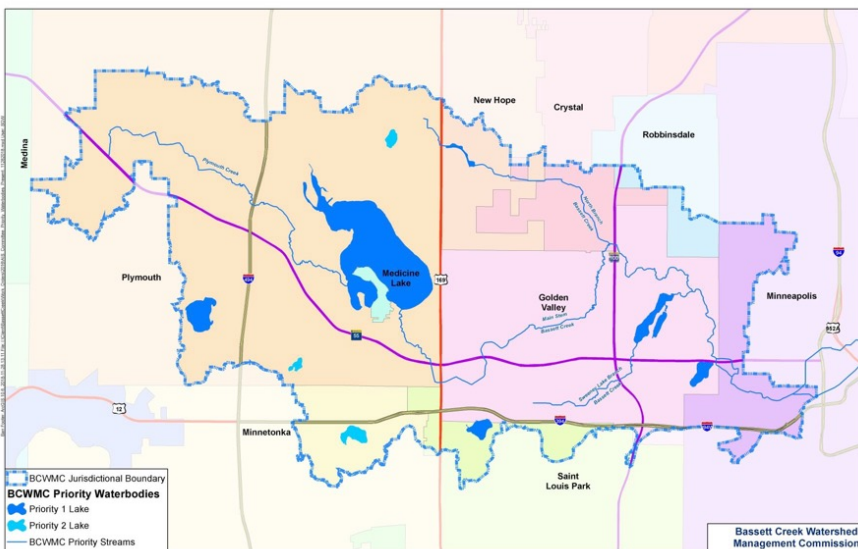


FIG. 3. Map of the Bassett Creek Watershed and location of contemporary suburbs west of Minneapolis

When reflecting on his identity, belonging, and place, Bradley Blackhawk, a member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska (Ho-Chunk) raised in suburban Crystal, recalls only one other Native family in the area. More specifically, Blackhawk remembered what it was like as a Native person in a predominantly white community: “We were trying to get, I guess, if you will, assimilated, because we had these different backgrounds. And going to school where we were, there wasn’t much for anything as far as Native cultures go. You had to get that from your own homes.”²⁹ As a Ho-Chunk person living in the Twin Cities, Blackhawk learned about his culture and identity from his father while also recognizing early on that he lived in a Dakota place. “There’s just tons of areas around here that are all Dakota . . . we just knew that. I don’t know how we knew it, but we’d . . . go places and see things, and we’d talk about it . . . that’s what we talked about. That’s what we learned. And thank God . . . I learned how to learn that.”³⁰ What is more significant, Blackhawk shared that he regularly thinks about himself, a Native person, living in a predominantly white suburb. “All the time. That’s the way I carry myself. . . . So that was always something in my life that I was proud of.”³¹ Here, Blackhawk shares the pressures he witnessed and experienced to become more “white” as a Native person in the suburbs who also lived away from his home community, though his family worked to maintain their connection to their tribe and culture, something not all suburban Indians are able to do.

For oral history project interviewee Sydney Beane, the chance to return home to Minnesota from California was a way to reconnect his family to their traditional homeland. He shares, “It was a way to sort of bring . . . our family, particularly the grandchildren and their parents and their grandparents, together and come back to our Dakota homeland.”³² Much like Wilson, Vick, and Blackhawk, Beane also reflected on the history of Dakota exile, what it meant for him to return home, and how it influences his own identity as a Dakota person. He shares, “Our history has been driven by what happened to my parents being exiled from Minnesota. . . . My relatives are on pretty much all the Dakota reservations. . . . I’m tied into all the different branches of what is Dakota. This is the mother homeland, and the rest came from here.” For Beane and his family, they are intimately tied to where they live today, across the west metro suburbs, because they are Dakota and connect their longer family history to the region.³³ Perhaps more revealing, though Beane lives in a decidedly suburban space (which is also a Dakota place), he does not consider himself a suburban Indian. “I think of myself as Dakota, first of all. And then I see myself as related to . . . my villages that were here . . . along the Mississippi and Minnesota [Rivers],” which shape the western suburbs of Minneapolis. Beane, like many Dakota, recognizes his strong family and community relations and is able to connect that to where he lives now, in a Dakota place that, over time, has become increasingly suburban. “I have a relationship to all those villages. . . . I come from those early, early villages there and [I am] directly descended from those families.”³⁴

In many ways, the lived experiences of these suburban Indians mirror how urban Indians have negotiated their identity off-reservation, in urban areas. Though erroneous, it is a commonly held belief that those American Indians who live off-reservation

are “less Indian” or less authentic. Similarly, it is widely assumed that American Indian people who live off-reservation and away from their tribal communities risk losing their “cultural identity and tribal connectedness” due to the physical separation.³⁵ However, as Nancy Lucero points out in her work on American Indian identity, American Indians regularly reflect on “cultural connectedness” or “an individual’s ties to either his/her specific tribal culture or to the intertribal urban Indian culture found in many US cities” as significant to American Indian identity formation and maintenance.³⁶ More, Lucero has described the ways urban American Indian women, in particular, because of their residential location, must negotiate their identity in distinct ways because they see and interact with so few people *who look like them*.³⁷ In addition, as Liebler has pointed out and described above, American Indian people’s identity, as recorded on official census forms, is informed by their proximity to, or distance from, a tribal community or reservation.³⁸

In each of the interview excerpts above (and based on my own experience as a suburban Indian), we can see how Native people in suburbia work to navigate their own identity and reflect on belonging—at the tribal/cultural level and at the neighborhood/suburban level. Though scholarship on urban Indians and identity is helpful in thinking about suburban Indians as a distinct subgroup, there are common characteristics of suburban Indians (and, more generally, most suburbanites) that are important to take note of. Here, access to improved housing and opportunities for homeownership is a key socioeconomic indicator that many suburban Indians have in common and that also informs their identity.

SUBURBAN INDIANS AND HOMEOWNERSHIP

Throughout the process of our home search, mortgage application, approval, and closing, no real estate agent or loan officer mentioned the Indian Home Loan Guarantee Program (IHLGP), a home loan program specifically intended for American Indian people, a program I indeed qualified for as an enrolled tribal citizen (and as was listed on all my demographic information during the home purchase process available to our realtor and lender). While my partner and I were fortunate to secure a more “traditional” mortgage, we were required to put more money down in addition to paying required monthly mortgage insurance, and our interest rate was directly tied to our credit scores. The Indian Home Loan Guarantee Program (IHLGP), established in 1992, and known as the Section 184 Home Loan Program, works to alleviate multiple barriers to homeownership for American Indian people.³⁹ Instead, my husband and I, first-time homebuyers with no family to rely on for financial support or guidance, navigated the complex web of a home purchase alone. We were lucky: as a highly educated couple with stable employment, we were able to understand the drawn-out and highly involved, time-sensitive process. With no children nor significant debt, we were able to plan, save, and sacrifice to make homeownership a reality.

I often reflect on this experience and the ways American Indians access, or are prevented from accessing, homeownership, oftentimes in their homelands and specifically in today’s suburbs. While many suburban Indians move to suburban geographies

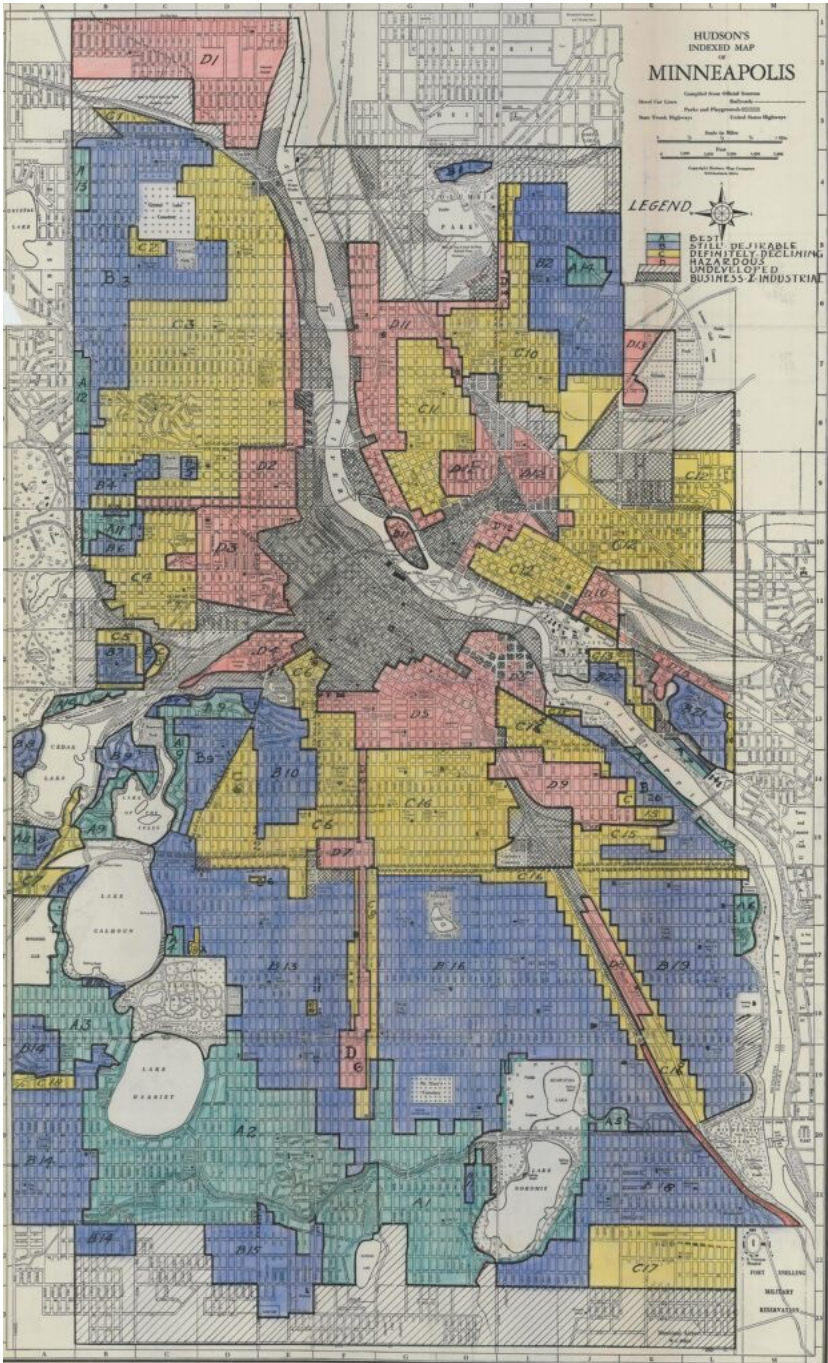


FIG. 4. Redlining map of Minneapolis

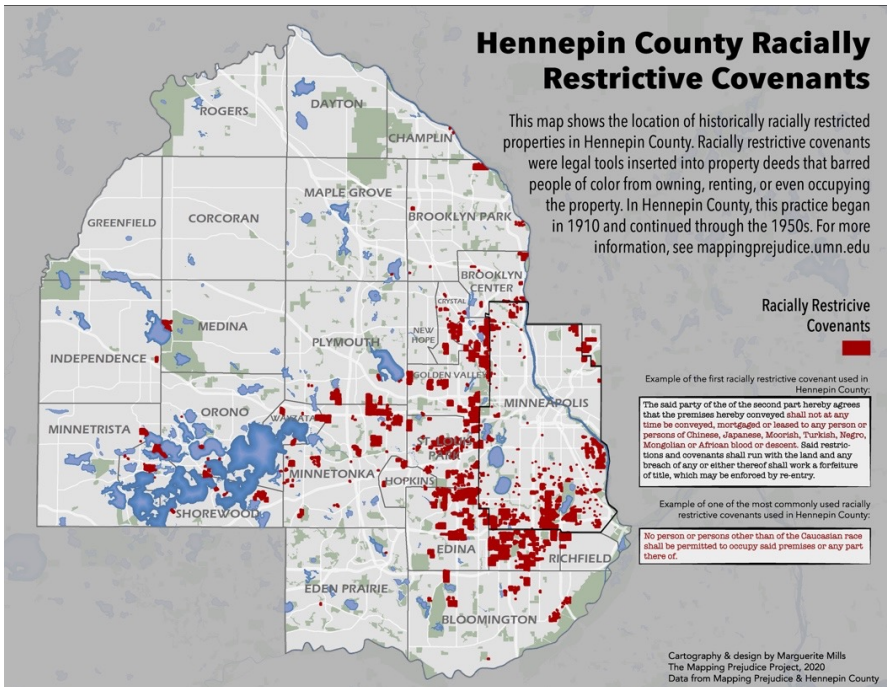


FIG. 5. Race-based covenants in the west metro area of the Twin Cities

for homeownership opportunities, homeownership does not exempt them from financial hardships and historical legacies of dispossession, removal, the reservation system, redlining, race-based covenants, and, indeed, racism. The western suburbs of the Twin Cities, the focal point of this research, has its own legacies to contend with. As described above, most of present-day central and southern Minnesota is Dakota homelands, a geography Dakota (and Ho-Chunk) were exiled from in the months and years following the US-Dakota War. During the twentieth century, this same geography ushered in a new form of race-based exclusion in the form of redlining and race-based covenants. The policy and practice of redlining, commonplace throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, used a series of color-coded maps that corresponded to metropolitan neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were rated on a scale of “best” (green), “still desirable” (blue), “definitely declining” (yellow), and “hazardous” (red), based on factors including racial makeup of the neighborhood. Though redlining is most often associated with African American exclusion, American Indians also felt the weight of redlining’s racial exclusion from certain neighborhoods, including those in the west metro. Like redlining, race-based covenants worked to exclude those from the non-white races from purchasing, renting, or living in individual homes through property deeds.⁴⁰ Despite these barriers to homeownership for American Indians and other people of color, the lure of improved housing, namely homeownership, has brought an

increasing number of American Indians to the suburbs where more housing is generally available and at competitive prices.

Like many of those who have made their home in the suburbs, when Diane Wilson moved with her family out of South Minneapolis and into Golden Valley in the 1950s, they were attracted by the mid-century suburban housing boom and a chance to become homeowners.

"[My parents] were renting places. And I was the third child. They needed more space, so they bought an acre lot . . . and they had a little rambler built—a little three-bedroom rambler."⁴¹ While Wilson's family did not directly experience race-based discrimination and exclusion when working to purchase a home, that was not always the case for other American Indian families in the western suburbs. Tawnya Stewart (who identifies as Black and Ojibwe) vividly recalls her family's experience when they worked to move out of Minneapolis and to the western suburbs: "When [my aunt and uncle] bought the home [I was raised in], they literally had to get approval to move to the area because they were the first Black family to move to that street and that neighborhood."⁴² Here we see how multiracial identities and racism add another layer of complexity to purchasing a home in a white suburban community. While Stewart's family was eventually able to purchase their home, that was not the case for all American Indians or other BIPOC.

Eric Buffalohead (Ponca) also remembers how his family navigated anti-American Indian racism in the suburban housing market. When Buffalohead's parents moved his family to a suburb west of Minneapolis in the early 1980s for multiple opportunities, including education and eventually homeownership, they experienced discrimination in the rental market, despite his father having a well-paying job. Buffalohead shares, "there was a lot of discrimination in the renting toward us . . . we finally figured it out: My mom's a white person. Just send her. She'll go talk to them . . . and then after the contract's signed, then the rest of us would show up."⁴³ When Buffalohead was old enough to rent on his own, he also experienced anti-American Indian discrimination, some of which he attributes to such an "Indian sounding" last name. In fact, it was homeownership that offered Buffalohead and his family a chance to escape the same tired cycle of discrimination in the rental housing market: "We lived in a very, very white neighborhood [Plymouth] . . . people were nice to us. They weren't racist toward us or anything because . . . I've experienced that in other places [in the Twin Cities and in other states]."⁴⁴ Buffalohead also shares his insight on the racial makeup of the Twin Cities, including the west-metro suburbs, "there's a reason you still see the Native population in the Twin Cities kind of integrated into certain places and seem to be left out of other places for the most part. There [are] certain places like Osseo . . . but Edina, not so much . . . a lot of people don't even think about it; they don't pay attention to it because it's not something that would impact them as a white person."⁴⁵ This lived experience has shaped how Buffalohead, and others, navigate the racial geography of the Twin Cities as American Indian people living off-reservation.

Despite these challenges—exclusion and racism—American Indians who live in suburbs have experienced higher rates of homeownership than American Indians who live in urban areas and in rural-reservation areas since the mid-twentieth century. While

the US Census and other large datasets can provide valuable quantitative data about American Indian people over time and across urban, suburban, rural-reservation geographies, I recognize the limits to this data as well as the inherently colonial nature of the US Census more specifically. Indigenous Studies scholars Chris Andersen and Tahu Kukutai have demonstrated how the “dominance of historical demography with the broader ambit of quantitative Indigenous history reflects, to some extent, the obsession of colonists with documenting what they saw as the inevitable demise of native peoples in the face of conquest, disease, and ‘civilization.’”⁴⁶ With this context in mind, I mine quantitative data, so to speak, to provide a more complete picture of suburban Indians.

When looking to American Indian homeownership rates (versus non-homeowners or rental status) across residential location and through time in Minnesota, rates of urban Indian homeownership has lagged significantly behind that of suburban and rural-reservation Indians (fig. 6). This is affirmed in the qualitative evidence from the *Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ/Bassett Creek Oral History Project* as multiple individuals described moving to the suburbs (and out of urban Minneapolis) to pursue opportunities for homeownership between the 1950s and 2010s. At the time of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 US Censuses, which are essentially single snapshots in time, suburban Indians in Minnesota were more likely to be homeowners than their urban or rural-reservation peers. By 2010 rural-reservation American Indian homeownership rates virtually matched that of suburban Indians. More, at the time of the 2000 census and the 2010 census, the first census in which individuals could identify as one or more races, single-race American Indians had slightly lower rates of homeownership than multi-race American Indians, across all three residential locations considered (rural-reservation, suburban, and urban) in Minnesota.⁴⁷ These data are significant, especially when considered alongside federal Indian policy, like the Relocation program, that worked to move American Indian people urban areas following World War II. The Relocation program did not provide opportunities for homeownership; rather, American Indian people largely navigated that process on their own.

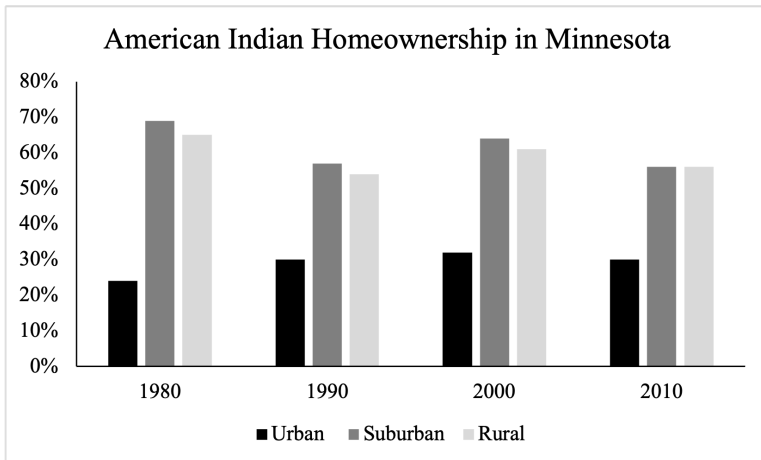


Fig. 6

CONCLUSION

In the years since our first-home purchase, I have become increasingly cognizant of what it means to live in a suburb as an American Indian person, particularly on land that Native people have been dispossessed from, land that is not my tribal homeland. Growing up, my family and I occasionally traveled to the reservation where my mom grew up, and has since returned to, in Tuolumne, California, where much of our family remains today. We visited rural southeast Oklahoma regularly, visiting my maternal grandmother, an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. More recently, while living in Wisconsin, I have learned the history of this state and policies and histories of Indigenous dispossession and displacement here, particularly as they unfolded for Ho-Chunk people across Teejop, or Madison as we know it today. Through each of these diverse, yet family and community-centered experiences across diverse geographies, I have reflected on what it means to be a suburban Indian. Many of the presumed differences between suburban, urban, and rural-reservation American Indians are those that are associated with socioeconomic markers, specifically homeownership. However, socioeconomic markers are made hypervisible under a capitalist worldview, a system and structure meant to divide. What is less recognized, though this is changing today, are the ways that many suburban Indians are reconnecting with a landscape their ancestors were removed from, something Sydney Beane and his family work to do every single day. Similarly, it is crucial to also understand the ways federal Indian policy, land policy, housing policy, and their respective historic legacies, have deliberately bifurcated American Indian communities, working to separate Native people between those who live on and off-reservation, creating differential access to multiple opportunities, based on where one lives.

Taking seriously suburban Indians forces us to reflect not only on American Indian identity, belonging, place, and homeownership, but the extent of and limits to federal and federal Indian policy. We are left to consider the following: in what ways can, and should, services to American Indian people be better tailored to those they are designed to serve based on location? By looking to qualitative and quantitative data on suburban Indians, we are encouraged to think critically about access to housing programs, as well as access to land and property for American Indian people who live away from a reservation community and in a metropolitan environment. This is further compounded when an American Indian person, an urban or suburban Indian, lives away from their reservation community, yet with in a traditional homeland, much like Wilson and Beane, whose experiences have been described here. While this article opens the door to think intentionally about suburban Indians, further studies that center off-reservation American Indians, outside the urban core, are long overdue.

APPENDIX

The Ĥaha Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project

Narrator	Tribal Affiliation
Sydney Beane	Dakota (Flandreau Santee Sioux)
Benjamin Blackhawk	Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska (Ho-Chunk)
Bradley Blackhawk	Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska (Ho-Chunk)
Eric Buffalohead	Ponca
Roxanne Gould	Ojibwe (Grand Traverse Band)
Samantha Majhor	Dakota and Assiniboine
Tawnya Stewart	Ojibwe (Mille Lacs Band)
Jim Rock	Dakota
Grant Two Bulls	Oglala Lakota
Cathee Vick	Ojibwe (White Earth Band)
Debbi Williams	Ojibwe
David Wilson	Dakota (Rosebud)
Diane Wilson	Dakota (Rosebud)
Benjamin Yawakie	Ojibwe (Turtle Mountain) and Zuni

NOTES

1. For more on the American Dream see Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015); John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Kasey Keeler, *American Indians and the American Dream: Policies, Place, and Property in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

2. See Kasey Keeler, “Pivotal Policies: The Creation of the Federal Housing Administration and the Indian Reorganization Act” in *American Indians and the American Dream: Policies, Place, and Property in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

3. Ibid., and discussed later in this paper.

4. For more on Dakota history and the US-Dakota War, see Gwen Westerman and Bruce White, *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012).

5. In his seminal work on suburbs, Kenneth T. Jackson examines the long history of the residential spaces we recognize as suburbs today, including views on homeownership. Jackson defines key characteristics of suburbs: outside of an urban core; non-farming purpose; elevated socioeconomic distinction; and low density (as compared to an urban core). See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 11.

6. See Chris Andersen and Tahu Kukutai, "Reclaiming the Statical 'Native': Quantitative Historical Research Beyond the Pale"; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm"; Coll Thrush, "Placing the City: Crafting Urban Indigenous Histories"; Amy E. Den Ouden's "Histories with Communities: Struggles, Collaborations, Transformations"; and William Bauer Jr., "Oral History" in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, eds. Chris Andersen and Jean O'Brien (New York: Routledge, 2017). For examples of Native scholars whose research centers their home communities and lived experiences, in addition to Lowery, see Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) and Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

7. Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), xvi.

8. Ibid.

9. Here, I draw on the experiences of other suburban Indians as shared in the Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

10. Carolyn Ellis, Toney E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (January 2011).

11. I use the term *rural-reservation* to describe those American Indian people who are generally considered "on-reservation Indians." This includes those American Indian people who live within a reservation community and those who live immediately adjacent to a reservation. In addition, I choose to use the term *rural-reservation* because of the limits to identifying where American Indian people live on US Census data through the use of the "homeland" variable which is contingent on PUMAs (public use microdata areas of non-overlapping geographic areas of 100,000 or more persons). For more on the homeland variable, see Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Matthew Sobek, Danika Brockman, Grace Cooper, Stephanie Richards, and Megan Schouweiler, IPUMS USA: Version 13.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, Minnesota: IPUMS, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V13.0>.

12. Donald Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 2000), x.

13. Ibid., 163.

14. Ibid., 163.

15. James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945–75* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 3.

16. Ibid., 3.

17. Rosalyn LaPier and David Beck, *City Indian: Native American Activism in Chicago, 1893–1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), xi–xv.

18. For more on the census definition of *urban*, see C. Matthew Snipp, "American Indians and Alaska Natives in Urban Environments," *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*, eds. Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013). Here, Snipp explains how *urban* is defined by the US Census: ". . . in anticipation of the 2000 census, the Census Bureau revamped its definition of urban areas to make it more consistent with an intuitive understanding of the circumstances connected with city living (for instance, a large densely settled area)" (179).

19. In this article I rely on an individual's self-identification as American Indian; self-identification is also used for and collected on the US Census. While self-identification as American Indian can (and does) differ from tribal enrollment, citizenship, and membership, it is not the focus of this paper.

20. See Carolyn Liebler, "Homelands and Indigenous Identities in a Multiracial Era," *Social Science Research* 39, no. 4 (July 2010), 596–606; "Ties on the Fringes of Identity," *Social Science*

Research 33, no. 4 (December 2004), 702–23; “History, Place, and Racial Self-Representation in 21st-Century America,” *Social Science Research* 57 (May 2016), 211–32.

21. For more on suburbs as historically Indian places, see Kasey Keeler, “Indigenous Suburbs: Settler Colonialism, Housing Policy, and American Indians in Suburbia,” PhD diss. (University of Minnesota, 2016).

22. LaPier and Beck, *City Indian*, xxi.

23. Susan Lobo, “Is Urban a Person or a Place? Characteristics of Urban Indian Country,” *American Indians and the Urban Experience* (New York: Altamira Press, 2001), 73.

24. *Ibid.*, 73.

25. The Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota. In this oral history project, I conducted fourteen interviews, both in-person and via zoom, which ranged between thirty minutes to two hours. This project was generously supported by the Minnesota Historical Society with funding from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, and by the University of Wisconsin with funding from the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies and completed in collaboration with the Valley Community Presbyterian Church’s Land Acknowledgment Task Force. See Appendix.

26. For more on the US-Dakota War, see White and Westerman, *Mni Sota Makoce*. See also Diane Wilson, *Spirit Car: Journey to a Dakota Past* (Saint Paul: Borealis Books, 2006).

27. Diane Wilson. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, June 16, 2022. B287.13, The Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

28. Cathee Vick. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, May 5, 2022. B287.10, The Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

29. Bradley Blackhawk. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, July 12, 2022. B287.3, The Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Sydney Beane. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, July 7, 2022. B287.1, The Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

33. For more on Sydney Beane’s family and connection to place, see *In the Beginning, Sun: The Dakota Legend of Creation*, eds. Charles Alexander Eastman, Gail Johnson, and Sydney Beane, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023).

34. Sydney Beane. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, July 7, 2022. B287.1, The Ĥaĥa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

35. Nancy M. Lucero, “Making Meaning of Urban American Indian Identity: A Multistage Integrative Process,” *Social Work* 55 (2010), 327. See also Nancy Lucero, “Being Indian in the City: Generational Differences in the Negotiation of Native Identity Among Urban-Based American Indians” in *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*, eds. Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

36. Nancy M. Lucero, “It’s Not About Place, It’s About What’s Inside’: American Indian Women Negotiating Cultural Connectedness and Identity in Urban Spaces,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 42 (2014), 10.

37. *Ibid.*, 11. Emphasis added.

38. See Carolyn Liebler, “Homelands and Indigenous Identities in a Multiracial Era,” *Social Science Research* 39, no. 4 (July 2010), 596–606; “Ties on the Fringes of Identity,” *Social Science Research* 33, no. 4 (December 2004), 702–23; “History, Place, and Racial Self-Representation in 21st-Century America,” *Social Science Research* 57 (May 2016), 211–32.

39. The IHLGP was created by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1992. Today, HUD continues to fund and administer the American Indian homeownership program as a way to address the “underserved” American Indian community through homeownership opportunities. In 2004, the “Indian area” or service area of the IHLGP was expanded to include areas outside of reservations, including many suburban communities.

40. Projects such as Mapping Prejudice and Just Deeds work to make these practices—which led to significantly reduced rates of homeownership for many people of color, including African Americans and American Indians—visible and led the call for change. See <https://mappingprejudice.umn.edu/> and <https://justdeeds.org/>.

41. Diane Wilson. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, June 16, 2022. B287.13, The Ħħa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

42. Tawnya Stewart. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, May 17, 2022. B287.7, The Ħħa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

43. Eric Buffalohead. Interviewed by Kasey Keeler, May 18, 2022. B287.4, The Ħħa Wakpadaŋ–Bassett Creek Oral History Project Collection, Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Chris Andersen and Tahu Kukutai, “Reclaiming the Statistical ‘Native’: Quantitative Historical Research Beyond the Pale” in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, eds. Chris Andersen and Jean O’Brien (New York: Routledge, 2017), 42.

47. For more on American Indian socioeconomic indicators, specifically education and household income, see C. Matthew Snipp, “American Indians and Alaska Natives in Urban Environments” in *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*, eds. Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

