



Valandra

BLACK FAMILY
ENTERPRISE AND
COMMUNITY IN
SEGREGATED
NORTH OMAHA

The Pratt Street House

Black Studies

Collection Editor

CHRISTOPHER MCAULEY

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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For my ancestors

Great-great-great-grandparents Lizzy Spotsell Johnson and
Jim Singleton

Great-great maternal grandparents Willie Ann Rogers and
Jim Henderson

Great-great paternal grandparents Monroe Hall and
Anna Sayers Hall

Great-grandparents Ida Henderson Hall and Dennis Hall

Grandparents Berdine Hall Williams and Bobby Williams

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Abstract

This interpretative account of a working-class Black community in North Omaha illustrates the common and unique ways residents claim space and place in defining their lives and community and sustaining their histories, culture, and traditions. These stories of Black urban placemaking address themes of mutual aid, safety, religion, activism, caregiving, structural inequality, and injustice. Black family enterprise and industry are explored through the lived experiences of the author's grandparents and interviews with former and current residents of North Omaha. These intergenerational stories of individual, family, and community resilience and determination demonstrate how ideological, historical, economic, and sociopolitical forces converge to create barriers and opportunities that influence living in a segregated urban community.

Key words

Black family enterprise; segregation; housing; religion; residential caregiving; community; highway construction; gentrification; urban planning; development and disinvestment.

Acknowledgments



Bobby and Berdine Williams

This book reflects a collective effort on the part of family and friends who supported, encouraged, and inspired me generously in ways for which I am forever grateful and appreciative. First and foremost, I honor my ancestors for their steadfastness in weathering unfathomable conditions for generations that

I might walk less burdened in this world. Thank you. I am equally grateful for the sustained support and guidance of my mother, Ida Frazer; sisters, Jendayi Frazer and Ramona Durham; companion, RoAnne Elliott; and Aunt Doris M. Williams. Your unwavering love, support, and insights lighted my way through this journey, providing the fuel to see it through.

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"Susie" Tarver, Barbara, and Milton Tarver after 40 years and to make a new friend, Linda Hill. Mount Moriah Baptist Church has held a special spiritual place in my family for generations. I am grateful for the time spent with pastor Reverend T. Michael Williams, learning about his ministry and activist work in Omaha. I also want to acknowledge my cousin Tracy and her parents, Mrs. Ruby and Mr. Sidney Smith. Growing up in the 28th and Pratt Street neighborhood, they played a significant role in my life. Finally, I want to thank Lynette D'Amico for her wisdom and guidance in getting the ball rolling and the editorial team at Lived Places Publishing for a supportive editorial process.

Notes on language

1. I use the terms Black and African American interchangeably.
2. I capitalize both Black and White as racial designations except when quoting previously published scholarship. The capitalization of Black and White people acknowledges that both groups are racialized through the processes of white domination. It also disrupts the depiction of whiteness as normative, making it more visible as a significant factor in the historical and contemporary experiences of people based on their racialization as Black or White.
3. I use the term enslaved instead of slave, except in quoting previously published scholarship, to recognize Black people's humanity and acknowledge the racial oppression used by the white power structure in the United States to deny Black people their freedom by placing them in bondage to exploit their labor and suppress their lives.
4. I use the term white power structure to represent laws, policies, and customs created and enacted by a majority White public to systemically disenfranchise Black voters, curtail Black freedom, and otherwise restrict Black economic, political, and social progress. Regardless of race, people in positions of power can enact these policies.
5. I use quotes from my great-great-grandmother, Willie Ann Roger's Federal Writers' Project (FWP) Slave Narrative interview with Irene Robertson, a White woman who prepared 97 per cent (290/300) of the narratives from the Arkansas

FWP interviews in the counties of Crittenden, Philips, Monroe, Lee, Moro, St. Francis, and Prairie. Historians have criticized the FWP interviews for many reasons, including how White interviewers construct “Black speech” using degrading, patronizing minstrel depictions and spellings that make Black people sound ignorant, backward, and living in calm contentment. To counter these negative depictions, I followed the lead of historian Emberton (2022) and standardized the written dialect and spelling of the quotes to minimize distractions and maximize meaning. However, growing up in a family with Southern roots, there are certain words, phrases, and expressions that I have come to associate with the South, but not exclusively with Black people in the South, and in these instances, I did not change the speech or phrasing of the quotes. For example, phrases like “I reckon.”

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Learning objectives

- What are the diverse ways a community is self-defined and enacted?
- What acts of community, enterprise, resilience, resistance, and refusal are represented?
- What are the intergenerational impacts of housing history and urban development policies and practices?
- In what ways can practitioners collaborate with communities for equity?
- How do Northern segregated communities reflect Southern Jim Crow policies and practices?
- How do interpersonal experiences shape your understanding of and construction of what constitutes home, community, neighborhood, and city beyond geographical boundaries?
- How do the intersections of race, class, and culture shape community cohesiveness?
- In what ways can neighborhood integration be beneficial or harmful?

Introduction

It was the day after Christmas in 1980, almost 30 years after my grandparents, Bobby and Berdine Hall Williams, bought the Pratt Street house, when we were sitting around the festively laid table after dinner, and my then 60-year-old grandmother said,

I'm not saying it because I was born and raised there, but if I could have lived there, I would have never left Arkansas. I'd stayed there and built in my own birthplace, had my name printed up on the building—"Built by Bobby and Berdine Williams;" you know what I mean, instead of here in Omaha.

As if responding to an unspoken question of why Arkansas, she explained further, "Because, honey, that was where I was born and raised, and I never will say I was born anywhere else because I'm not gonna tell a lie. I love my birthplace, but my health caused me to leave that place."

The staunch pride in her voice startled me. Unlike Grandpa, who was also born in Arkansas and talked about his life there readily and, seemingly, with greater ease, Grandma rarely did. "You know," she continued,

After I came here, I got better, but I couldn't cope with this prejudice when I came to Omaha. I kept my Bible

with me night and day, and I still do. If I don't read my Bible every night, I have to read my Bible every morning. Every morning before leaving for work, I get on my knees and pray. Ask the Lord to bless all races, all creeds, and all colors because you know we can't get to heaven having hatred in our hearts.

I listened attentively. Feelings of pride and sadness bubbled up in me. I felt pride in hearing the determination in my grandmother's voice and sadness at the prejudice she and my grandpa had endured.

As we helped Grandma clear the dishes and remaining food from the table, I wondered what fueled her steadfast determination, faith, and vision. I wondered whether her health was the only reason she left Arkansas and if there were other reasons she did not want to share at that moment. Faith and prayer sustained my grandparents in their efforts to build a better life for themselves and their family while weathering the ongoing storms of racial prejudice and discrimination. Nevertheless, I was curious about what else helped them thrive in the face of racism and housing discrimination when they arrived in Omaha in 1944.

I wondered how they overcame the prejudices Grandma had not explicitly named to buy and later convert their Pratt Street house into a licensed residential care home for their community in 1954 and purchased two residential homes in 1972 to provide semi-independent living for adults. In 1977, they built a \$600,000, single-level, 60-bed nursing home, the Williams Care Manor, at 3525 Evans Street in North Omaha, a family enterprise that employed and served people of all races, creeds, and colors, as

Grandma said. I learned the answers to some of these questions and much more throughout my life. Their diligence and persistence were evident in all they accomplished. The Williams Care Manor was sold in 1992 after serving the North Omaha community for 38 years. Grandma, however, continued her dream of providing health care to adults, working into her late 90s with her youngest daughter Doris Williams.

Grandma's work ethic and motto were, "I will retire when God retires me." She closed her eyes for the last time in November 2020, dying peacefully in her sleep at my home in Arkansas, her birthplace, when she was 101 years old. I was her legal guardian. Sixty years earlier, in November 1960, when I opened my eyes for the first time in Omaha, NE, my birthplace, she became my guardian angel, teaching me the meaning of home and community in words and deeds.

This interpretive account of a working-class Black community in segregated North Omaha explores my grandparents' life after they migrated from rural Arkansas to Nebraska in 1944. By 1952, they bought a two-story, five-bedroom white house on the corner of Pratt and 28th Street in North Omaha and, two years later, converted it into a residential care home where they lived with their five children, and cared for five adult women. The Pratt Street house is one story of a Black family and community and their relationship to home. The neighborhood residents' everyday experiences of the 28th Street block between Pratt and Pinkney Streets illustrate African American traditions of intergenerational business enterprise, resistance, resilience, and determination. Through first-person interviews with former and current North Omaha residents and personal reflections from my own

life, this story illuminates how homeownership, entrepreneurship, mutual aid, and faith created a beacon of light and a sanctuary of safety and security in an urban segregated setting.

These narratives of Black urban place-making emphasize migration patterns, geography, and relatedness through culture, leisure, work, life, and living defined by the residents. They disrupt commonly held assumptions that Black urban spaces lack community stewardship and heritage preservation. They disrupt the constructions of Black people in urban spaces as dangerous, criminals, and unwelcoming. In summary, I illustrate the common and unique ways Black residents in the 28th Street neighborhood and the Near North Side of Omaha claim space and place in defining their lives and community and sustaining their traditions. Finally, I demonstrate how racism, housing segregation, and city disinvestment affected individual and community life and aspirations and explore what helped residents live with and resist racial and economic injustice.

Motivation

Deficit-based framing of Black urban life

In the early days of my teaching career, I cringed at the inaccurate, oversimplified, and offensive representations of black life I regularly observed in textbooks intended to “help” prepare students for human service practice with Black families. These representations constructed Black family and community life as deficient, deviant, problematic, and dysfunctional. Case study narratives habitually depicted many unfavorable characteristics and landscapes framed as endemic to Black family values, traditions, and geography. Negative statistics

overpowered descriptions of families' experiences living in urban, low-income, and economically mixed neighborhoods, even in textbooks that purported to use a strength-based, culturally sensitive approach.

Frustrated and disappointed, I attempted to console myself with thoughts like, "I'm thankful that I grew up in a Black neighborhood and know better than that." It was not enough to say this to myself, however. I needed to change the script for the larger audience of students I was responsible for teaching. Enveloped by Eurocentrically-driven academic and professional practice settings necessitated an ongoing critical consciousness, commitment, and diligence of effort to counter the Black pathology gushing through the pages of texts. I wanted to see the Black working-class values, cultural assets, and heritage that I grew up with reflected in those textbooks' stories of Black life. Representation matters. I wanted the multi-generational family practices and traditions that nurtured me to loom as prominent on the page as the blemishes and challenges shaping and reflecting the human experience.

As an interdisciplinary scholar of Black studies and social work, I spent a tremendous amount of time during my teaching career urgently seeking resources that, at a minimum, offered students a more complex and nuanced depiction of Black urban landscapes and working-class communities with limited success. These efforts profoundly shape the foundation of my research practice and scholarship today. Equally, I am guided by my embodied experiences and memories of living in North Omaha for roughly 20 years and visiting my grandparents there for almost 40 years as an adult.

I spent the first five years of my life and subsequent summers with my grandparents at the 2801 Pratt Street house. After high school, I returned to Omaha as a 17-year-old. I lived with them at North 39th Street while attending college and graduate school in business administration at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. I lived in the area off 50th and Ames in North Omaha for another ten years until 1988, after graduating with a master's in business administration. Since then, I have returned to North Omaha to visit my grandparents for holidays, birthdays, and other special events or occasions. I lived roughly 20 years in North Omaha and still consider the area home. I was baptized as a child and attended Mount Moriah Baptist Church, the same church my grandparents were members of for 75 years.

Like many other families living on the 28th Street block between Pratt and Pickney Streets, my grandparents were hardworking, religious, value-driven folk who migrated from the rural South. Their grandparents lived through the aftermath of the Civil War and the legacy of racial violence through Reconstruction. They had first-hand experience living in the racially repressive Jim Crow South. They brought many of their traditions, memories, and stories to the racially segregated urban centers of the North. Through listening and observations, I learned as they transmitted their values, beliefs, spirituality, and approach to living to me and subsequent generations through oral traditions, instructions, and deeds. Many of their neighbors had also traveled similar roads North for different reasons and some of the same. However, their everyday experiences and stories of settlement into urban Black life in the North were missing from the dominant, often distorted discourses of Black life and urban geographies found in textbooks.

Black families are the heart of the Black community in North Omaha. How families and friends looked out for one another, supported each other financially, spiritually, and emotionally, and held each other accountable created an enclave of community resistance and security most of the time. Many families worked outside of the racially segregated community but also cultivated, out of necessity and interest, entrepreneurial enterprises within the Black community that sustained us all and provided direction, hope, and inspired confidence in living in a white-dominated world. Some problems also challenged community cohesiveness. However, as a child of a military family that relocated frequently, spending my summers in Omaha with my grandparents was a source of stability that grounded me and sustained me throughout my life. In this work, I share the stories of some Black families and institutions that cultivated life in Omaha on the Near North Side.

Methodology

I use a combination of autoethnographic, oral history interviews, and archival research methods to illustrate the rich and complex lives of the families living in the Pratt Street house neighborhood and North Omaha. Autoethnography is a qualitative method of research that combines the study of one's own life experiences and the study of the cultural practices and customs of others, typically conducted through interviews and observations and self-reflection or reflexive analysis (Valandra, 2012; Winkler, 2018). I also rely on the work of scholars Saidiya Hartman and Toni Morrison to help me deal with the gaps in the recorded historical records of my ancestors' lives. Hartman uses a method she

refers to as “critical fabulation” (Hartman, 2008, p. 11), which combines historical and fictional accounts to re-imagine narratives of the agency of Black women without ignoring their subjugation when there are gaps in the written records. Toni Morrison used a method she described as “literary archeology” (Morrison, 2008, p. 71) to access the interior life of enslaved people. She noted that as a Black writer and woman writing about a time when her ancestors lived, she could embrace autobiographical strategies and reconstruct the world that the gaps implied.

My great-great-grandmother Willie Ann Rogers’ industry and service to her community in Arkansas was known to my family early in my life because my grandmother Berdine often talked about how she would travel with her grandmother, Willie Ann, to help deliver babies and attend to sick people in her rural community in Wheatley and Brinkley, Arkansas. Those experiences inspired my grandmother to want to become a doctor. This oral autobiographical knowledge provided context for me as I interpreted the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) transcript of an interview with Willie Ann when she was 70 (Robertson and Rogers, 1938).

Dialogue from interviews I held with former and current residents of North Omaha and those who live on the 28th Street block between Pratt and Pinkney Streets is also used to tell the family stories in this book. The voices of neighborhood residents amplify family intimacies, intricate relational neighborhood interactions, and minute details of daily urban living, offering a fuller, more diverse, and contextually layered picture beyond my summer childhood memories and the time I lived in North Omaha as an adult. Hundreds of hours of tape-recorded and videotaped

interviews with my grandparents, especially my grandmother, throughout their adult lives and recorded interviews with relatives, especially my mother Ida and Aunt Doris, and those who knew my grandparents also shape the dialogue presented in this book. I also analyzed family photos, newspaper articles, public records, and other secondary sources to provide historical context and illustrate community life germinating over four decades. Historical documents—census records, land deeds, marriage licenses, birth and death certificates—including a transcript of an interview with my great-great-grandmother Willie Ann Rogers by the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) FWP Slave Narratives help tell this story. The names in this book include the actual names of the people described, and some fictionalized names are used to maintain anonymity when necessary.

PART I

History

Chapter 1

Southern roots and migration North

Writing about the places that raised us, award-winning author Kephart (2021, p. 1) proposed that “We have been shaped by the houses and the land of our past. We remember, through them, what we have gained and what we have lost, what we were offered and what we were denied, what we have decided about transience, permanence, and most things in between.” Like generations of Black Americans, my life and that of my ancestors are shaped, in part, by our collective resistance to institutions of enslavement and ongoing oppression and our unwavering insistence on demanding our rights to live as full citizens in the United States.

My great-great-great-grandmother Lizzie Spotsell Johnson’s long walk from enslavement in Richmond, Virginia, to relative freedom in Friars Point, Mississippi, in 1861 exemplifies our persistence and determination. Lizzie is part of what Emberton (2022 p. xix) calls the “charter generation of freedom”—people with direct experiences of enslavement and emancipation and its prolonged aftermath. Based on family records and the FWP interview of Willie Ann, it is estimated that Lizzie was born in 1834, sold away from her family at about 14 years old, and lived 27 years of her life

enslaved in Richmond, Virginia until she escaped in around 1861 when Union soldiers entered Richmond at the dawning of the Civil War.

In the African American oral tradition, Lizzie shared parts of her life history with her daughter, Willie Ann. At 70 years old, Willie Ann narrated it to Irene Robertson when Irene showed up in the rural farm community of Monroe County, two miles east of Brinkley, Arkansas, in 1938. The transcript of Willie Ann's interview with Robertson tells a complex story of intergenerational faith, courage, and determination in surviving what Emberton (2022) described as several different Souths—the enslavement South, the wartime South, the Reconstruction South, and the Jim Crow South.

It is an intergenerational family story of a collective life history that spans roughly 186 years (1834–2020) and challenges prevailing narratives of whiteness as innocent, superior, objective, and benign. Over time, these mythical narratives have been framed as historical facts and used to maintain, camouflage, and perpetuate racist ideologies and a racial caste system firmly anchored in America's political, economic, and sociocultural landscapes. The intergenerational story of my ancestors' lives offers me a window into my identity and life in proximity to Black human geographies in the South and the North and overarching structures of power, privilege, and oppression.

The enslaved South

Willie Ann was born three years after the end of the Civil War in 1868. When Robertson knocked on her door in 1938, 70 years