Haunting Legacies: Sundown Towns of the American Midwest

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Haunting Legacies: Sundown Towns of the American Midwest

In 2014, filmmaker Keith Beauchamp traveled from his studio in Brooklyn, New York to Martinsville, Indiana, a small town with a population of approximately twelve thousand residents. An Emmy-nominee and creator of groundbreaking documentaries such as The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till, Beauchamp was in Indiana in pursuit of a new project documenting racial violence in small towns across the country. Upon entering Martinsville, Beauchamp—a Black man—shared with his white producer, “I can tell you when we came into this town, I really felt an eerie feeling, I had an eerie feeling about this place that came over me that makes me feel like I’m not wanted”\(^1\). This sense, coupled with documented anti-Black violence in Martinsville, prompted a change of plans. Beauchamp decided to stay safely in the car and sent his producer undercover into a local diner. He took a seat and began engaging in small talk with an employee, establishing himself as a curious outsider and eventually inquiring about the town’s racial history. Almost immediately, the diner’s manager inserted herself into the conversation and forced him to leave the restaurant. The truth that the manager hoped to obfuscate is that Martinsville was once a sundown town, one of the most sinister practices in national history, in which Black Americans were violently excluded from living or even passing through. While they existed across the entire United States, sundown towns were particularly rampant in the American Midwest. Even today, the history of sundown towns is minimally known. As new documentation continues to uncover the atrocities of sundown towns, city officials and citizens must acknowledge their pasts and make intentional steps to recover from them. The efforts committed to doing so will ultimately define the future of these towns and the ethical merit of the Midwestern region.

\(^1\) Al Roker, Injustice Files: Sundown Towns, hosted by Keith Beauchamp, Investigation Discovery, 2014.
Sundown towns were communities across the United States that systematically and violently banned people of color, specifically Black Americans. Sundown towns got their name because of the threatening signs that marked them, often installed at their city limits. Manitowoc, Wisconsin threatened “N***** Don't let the sun go down on you in our town” until as late as 1964. These threats were upheld with harassment, violence, and even murder if Black people were in the towns after dark. Between 1890 and 1940, it is estimated that between 3,000 and 15,000 American towns were sundown towns with such policies. In some cases, entire counties were sundown. This period of time is also referred to as the “nadir of race relations”, marked by a peak in lynchings and Jim Crow practices.

While sundown towns overwhelmingly targeted Black Americans, some also excluded citizens and non-citizens of Chinese, Mexican, Jewish and Native American descent. The exclusion of Chinese Americans preceded nadir-era sundown towns and set their groundwork. Until the 1880s, Chinese Americans inhabited virtually all towns in the American West, often working as farmers and laborers. However, beginning in the mid-1880s, white citizens began violently ousting them, justifying their actions with extreme prejudice. During this time, the exclusion of Chinese Americans from the state of Idaho was particularly disturbing. Chinese Americans were driven out by targeted assaults and murders; violence which was fueled by an 1886 anti-Chinese convention held in the state’s future capital, Boise. In 1870, Chinese

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3 Ibid.
6 Schaefer, 1283.
8 Loewen, 50.
9 Loewen, 51.
Americans composed one-third of Idaho’s population. In 1910, there were almost none remaining in the state. As the final Chinese Americans were terrorized out of Idaho, anti-Black sundown towns had begun terrorizing throughout the country. While racist policies existed far before this time period, many sundown towns emerged as responses to northern migration of previously enslaved Black Americans after the Civil War. There were sundown towns in every single state, however they were most concentrated in the North and Midwest. The nadir era specifically enabled sundown towns’ unchecked racism and violence, in concert with anti-Black violence nationwide.

The signs marking sundown towns were backed by severe threat of physical harm if a person of color was found present after dark. Violence came from white citizens, as well as officers of local police and fire departments. In one case, a Black family was moving into a new residence in Carterville, IL. They were unloading their belongings from a pickup truck into the home, and went back to the pickup truck to retrieve another load. By the time that the family returned with their second handfuls, their home had been set on fire. The local fire department was notified, but when the fire chief learned the identities of the homeowners, he pulled the choke of the firetruck so that it malfunctioned en route. By the time the firefighting team arrived, the house was entirely burned down. According to a resident testimony, “...for another twenty years or so, no Blacks moved to Carterville, because they knew that if they did they would be

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13 Loewen, 36-37.
15 Ibid.
burned out”\textsuperscript{16}. Decades later and a state away, Carol Jenkins, a Black woman and aspiring schoolteacher, found herself selling encyclopedias in Martinsville, IN after dark. Jenkins was brutally stabbed with a screwdriver by two white men. Her murder case is still open, and many of her family members cite malpractice in the police investigation of her death\textsuperscript{17}.

Jenkins’ family lives in a town a short distance from the site of her tragic murder. After being forced out of sundown towns, Black families often developed Black Townships nearby\textsuperscript{18}, moved to already multiracial towns\textsuperscript{19}, or moved to larger cities\textsuperscript{20}. This further enabled the proponents of white-only towns to discriminate in the quality of public institutions offered to citizens. Sundown towns made it easier to provide Black Americans with poorer educational institutions, health care, public services and legal justice\textsuperscript{21}.

It may be surprising to some that sundown towns were most prevalent in the North and Midwest, not the South. In the US, 204 towns are known to have displayed explicit sundown signage at their city limits. Only nine of these towns were located in the plantation South\textsuperscript{22}. On a state level, approximately two-thirds of incorporated Indiana and Illinois were once sundown\textsuperscript{23}. In Illinois specifically, upwards of 480 towns were likely sundown, whereas only 6 in Mississippi met the description\textsuperscript{24}. Any surprise that the South did not lead the nation in sundown towns can be negated in two ways. First, as previously mentioned, sundown towns were

\textsuperscript{17} Al Roker, Injustice Files: Sundown Towns, hosted by Keith Beauchamp, Investigation Discovery, 2014.
\textsuperscript{20} Crowe, 1956.
\textsuperscript{23} Loewen, “Sundown Towns and Counties,” 23.
\textsuperscript{24} Loewen, “Sundown Towns and Counties,” 27.
responsive to northward migration of Black Americans after the Civil War. The South undoubtedly had its own methods of racial and housing discrimination, many of which targeted Black Americans economically, but still relied on them for inexpensive labor. Sundown town prevalence in the Midwest and North “reflects the demographic reality that there were very few African Americans living outside the South until the latter part of the 19th century.” The second explanation is that culturally, the United States is conditioned to associate extreme racism with the South. This reflects the tendency of northern whites to project images of racism to the South in efforts to distract from their own regions’ rampant racism, marked by literally thousands of towns engineered to be all-white. These stereotypes are perpetuated by Hollywood and media, like in the films *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) and *Sudie and Simpson* (1984), which both feature sundown town signs in the plantation South.

Hollywood films contribute to this understanding not only by inaccurately depicting the South, but also by obfuscating the injustices of other regions. In *Hoosiers* (1986), arguably the most famous film about the state of Indiana, Black high school students are shown playing basketball and sitting in the stands at a game in Jasper, IN in the 1950s. In reality, no Black students were permitted until around the 1960s. One white resident of Jasper noted in 2002 that “[Black students probably] do not feel welcome today.” Unfortunately, Hollywood and media have such power over the public perception of sundown towns because there has been little other reporting or research on the subject. Most of sundown town history has been transmitted

27 Loewen, 25.
28 Loewen, 26.
29 Ibid.
orally\textsuperscript{31}, as many pieces of sundown legislation were intentionally destroyed by white community leaders\textsuperscript{32}. Further, little to no academic research has focused on sundown towns except for the works of sociologist James Loewen\textsuperscript{33}. Often considered the utmost expert on sundown towns, Loewen published the first book on the subject in 2005, entitled \textit{Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism}\textsuperscript{34}. His works have inspired subsequent studies on the subject, and his expertise has been directly contracted for others\textsuperscript{35}. Most evidence collected in unearthing the atrocities of sundown towns is gathered via oral sources and corroborated with physical sources such as newspaper articles, manuscript census, or tax records\textsuperscript{36}.

One study inspired by Loewen intended to interrogate how retelling sundown histories reveals performances of race\textsuperscript{37}. The researcher was Elena Esquibel, a then doctoral candidate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her research focused on sundown towns located in southern Illinois, and in particular the interviews of two older men. One was “a 70-year-old African American male, a southern Illinois native who [had] been surrounded by and excluded from sundown town communities throughout his life”, the other “a 67-year-old White male resident who was born, raised, and currently [lived] in a town with a strong sundown town past”\textsuperscript{38}. In her interviews, Esquibel found herself in an awkward intermediate racial position as a Latina woman.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Al Roker, \textit{Injustice Files: Sundown Towns}, hosted by Keith Beauchamp, Investigation Discovery, 2014.
\textsuperscript{37} Esquibel, 1.
\textsuperscript{38} Esquibel, 2.
The white man interviewed, Gary, was a friend’s father. Esquibel had been previously warned, “you know Anthony’s Dad is a racist, right?”\textsuperscript{39} She quickly realized that Gary incorporated her into a process of white racial bonding\textsuperscript{40}. He divulged disgustingly racist sentiments with her, such as “...[b]ecause the Blacks are trashy, the biggest majority of them. I mean I’m prejudice [sic], but I’m prejudice [sic] because I’ve seen what they’ve done. You know, you have....”\textsuperscript{41} While Esquibel was disturbed throughout the entire interview, she maintained her ethnographic persona in order to collect the information\textsuperscript{42}. Gary had read her as white, in the sense that white was not-Black.

The Black man interviewed, Dr. Bardo, was a professor of medicine and well-connected within his community\textsuperscript{43}. Before fully consenting to the interview, Dr. Bardo asked Esquibel about her racial and ethnic identity. When she revealed that she identified as a Brown person, Esquibel noted a change in demeanor in Dr. Bardo. He was more comfortable and willing to answer her questions on the subject. Just as Gary considered Esquibel an insider as not-Black, Dr. Bardo considered her an insider as not-white. He shared stories of his youth, about how his “interracial [school] had to take measures to shield their Black teammates and cheerleaders from harm in some sundown towns”\textsuperscript{44}, and that “you [would] hear stories passed on about these communities from older people, in your own community, in....your own ethnic group about ‘well, you better be out of there by sundown.’ And that’s the time, the first time that I heard that term, sundown towns”\textsuperscript{45}.

\textsuperscript{39} Elena Esquibel, “‘Don’t Let the Sun Set on You!’: Performing Racial Histories in Retelling Sundown Town Stories,” Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research 10 (2011): 5
\textsuperscript{41} Esquibel, 9.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Esquibel, 10.
\textsuperscript{44} Esquibel, 12.
\textsuperscript{45} Esquibel, 11-12.
After conducting these two interviews, compiled with approximately thirty others, Esquibel came to the conclusion that both of the interviewees’ responses and performances were largely produced by the racial history of the region, and that they perpetuate and reinvent the history today. This was largely due to the ways in which they reiterated a racial binary from both sides and informed their present racial opinions on ones they had developed growing up in a sundown era.

Esquibel’s study was conducted in 2011, and she has since received her PhD in Communication Studies. It is possible that both of her interviewees, and certainly members of their generation, are still alive and continue to inhabit these communities. This beckons the question, what do former sundown towns look like today? How are they marked by their exclusionary pasts, and have they actually improved? Not surprisingly, there is great diversity in the status of communities haunted by the legacy of once being sundown towns. While some former sundowns are making positive steps in “recovery”, others still practice violent and disturbing exclusion.

One example of a town in demographic recovery is Riverbend, IL. Since its founding, Riverbend has had a history of exclusion and maltreatment of people of color, and for a shorter period, Germans. As a result, it remained heavily white; Riverbend was 99.1% non-Latinx white in 1990. Just sixteen years later in 2006, the non-Latinx white population was 66%, accounted for by a Latinx population of 32.2%. This demographic shift occurred as the result

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47 Esquibel.
50 Diaz McConnell and Miraftab, 616.
51 Ibid.
of a re-opening of a meat-processing plant, for which corporate representatives had heavily recruited workers from Southwest border towns. The majority of the Latinx population in Riverbend is now employed at the factory. Unfortunately, racial attitudes of white citizens have not improved as dramatically as the demographic makeup has, but Riverbend does provide a promising example of one thing: decreased residential segregation. As the Latinx population increased majorly between 1990 and 2006, years 1990 to 2000 saw a decline in Latinx-white residential segregation. According to researchers, it was reportedly “more than twice the average drop in segregation of rural ‘new immigrant destinations’ experiencing a large influx of Latinos.” While Riverbend’s sundown past cannot be cited as causal for this progress, researchers suspect that recovering from previous sundown practices may have actually conditioned the town for this shift. The case of Riverbend also presents insight into how these communities can change, as small-town and rural areas see continued increase in diversity metrics, particularly a rise in Latinx populations.

While Riverbend may be an example of a former sundown town in statistical recovery, the reality is that all former sundown towns have a long way to go for an ethical recovery. Residual injustices include racist policies, biased school curriculum and an overwhelming majority of white teachers.

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
57 Diaz McConnell and Miraftab, 628.
Even in communities that outwardly acknowledge their exclusionary pasts, bigotry hinders efforts for true justice or equality to be extended to Black residents. In Goshen, IN, a 2015 city commission unanimously passed a resolution acknowledging the city’s past as a sundown town. Responses to the resolution, however, were seeped in the racism and white self-righteousness that instituted the practice in the first place. “No one wants their community to be classified as a racist community whether it’s past or present” said one city council member, and later “why is the community as a whole have [sic] to apologize for something that happened so many years ago and wasn't representative of the community as a whole?” This abhorrent lack of concern illustrates that if the first step to sundown recovery is acknowledgement, the second must be severely reconstructing racial attitudes before any Black Americans will have any safety or interest in moving to these places. Just because a sundown town has ditched its explicit exclusion does not mean that its culture is welcoming for anyone deemed an outsider. Signs of such a culture include, but are not limited to, a city council member making statements regarding a recent resolution to the effect of “#notallwhitepeople”.

Of course, there are also towns like the one Keith Beauchamp encountered when making his documentary. While there are no remaining sundown town signs, more subtle practices continue to maintain towns as all-white. These towns perpetuate their own racism and bigotry with each passing generation. When white people live in majority-white communities, it contributes to them being more racist than whites living in more diverse communities. Heavily-white former sundown towns are also statistically less likely to actively pursue economic

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development incentives that have the potential to attract employees of color to their communities. And atop of all of these factors, arguably the most important question remains: why in the world would people of color want to move to these communities? Excluding a few economic opportunities, why would one want to move to a place that once violently excluded them and likely still harbors racist social attitudes and constructs today? And what does this mean for the future of the region?

Documenting and confronting sundown towns comes at a time when all-white communities are being engineered in new, but equally problematic, ways. In his book Searching for Whitopia, author Rich Benjamin reveals that virtually all-white communities (“whitopias”) are on the rise. Throughout his research, Benjamin discovered 115 counties across the US classified as “extreme whitopias”, in which at least 90% of population is non-Latinx white, has total population growth of 10% after 2000 and for which at least 75% is accounted for by non-Latinx whites. While these enclaves do not yield the threatening signs of the past, they still raise alarming similarities to sundown towns. Benjamin argues that many of these whitopias intentionally regress to a culture of “1950s values,” a time that only society’s most privileged would have any interest in returning to. Even one of the three whitopia communities that he implanted himself into, Forsyth County, GA, was previously a sundown town. Benjamin reveals that in practice, these communities result hoarding of resources and political power, just as sundown towns were constructed to do.

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65 Benjamin, 321-324.
Undoubtedly, recent works uncovering and addressing histories of sundown towns are the first step in trying to recover from them. As Loewen and his colleagues continue to expose, towns and governments must be forced to acknowledge their pasts. In the Midwest particularly, there is a regional culture of being non-confrontational; not wanting to bring up traumas, or “stir the pot”. But the history of sundown towns is so clearly immoral, the crimes so evil, the intents so disturbing, it must be addressed with an intensity uncharacteristic of Midwestern small-towns. This history shapes today’s communities and ideologies in profound ways, and white ignorance cannot be excusable for continuing injustices. The region’s commitment to efforts to combat racism, educate in responsible ways, and repair the moral wreckage that remains in former sundown towns will undoubtedly define the Midwest’s ethical merit in the twenty-first century.
References


**Multimedia References**


