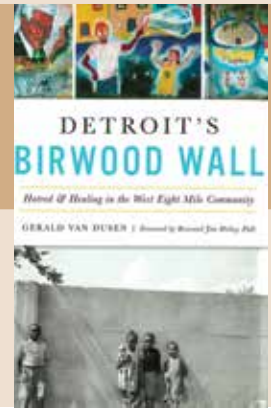


# Detroit's Birwood Wall: Hatred & Healing in the West Eight Mile Community

By Gerald Van Dusen, published by The History Press (2019), softcover, 189 pages, \$21.99

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Reviewed by David W. Thompson

**D**etroit's *Birwood Wall* recounts the history of resilience and engagement in the face of northern racial discrimination. The decisive characteristic of that discrimination is that it is de facto as opposed to de jure Jim Crow discrimination in the South. (pp 22, 140)

The book concentrates on Detroit as wartime industry and population boomed between 1910 and 1950. The Birwood Wall was constructed in 1941 to separate neighborhoods in Detroit's West Eight Mile community. (In the Introduction, the author tells the story of climbing along the wall as a 16-year-old and asking his friend about its purpose. "It was built to keep people like me away from people like you," his friend replied. (p 9)) The wall was constructed to quell concerns of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), which was financing a new subdivision to be situated next to "substandard" black homes.

Van Dusen sees the wall as a symbol—a tangible representation—of all the barriers that blacks face in Detroit. (p 40) What lurks immediately below the surface is the seeming passivity of the wall's rationale, which was to secure financing by protecting the FHA's investment. In other words, it may have seemed like an agnostic and seemingly neutral concession to the reality of population increase and racial unrest. (p 82) But the reality of the wall is that it reflected (and still reflects) discriminatory attitudes and the systemic challenges facing blacks in Detroit.

## Barriers to progress

The author identifies areas where barriers hinder advancement and progress for blacks living in Detroit: housing, education, employment, transportation, healthcare, and public accommodations.

It would be a mistake to think of these barriers as silos isolated from one another; instead, they are interdependent and propped up by segregation. "The forced segregation of African Americans into neighborhoods of substandard housing, limited employment opportunities, and poor transportation has led to significant social and economic consequences for residents of those neighborhoods." (p 165)

If one understands the significance of these barriers according to the author's chapter ordering, housing barriers are the most insidious and far-reaching in their implications. For many, home ownership is the very foundation of a healthy financial life. Yet "Detroit is a city so financially broken that a normal mortgage market here almost didn't exist until just recently."<sup>1</sup>

Predictably, the housing crisis begets other crises. For example, housing discrimination (such as redlining and restrictive covenants) makes it difficult to establish a property tax infrastructure. A smaller tax base, in turn, affects schools and inhibits the possibility of a "comparable learning environment" to that of wealthier suburban districts. (*Id.*) The consequences of this are immeasurable. "The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated."<sup>2</sup> And if one were to examine the infrastructure of housing and education in Detroit, one could hardly ignore how both had been hamstrung by society in the first instance.

The same can be said regarding employment: even after automobile factories were integrated, blacks were often given the worst jobs, with two in three classified as unskilled laborers, while only one in four whites were similarly classified. (p 73) And "[s]tarting on the bottom more often than not led to staying on the bottom." (p 73)

[T]he reality of the wall is that it reflected (and still reflects) discriminatory attitudes and the systemic challenges facing blacks in Detroit.

The wall is no longer a mere physical barrier. It is now, physically speaking, repurposed as a canvas bearing works of art and telling stories about the struggle for civil rights.

As for transportation, Van Dusen suggests that the Birwood Wall operated, psychologically, to interfere with the freedom “to come and go as one pleases.” (pp 116–117) That theme recurs throughout the book as Detroiters struggle to get to and from work, the grocery store, and other places where people ordinarily carry out their lives. For many, neither public transit (which has never had the capital and the vision to fully meet the needs of Detroiters) nor the automobile (often prohibitively expensive because of high insurance rates and low credit ratings) were viable options. (pp 118, 121)

Concerning healthcare, the author notes that discrimination “permeated every aspect of healthcare,” including discriminatory hiring of medical professionals and inferior treatment (or even nontreatment) for blacks. And if one was treated, insurance companies would routinely reject or adjust claims “based on the race of the claimant.” (p 130)

Finally, the author devotes a chapter to public accommodations and explains how service was often delayed or altogether denied on the basis of race—whether in hotels, restaurants, or other public destinations. While not all restaurants denied service, “for residents of West Eight Mile who were unfamiliar with the lay of the land, a casual visit downtown could turn into a humiliating experience.” (p 144)

It all adds up to a bigger picture of daily struggle and resilience.

### De facto discrimination: The big picture

The book carefully treats the implications and internal mechanics of de facto discrimination as distinct from de jure discrimination. The former grows out of com-

paratively more passive (but still pervasive) discriminatory attitudes than the latter, and is expressed and implemented in public policy with “little public dissent.” (p 169) In other words, racial barriers are erected and implemented in a seemingly quieter—yet no less systemic and connected—way than in the South. But the reality of Detroit’s de facto segregation is that discriminatory attitudes did not (and do not) need to be expressed out loud because an infrastructure comprised of racial barriers as its cornerstones already frustrates the progress of the city’s blacks. (p 165) No one needs to say or do anything when the gears of society are designed to elevate one group over another. You can just quietly go along.

The book employs a largely aggregate analysis, thoroughly researched and from a mostly top-down view of Detroit. From this vantage point, Detroit’s history is one of out-migration; demographic change; and segregation in schools, housing, healthcare, and employment. These realities are only exacerbated by missed opportunities and inaction.

The author discusses various efforts and possibilities for regional planning, such as the formation of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). Yet SEMCOG provided the city of Detroit with little comparative representation and often left its interests, such as regional public transit, ignored. (pp 162–163) After a lawsuit alleging discriminatory practices within SEMCOG was dismissed, efforts were made to strengthen the council, which implemented a new voting system. Later attempts to replace SEMCOG with a new regional authority “and hold accountable publicly funded special purpose regional agencies” (p 164) were unsuccessful, as were proposals such as tax-base sharing (distributing larger shares of

tax dollars to communities with a “smaller per capita property value” (p 167)) or efforts to integrate Detroit schools. (p 165)

In short, the author argues that what has been missing is a “top-down master plan,” and the resulting void has been occupied by “local groups and organizations [who] have explored various options to achieve bottom up reform.” (p 168) Yet these “[p]iecemeal and disconnected efforts tend to be ineffective in preventing malignant problems long in the making.” (p 169)

### The view on the ground

Van Dusen includes individual anecdotes for the reader to better understand the view from the ground. The reader sees individuals relying on themselves to survive and create better lives for their families and communities coming together to confront the various barriers to their progress through grassroots efforts. For example, the author tells the story of John Crews and his family, who fled the South in search of opportunity. The first step was affordable housing, and the Crewses initially found a downstairs flat to rent. (p 21) But “inevitably,” the landlord raised their rent in consecutive months. They realized that their arrangement was not sustainable, but they had few other viable options. They opted to purchase a fixer-upper on a high-interest land contract and eventually were evicted over a single missed payment. (p 28)

The Crewses moved in with family in the Eight Mile subdivision, which at that time had no municipal water service. The nearest clean water source was a quarter-mile away. (p 29) But they made it work, and John found a job as a carpenter. The Crews family, like so many others, was involved in local churches, which, along with organizations such as the Detroit Urban League and other community nonprofit and volunteer efforts, created opportunities to establish and maintain roots.

The book also describes how individuals came together for collective efforts to build and sustain communities. The author describes the West Eight Mile community as “an island, a curious suburban experiment in self-help” away from more populous regions

of Detroit. For example, during World War I, the Detroit Urban League mobilized volunteers to help southern migrants find housing, employment, education, and healthcare services. (p 145) Over time, the league expanded its services, organizing social activities, improving homes and neighborhoods, and planning events for local children to see such sights as Greenfield Village. (p 146)

### The Birwood Wall today

The Birwood Wall still stands but has since been transformed “into something more uplifting than a memorial to segregation.” (p 172) Specifically, various artists mobilized by a nonprofit lent their crafts and talents to create murals depicting civil-rights heroes, African-American culture, and “bitter memories of the segregationist south.” (p 172)

The wall is no longer a mere physical barrier. And its significance is no longer to separate neighborhoods or represent the insidious barriers that confront Detroit’s black population. It is now, physically speaking,

repurposed as a canvas bearing works of art and telling stories about the struggle for civil rights. It stands testamentary to resilience and cohesion, to challenges overcome and those yet to be conquered by individuals coming together as a community.

### Conclusion

This is an important book. It can be technical at times, with details that may seem insignificant to readers unfamiliar with Detroit, the West Eight Mile community, and the roads and locations that frame the history of the area. But Van Dusen is careful to make that history accessible to those unfamiliar.

As with any good book, you get out of it what you put into it—not least of which are opportunities to understand, reflect, engage, and join with others to solve problems. Not only are these aspirations for members of our Bar, but they are also the lessons and legacy of those who did, and still do, the same in the West Eight Mile community and throughout Detroit. ■



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### ENDNOTES

1. Gallagher, *Departing Free Press columnist John Gallagher pens open letter to Detroiters*, Detroit Free Press (December 20, 2019) <<https://www.freepress.com/in-depth/money/business/john-gallagher/2019/12/19/reporter-john-gallagher-retires-detroit/2685362001/>> (accessed January 22, 2020).
2. Baldwin, *A Talk to Teachers*, The Saturday Review (December 21, 1963), available at <[https://www.spps.org/cms/lib010/MN01910242/Centricity/Domain/125/baldwin\\_atalktoteachers\\_1\\_2.pdf](https://www.spps.org/cms/lib010/MN01910242/Centricity/Domain/125/baldwin_atalktoteachers_1_2.pdf)> (accessed January 22, 2020).

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