I acquired datasets for this project from various sources. In particular, I used the U.S. historical census records, found on Social Explorer and the National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS). I downloaded the U.S. census tract polygons in the form of shapefiles from NHGIS for the three decennial census years. Then, I downloaded the U.S. Census data tables of Milwaukee County by Race for the same years. These datasets served as the foundation for my analysis.

The spatial results of the three maps were not surprising. In 1960, Asian Americans were included in the “Other Race” Census category (along with Native people), represented in red on the map. Looking at the map, you can see the red dots scattered across Milwaukee, but most clustered around the Black population (green dots). This is the beginning of an Asian American “buffer zone” between the Black community (green) and White residential areas (blue). Moving to 1980, when “Asian” was its own Census category, the red dots remain on the outskirts of the green dots; even as the Black community grows outward. Looking to 2000, this spatial pattern becomes most obvious. Asian American communities are clustered on every side of the Black population, and now the Latino community as well (yellow dots, clustered below dense green area).

Additionally, I wanted to highlight the results of the 2000 year map. Although my grandmother moved away from Milwaukee before 2000, I included this map to show the effects of the many thousands of Hmong refugees who were resettled by the U.S. government in Wisconsin following the U.S. War in Vietnam and “secret war” in Laos. Since nearly 40 percent of Asian Americans in Wisconsin are Hmong, I point out the government resettlement because the U.S. government literally chose where Hmong people would live—and unsurprisingly, it chose to settle Hmong people between Black and White residential areas in Milwaukee, reinforcing the exploitation of Asian American people as “buffer communities.”

LIMITATIONS
These maps show a distorted history. Historical U.S. Census records are spotty and inaccurate. Records predating computers were initially handwritten, and later digitized. This process is likely full of mistakes. Additionally, 1960 was the first year that individuals could determine their own race. Before this, census takers made their own judgments based on appearance. Even after 1960, I doubt this practice was completely terminated. Lastly, the U.S. Census has long been used as a method of White racial control. Changes in racial categories over time are used to alter the stereotypes, visibility, and invisibility of different groups of Color. For example, “Mexican” was included in the 1930 Census for the first time as undocumented Mexican immigrants became a crucial supply of labor for U.S. capitalism. In 1940, this category was taken away for 30 years (until 1970), in tandem with the bracero program, which admitted nearly one million temporary Mexican laborers into the U.S. (only to deport many of them in the 1950s under “Operation Wetback”). This is a clear example of how White-run institutions such as the U.S. government use the U.S. Census to manipulate constructions of race.

In conclusion, the U.S. Census should not be trusted as an accurate representation of history, although it can be helpful in piecing together a clearer picture, as in the case of my grandmother’s oral history.

SOURCES