

COUNTING THE SILENCE: RACE-LANGUAGE ASYMMETRY IN THE SHORT HISTORIES

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 COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", *NASHVILLE SCENE*

FINDING

When Nashville's historic-zoning commission writes the official history of a neighborhood, it names race dozens of times for historically Black districts and zero times for white ones, even white neighborhoods whose founding deeds barred Black ownership by covenant.

SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *race appears dozens of times in Black-overlay histories and zero times in white-overlay histories*
- *the 55-versus-0 asymmetry*

ABSTRACT

A sentence-level count of every racial mention across all twenty-seven Short Histories the Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission attaches to overlay nominations finds 193 verified mentions, 178 concentrated in four sections — all four for historically Black neighborhoods — and zero in the nineteen sections covering white neighborhoods, including every white overlay whose founding deeds recorded racially restrictive clauses. The count was produced by a two-coder blind classification against a written codebook, reaching 0.98 agreement at the mention level and 1.00 at the section level; it registers explicit race-marking only, so the rhetorical asymmetry runs wider than the number shows. The same neighborhoods whose Short Histories are silent on race are the ones a separate parcel-level covenant audit finds built on deeds that barred Black ownership. The document was written to win an overlay, and the silence served that purpose.

METHODOLOGY

The corpus. The unit of analysis is the Short History — the historical-narrative section MHZC attaches to each overlay's design guidelines to justify the overlay before Metro Council. Twenty-seven sit in the current record, distributed across four documents: the *Turn of the Century Part II* guidelines (December 2025), the *Mid-Century 2025 revision*, the *Belmont-Hillsboro* guidelines (2017, revised April 2026), and the *Hillsboro-West End* guidelines (2024). The documents are born-digital, published with a text layer and extracted clean, carrying none of the linebreak and character damage that scanned pages introduce; together they hold 58,435 words of Short-History prose. This is the entire population.

What "race-language" means, operationally. A substantive mention is a sentence in which race is named as race — an explicit racial-identity term (*African American, Black, Negro, colored,*

Caucasian, white used of people), a race-as-concept word (*race, racial, segregation, integration, discrimination*), a segregation-regime term (*Jim Crow, redlining, restrictive covenant* with racial content named), or a named racial-historical event (*Brown v. Board, Shelley v. Kraemer*). The counting unit is the mention, and a mention is counted once: "African American" lands as a single term, never split into an "African" and an "American" the way a token pass would divide it. The definition captures explicit race-marking and stops there. It does not reach implicit racial coding — "exclusive neighborhood," "high-class development," "neighborhood character," the racial-stewardship vocabulary the 1947 Long and Johnson study would flag — so every count is a floor, strictly lexical, and the rhetorical asymmetry runs wider than the count records.

Candidate generation, then blind classification. A single regex cannot serve as a final count: tuned wide it banks false positives, tuned narrow it drops bare "Black" and bare "white" used of people. The protocol separates the machine's work from the reader's. A regex spanning racial-identity terms, race-as-concept words, segregation and integration vocabulary, period euphemisms, and named race-events passes over the corpus and nominates every sentence that carries a token, each stored with the full sentence around it; the patterns match longest-first and without overlap, so "African American" consumes its own "African" and the phrase is banked once. The regex classifies nothing. Every nominated sentence is then read and labeled by two coders working independently from a written codebook — substantive, or one of a fixed set of false positives: architectural ("the majority of homes are brick," "exclusively one story"), proper-noun ("Granny White Pike," "Whites Creek," "Ogleton-White"), paint-color ("white bricks"), occupational ("white-collar residents"), date-marker ("before the Civil War"), the non-discrimination disclaimer that closes the documents, or a covenant mention that names only its non-racial provisions. The two readings agreed on 271 of the 273 nominations, a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.98; the two disagreements were settled against the source sentence. The two coders' counts and the cleaned regex land within one mention of one another, at 193.

The count is a count of sentences a reader judged, never a count of tokens a pattern matched. What a token pass would do to the corpus is visible in the densest section: a bare-token count of Haynes Heights would bank an "African" for every "African American" though no "African" in those pages ever stands alone, and a token count of Lathan-Youngs would bank "white" a dozen times over as the surname "Ogleton-White" recurs through the photo credits. Where the machine's nominations and the verified count diverge, a reader overruled the pattern.

The section-level reading. Beneath the mention count sits a second, coarser judgment made on the same twenty-seven sections by the same two coders: whether each Short History addresses the neighborhood's racial history at all, and whether, where it discusses the founding covenants, it names their racial content. The two readers returned identical verdicts on all twenty-seven, an alpha of 1.00. That judgment is what the covenant cross-reference tests.

The cross-reference. The verified counts are set against a separate instrument: a parcel-level chain-of-title audit that records, for every parcel inside an overlay's boundary, whether its deed carries a confirmed racially restrictive covenant, drawn from Davidson County Register of Deeds instruments and clipped to the overlay polygon. The audit and the language count are independent measurements — one reads deeds, the other reads MHZC's narrative about those deeds — and the finding is the relationship between them. Across the twenty-seven overlays, nineteen carry racial covenants in their founding deeds whose Short History never names them. Two of the historically Black overlays in the corpus, Haynes Manor and Lathan-Youngs, were designated after the audit's mid-century cutoff and fall outside the deed universe; their covenant status is unmeasured, not a confirmed zero, and the central inversion stands on the white overlays alone.

SOURCES

Primary documents.

- MHZC, *Turn of the Century Part II NCZO Design Guidelines* (December 2025). Source of fourteen of the zero-hit Short Histories, including Cherokee Park, Richland-West End, and Belle Meade Links Triangle, plus the Edgehill (sixty-eight-hit) and Salemtown sections.
- MHZC, *Mid-Century 2025 Revision NCZO Design Guidelines*. Source of the Haynes Heights, Haynes Manor, Lathan-Youngs, and Marlin Meadows East Short Histories.
- MHZC, *Belmont-Hillsboro NCZO Design Guidelines* (2017, revised April 2026); *Hillsboro-West End NCZO Design Guidelines* (2024). Two of the longest Short Histories in the corpus (6,489 and 7,037 words) and both zero-hit.
- Davidson County Register of Deeds instruments, as cited by book and page — the per-parcel confirmed racial-covenant record, clipped to each overlay polygon (the author's chain-of-title audit).

Derived analysis.

The mention and section-level counts derive from the four MHZC guideline documents cited above, read and classified by the protocol set out in the Methodology. The Richland-West End founding-instrument language ("African blood or descent") is from the Davidson County Register of Deeds instruments cited above.

FINDINGS

FOUR SHORT HISTORIES CARRY SUBSTANTIAL RACE-LANGUAGE, AND ALL FOUR ARE FOR HISTORICALLY BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS

By verified count: Haynes Heights, fifty-five substantive mentions in 2,684 words (20.5 per thousand); Edgehill, sixty-eight in 3,936 (17.3); Haynes Manor, twenty in 2,014 (9.9); Lathan-Youngs, thirty-five in 3,569 (9.8). These four sections hold 178 of the corpus's 193 verified mentions across 12,203 words. Set against the nineteen white-overlay sections at zero, the asymmetry — race named dozens of times in the Black-overlay histories, never in the white ones — holds however it is measured, by raw mentions or per thousand words.

NINETEEN SHORT HISTORIES CARRY ZERO SUBSTANTIVE RACE-LANGUAGE, AND THEY INCLUDE EVERY WHITE OVERLAY WHOSE FOUNDING DEEDS CARRY RACIAL COVENANTS

The nineteen zero-hit sections span 39,915 words and contain not one verified racial mention among them. The parcel-level audit shows what the deeds underneath those neighborhoods recorded: Cherokee Park, every parcel covenanted (347 of 347); Richland-West End, every parcel (446 of 446); Belle Meade Links Triangle, every parcel (152 of 152); Kenner, every parcel (89 of 89); Whitland, every parcel (122 of 122); Eastdale, every parcel (177 of 177); Woodlawn-West, 88%; Inglewood Place, 84%; Hillsboro-West End and Belmont-Hillsboro, 69%; South Music Row, 63%; Greenwood, 34%; Bowling House and Blakemore, 17%; Lockeland Springs-East End, 13%; Eastwood, 8%; Waverly-Belmont, 5%. Every white overlay with a parcel covenant rate above zero sits in the zero-hit column. The four sections that carry any race-language below the substantial band — Salemtown, Elmington Place, Maxwell Heights, Marlin Meadows East — speak of a neighborhood's early racial mix, of school desegregation, of slavery on the farmland that predated the subdivision; not one of them names the racial covenant recorded in the neighborhood's own founding deeds, though every Elmington parcel and a third of Maxwell's carry one.

HAYNES HEIGHTS NAMES THE SEGREGATION THAT BUILT IT, IN THE DOCUMENT'S OWN WORDS

The neighborhood with the densest race-language is the one with no racial covenant in its founding deeds: a Black subdivision in the Jim Crow era needed no covenant, because the exclusion ran the other way, written into the deeds of the white neighborhoods around it. The Short History says so plainly:

Developed by and for African Americans during the Jim Crow era, the Haynes Heights neighborhood was populated by doctors, lawyers and educators, among others. Haynes Heights afforded members of the Black community the type of neighborhood that they envisioned for themselves and their families, one that was not available to them in established neighborhoods of segregated Nashville.

And the marketing, named verbatim:

However, advertisements for Haynes Heights also let Nashvillians know that the subdivision was exclusively for African Americans. Barker’s advertisements for the development included phrases such as “Colored Exclusively” and “Colored Haynes Heights” to ensure the neighborhood remained segregated.

The fifty-five mentions land across *African American* (twenty-one), *Black* (six), *race* and *racial* (five), *segregation* and *redlining* (four each), the “exclusively for African Americans” and “Colored Exclusively” advertising (three), *colored* (two), *Jim Crow* and *Negro* and *white* used of people (two each), and single instances of slavery, emancipation, discrimination, and desegregation. Every “African” in the section is the first word of “African American”; banked as the phrase, the term lands twenty-one times (Source: MHZC, *Mid-Century 2025*, Haynes Heights section; counts per the Methodology).

CHEROKEE PARK, EVERY PARCEL COVENANTED, NAMES RACE NOT AT ALL

The candidate pass found exactly one nominee in the Cherokee Park Short History — “Majority are one and one-half stories” — adjudicated architectural. The narrative describes development by Wakefield-Davis Realty of Louisville, the curving street pattern, the absence of an alley system, and the architectural styles. All 347 parcels inside the overlay descend from deeds that barred Black ownership. The Short History describes the streets and stays silent on the deeds (Source: parcel-level audit, 347/347; MHZC, *Turn of the Century Part II*, Cherokee Park section).

RICHLAND-WEST END DESCRIBES THE COVENANTS AND OMITTS THEIR RACIAL CONTENT

This is the sharpest case because the Short History does discuss the founding instruments. It lists what they restricted:

protective covenants precluding uses such as stores, factories, saloons or asylums

and the cost minimum — “no residence or dwelling house costing less than \$2400.” Both were classified as covenant mentions that name only their non-racial provisions. Every one of the overlay’s 446 parcels carries the verbatim “African blood or descent” exclusion in the same numbered restriction sets. The Short History reads the deed, transcribes the part about saloons and asylums, and stops at the line that bars Black owners (Source: author’s chain-of-title audit, Davidson County Register of Deeds, 446/446; MHZC, *Turn of the Century Part II*, Richland-West End section).

THE SAME SELECTIVE TRANSCRIPTION RECURS AT BELLE MEADE LINKS TRIANGLE

The Short History notes covenants that “specified, among other things, certain setbacks from the street, ‘no swine,’ and a prohibition on fencing.” The governing 1916 Belle Meade Golf Links master covenant — the Bransford Realty Company agreement recorded at [Book 472, p. 481](#) (registered January 17, 1916), binding the subdivision platted at Book 421, pp. 94–95 — carries the Calhoun-template racial clause barring conveyance to “persons of African blood or descent,” servants excepted, and all 152 parcels in the overlay descend from it. Setbacks and swine are in the Short History; the racial clause in the same instrument is not (Source: parcel-level audit, 152/152; MHZC, *Turn of the Century Part II*, Belle Meade Links Triangle section).

THE ASYMMETRY TRACKS AUTHORSHIP, NOT THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Three of the four dense Short Histories — Haynes Heights, Haynes Manor, and Lathan-Youngs — were produced under a National Park Service Underrepresented Communities grant, “Documenting Nashville’s Mid-20th Century African American Neighborhoods,” whose explicit mandate was to surface racial history; the fourth dense section, Edgehill, carries the same race-saturated register, but was not part of that grant. The nineteen zero-hit sections were drafted in-house by MHZC staff to carry overlay applications through Council, with no equivalent mandate. The conservation-zoning press corpus (141 ProQuest clippings) records what those in-house arguments rested on instead: the future-oriented protective frame is present in 90.1% of clippings and the property-rights and stability frame in over half; the case is consistently made as demolition control, compatible growth, and neighborhood stability, never as a reckoning with the founding deeds. Surfacing racial covenants would have complicated that sales argument by forcing Council to ask whether the overlay continues or repudiates the original instruments. The document was written to win an overlay, and the silence served that purpose (Source: author’s analysis of 141 ProQuest conservation-zoning clippings).

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