

# Embracing the City: Black Families' Place Attachments and (Re)imaginings of the City and Suburb in Search of Educational Opportunity

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*Like many predominantly Black urban cities, Detroit, Michigan, has experienced significant out-migration among Black residents over the past 30 years. This situation has altered families' relationships to the communities and schools where they have been nurtured or call home. Therefore, this paper examines how seven Black families' place attachments influenced their geographic movement and school choices in the Detroit metropolitan region. Findings show that despite families' movement to surrounding suburbs, varied experiences in Detroit influenced families' decision-making regarding where to live, their search for sociocultural experiences that supported their families holistically, and their perceptions and navigation of municipal boundaries and borders. Families' intention toward maintaining connections with Detroit enact what I term embracing the city. Embracing the city helps consider the importance of socio-spatial ties that persist and orient Black families' community perceptions and school choices in suburban contexts.*

Keywords: *Black families, Black suburbanization, place attachments, school choice, U.S. metropolitan regions*

As a key destination for the Great Migration—the mass movement of approximately 6 million Black people from the U.S. South—Detroit is a city anchored in Black culture, history, and life (Boyd, 2017). Today, Detroit is a majority Black city, and yet from 2000 to 2010, the city had the largest Black population loss in the United States, with approximately 180,000 Black residents leaving the city (Afana, 2021; Frey, 2011). Further, although the 2020 Census<sup>1</sup> showed less overall population decline when compared to that of 2010, Black population loss remained notable, dropping from 82.2% in 2010 to 77.2% in 2020 (Afana, 2021). Provoked by a range of push and pull factors, including declining investment in Detroit's public school system and the rising cost of living, many descendants of the Great Migration continued their families' legacy of movement by relocating to the suburbs in search of educational and community resources.

In this paper, I examine the experiences of seven Black families who moved to two suburbs of Detroit—Redford and West Bloomfield Townships—in search of quality schools and community resources. Employing a critical phenomenological methodology, I interrogate how families' place attachments influenced their community and school choices. Place attachments compose an individual's or collective's emotional and psychological affect toward

places central to their life experiences and sense of identity (Berglund, 2020; Fullilove, 2016; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020).

Key findings indicate that although families did not reside in Detroit, they remained connected to the city through place attachments that oriented their decision-making on where to live, their perceptions of municipal boundaries and borders, and/or their search for educational experiences—in and out of schools—that supported their families' holistic well-being. Together, families' affective connections to Detroit led to their own placemaking practices to form a metropolitan landscape that better met the needs of their children and families. I conceptualize families' placemaking practices in this study as *embracing the city* to capture the relational labor, geographic moves, and spatial (re)imaginings they used to sustain connection to or affiliation with Detroit.

In what follows, I share contextual information about Detroit's historical and sociopolitical landscape. I then review literature that frames Black families' attachments and care for urban cities and the importance of identity to families' school and community choices. I also provide background on metropolitan Detroit's educational landscape. Finally, I outline my conceptual framing and research design, and I present data that inform key findings and implications.



## Contextualizing Detroit's Historic and Sociopolitical Landscape

During the early 20th century, Detroit's booming automotive industry attracted migrants from across the country and the world (Sugrue, 2014). With hopes of accessing living-wage jobs and social and political freedoms, Black Southerners journeyed to the city in large numbers (Baugh, 2011; Boyd, 2017). Over time, Black migrants created sites of culture, agency, and commerce, as evinced through Paradise Valley, a historic business and entertainment district (Boyd, 2017); powerful labor and social movements, including the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998); and the enduring sounds of Motown and such artists as Aretha Franklin (Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Smith, 2001).

In a previously unreleased song, "My Kind of Town (Detroit Is)," the late Franklin (2021), the Queen of Soul, belts:

My kind of town, Detroit is/  
My kind of town, I tell ya, it is/  
My kind of people too/  
They're just like you/  
They smile at you and/  
Each time I roam Detroit, it's/  
Callin' me home, I tell ya, it is/  
My kind of town, and it won't let you down.

The pride and ownership of Detroit expressed by Franklin is one cultural artifact among many that demonstrates how Black people "were connected by the geography and character of the places they created" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 45). Further, due to the prevalence of racial discrimination—as shown through racial restrictive covenants, mob violence, and White flight that followed Black migration to the city (Sugrue, 2014)—this placemaking and cultural expressions of "my kind of town" were undoubtedly racialized (Boyd, 2017; Hunter & Robinson, 2018). Although labor demands certainly drew Black folks to Detroit, Black people's community building, political solidarities, and collective practices of joy and leisure created habitable and culturally rich spaces that facilitated their ability to stay and fight for equal rights and justice (Boyd, 2017; Franklin, 2004; Georgakas & Surkin, 1998; Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Smith, 2001). This legacy lives on through the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of these migrants, who form a proud community of Detroiters. Indeed, Black Detroiters have created and sustain rich communal practices of belonging, activism, and communal education (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Boggs & Kurashige, 2012; Franklin, 2004; Wilson, 2015).

Asserting Black Detroiters' placemaking practices does not negate the significant impacts of urban disinvestment in the city. Urban disinvestment is broadly characterized by the fiscal and policy neglect of public institutions and services in urban cities. In Detroit, urban disinvestment has included neoliberal restructuring of Detroit's public school system, enacted through anti-democratic school governance structures, the growth of for-profit and loosely regulated school-choice options, and large-scale school closures that have disproportionately affected Black students and families (Khalifa et al., 2016; Pedroni, 2010; Wright et al., 2020). Black middle-class and poverty-impacted Detroiters have faced municipal conditions under which it is difficult to reliably access educational resources and public services. In turn, these dynamics have provoked some Black families' exits from the city (Detroit Future City, 2019; Xie et al., 2018).

## Black Families' Attachment and Care for Place Amid Movement

Many Black individuals' and families' movements from Detroit have resulted in ambivalent feelings about their decisions. These feelings have led many relocated Detroiters to maintain meaningful connections with the city (Boyd, 2017; Kellogg, 2010), demonstrating what scholars call *place attachment*, or individuals' affective connections and affinity to their environment (Berglund, 2020; Gieryn, 2000; Lewicka, 2008; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020).

Place attachments can be vital to Black individuals', families', and communities' senses of identity and belonging (Ewing, 2018; Fullilove, 2016; Hunter et al., 2016). Further, emotional bonds to place can serve as stability and continuity amid neighborhood change, geographic movement, or social mobility (Brown, 2018; Brown et al., 2003; Lewicka, 2008). Although one may no longer live in a place, individuals' and families' senses of self and values can continue to be bound to their communal memories and experiences.

Schooling experiences can nurture place attachments by serving as sites of collective knowledge, relationship building, and resource sharing (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Brown, 2018; Ewing, 2018; Green, 2017). In Ewing's (2018) study of school closure on the south side of Chicago, she documents the dissonance between district leaders' techno-rational decision-making and community members' love and pride for a school slated for closure. Ewing offers the concept of *institutional mourning* to illuminate the communal love and grief attached to shuttered schools, explaining:

When we remember what we lost, we remember first with love. . . . [T]his doesn't just mean love for a school or for the people in it. It can also mean love for ourselves within the school. In losing a school one loses a version of oneself—a self understood to be a member of a community, living and learning in relation to other community members. (pp. 130–131)

Ewing's (2018) analysis frames how schools can be vital institutions that foment collectivity and place attachments in Black communities. Schools in Black urban communities have provided spaces of love for self and community, honoring the relational and often place-based nature of maturation and learning (Ewing, 2018; Green, 2017; Morris, 1999).

As racial demographics shift, with approximately 54% of Black residents in the 100 most populous U.S. metropolitan areas living in suburbs (Tareen, 2022), Black suburbanites often maintain intentional ties to urban communities due to the prevalence of racial discrimination in suburban spaces (Clerge, 2019; Lacy, 2004; Posey-Maddox, 2016). However, many Black suburbanites are also intrinsically motivated to maintain ties with Black spaces and places (Lacy, 2004). For instance, in Lacy's (2004) study of Black middle-class families living in two suburban communities in metropolitan Washington, D.C., she shows how families sought relational ties to Black people through their housing choices or involvement in Black social organizations. Lacy's study emphasizes that racial identity and affinity matter to Black people, not only because of racial discrimination but because they also "relish their association with other blacks and their connections to black culture" (p. 913).

It is necessary to note that place attachments do not always evoke positive or consistent emotional affect (Berglund, 2020; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020). Manzo and Devine-Wright (2020) identify that place attachments can be rooted in ambivalent feelings due to harmful place-based conditions or structural violence. Studies have shown that displacement can foster ambivalent place attachments by contributing to a sense of disorientation and longing to reestablish communal bonds and identity (Berglund, 2020; Fullilove, 2016). In an exploitative global political economy that has habitually displaced communities of color in service of capital gains, "people work to 'protect' their place in the world" (Harvey, 1996, as quoted in Neely & Samura, 2011, p. 1937). As data will show, multiple families in this study have wrestled with an ambivalent sense of place attachment. Families sought to reconcile their school and community choices with enacting care and connection with Detroit—a city that they recognized faced structural challenges due to inequitable political and economic practices. Therefore, although embracing the city is certainly tied to positive memories and affinity with Detroit, it also suggests the ways that racialized policymaking and capitalist restructuring motivate place attachments.

### **Black Families' Search for Quality Schools**

Like all families, Black families make strategic decisions to support their children's educational achievement and success. However, families' choices are influenced by and often made with an awareness of dominant racial and class hierarchies (Cooper, 2007; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Lareau et al., 2021; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Mazama & Lundy, 2012;

Pattillo, 2015; Pedroni, 2007; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021). For example, Ellison and Aloe's (2019) qualitative-research synthesis documents how working-class families of color engaged in school-choice options due to disinvestment in urban schools. Notably, although families sought alternate options, they simultaneously expressed "a clear desire for their local schools to be fully funded and offer the same educational opportunities that are available to students in wealthier communities" (p. 1158). Families' engagement with schooling options outside their neighborhoods did not negate their desire for the health and well-being of their local schools and communities.

Families' geographic locations and perceptions of place can also influence their school and community choices (Bell, 2009; Montgomery, 2006; Shedd, 2015). Bell (2009) explains that Detroit parents' "geographic preferences [of the neighborhoods where schools are located] are socially situated and therefore vary as much as the rest of families' social lives" (p. 515). This study highlights how caregivers' own social positionalities and communal experiences shape their perceptions of neighborhood conditions affecting the quality of schools. Yet Bell also shows how families' resources mediate their geographic preferences and school choices. Families with socioeconomic affordances are often willing to traverse neighborhood boundaries to meet their children's needs.

Given dominant U.S. spatial ideologies that idealize suburban space, some Black families believe that suburban schools will provide their children with a higher quality education (Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017). Yet several studies show that continued barriers exist for Black families in accessing educational resources in suburban contexts (Lareau et al., 2021; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2017; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017). Namely, punitive school discipline practices and White teachers' lack of belief in Black children's academic ability contribute to racialized inequality in suburban school settings (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2017; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021). Therefore, even when Black families move to suburban schools and communities, they often remain vigilant of racial mistreatment and harm, revealing the ongoing and indefinite nature of Black families' schooling decisions (Lareau et al., 2021; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2017; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021). Posey-Maddox and colleagues (2021) assert that "no choice is the 'right' choice within educational systems marked by antiblackness" (p. 40). In Detroit's metropolitan landscape, marked by persistent racial residential segregation and punitive, racialized education policymaking, anti-Blackness certainly shapes families' school and community choices.

### *Metropolitan Detroit's School-Choice Landscape*

Many Black families and students, including those who still reside in Detroit, are highly mobile in their pursuit of

educational opportunity (Bell, 2009; Pogodzinski et al., 2018). For instance, during the 2014–2015 academic year, approximately half of Detroit schoolchildren attended a charter school, and 33% of Michigan students who enrolled in interdistrict transfer programs lived in metropolitan Detroit (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). Given this landscape of educational choice, a key driver of population loss in Detroit’s public school system has been Detroiters attending charter schools or engaging in interdistrict transfer programs. Notably, many of these school options are not of high quality or equitable for Black students (Singer & Lenhoff, 2022; Zernike, 2016). Singer and Lenhoff (2022) find that when compared with Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern, North African, and White students who exit Detroit for suburban schools, Black students exiting city schools typically enroll at suburban schools with higher discipline rates and lower stability rates. Stability rates capture the percentage of students who remain in schools outside compulsory transition years. This result suggests the limits of Black families’ suburban moves in accessing educational opportunity, whether through choice of residence or participation in non-residential choice options.

In the following section, I leverage theories focusing on race, place, and socio-spatial dynamics to describe my approach to analyzing the external and internal dynamics of Black families’ geographic moves in search of educational opportunity in metropolitan Detroit.

### **Conceptual Framework: Black Placemaking and Alternative Mapping Practices**

I draw from Lipsitz’s (2007) theorizing on the intertwined nature of racial and spatial processes and McKittrick’s (2011) analysis of “a Black sense of place” to examine how Black families’ place attachments and communal histories have influenced their geographic moves in metropolitan Detroit. Lipsitz’s (2007) scholarship analyzes how spatial politics and practices have been used to exclude and enact structural violence on Black people over time. Relatedly, McKittrick (2011) amplifies that “post-slave black geographies in the Americas are connected to practices of domination and deliberate attempts to destroy a black sense of place,” or Black community life and relationality (p. 947). Both McKittrick and Lipsitz call our attention to the spatialized nature of Black subjugation.

In a U.S. context that has routinely harmed Black people and communities, Lipsitz and McKittrick importantly resist fatalist narratives that portray Black life and communities as without joy, force, or fight. Both scholars identify how Black people and communities have resisted spatialized harm and resource deprivation by creating their own communal logics and relationships to place. McKittrick (2011) specifically explains that “the conditions of bondage (i.e., slavery, Jim Crowism) did not foreclose black geographies but rather

incited alternative mapping practices during and after transatlantic slavery, many of which were/are produced outside the official tenets of cartography” (p. 949). In other words, a Black sense of place urges us to attend to the landscapes of agency, relationality, care, and resistance that Black people and communities have used to navigate the world amid dehumanization and displacement. This approach may require questioning often-used narratives of city-suburb divides that fail to capture Black families’ placemaking and boundary-spanning work.

Black suburbanization undeniably affects the diverse forms of resistance, agency, and placemaking that Black people have created in urban communities. However, Lipsitz’s (2007) and McKittrick’s (2011) refusal of a single or one-note narrative brings nuance to the movements and decision-making of Black families. Due to how histories of racialized disinvestment shape access to resources, opportunity, and safety, many Black families have relocated to the suburbs after significant effort to remain in urban communities (Clerge, 2019; Kellogg, 2010). Therefore, for many Black suburbanites, urban communities remain sites of care that are foundational to their sense of belonging and political commitments (Clerge, 2019; Lacy, 2004; McGowen, 2017). These place attachments can provoke efforts to resist and (re)vision against and beyond inequitable spatial dynamics—a counter-hegemonic placemaking practice that draws from Black communities’ use of public space and community life to create networks of support and survival (Berglund, 2020; Hunter et al., 2016; Lipsitz, 2007).

Although this paper addresses how Black families envision the level of educational opportunity offered in the suburban communities where they reside and school their children, equal attention is given to the subjectivities that influence families’ perceptions and inform their alternative mapping and navigational practices. Place is not simply a backdrop to families’ daily lives but consequential to their holistic well-being and communal life (Soja, 2010). Education policymakers and researchers must consider Black people’s varied spatial histories and sites of belongingness. Neglect of these consequential cartographies easily reinscribes dominant and inequitable norms of U.S. metropolitan education policy and practice.

### **Research Design and Contexts of Study**

Data for this paper derive from a critical phenomenological study of seven Black families’ lived experiences of seeking quality schools in metropolitan Detroit. A phenomenological approach centers ontological subjectivity by aiming to understand an individual’s perceptions, memories, embodied actions, and social activities (Van Manen, 1990). Critical interpretive traditions of phenomenology particularly examine the role of identity, intersubjectivity, social context,



and power in shaping an individual's perceptions and lived experiences (Salamon, 2018). Together, these phenomena inform our sensemaking of our experiences. Given this study's focus on families' place attachments—an intersubjective experience—centering participants' individual and familial sensemaking is appropriate.<sup>2</sup> A phenomenological study does not aim to be generalizable, given the explicit focus on participants' subjective experiences and the small sample size (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The following research questions guide my analysis:

1. How do Black families' place attachments shape their movement to suburban places and their school-choice decision-making?
2. How do Black families' place attachments and school-choice decisions shed light on historic and contemporary social structures that affect education access and opportunity for Black children in the Detroit metropolitan region?

#### *Data Collection*

For this study, I focus on 20 in-depth interviews with family participants conducted from June through December 2019. Family participants were recruited through structured snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), and selection criteria included that families self-identify as Black/ African American, live in Redford or West Bloomfield, and have a child who attends or attended schools (neighborhood, charter, or private) in the two suburbs. To recruit families, I shared a research flyer on online platforms, such as local Facebook groups. Additionally, I engaged in 11 informal interviews and observations with educators and at local community events. Informational interviews and observations allowed me to gain needed contextual knowledge on the two focal suburbs and solicit connections to potential family participants. For instance, an informal interview with a Redford school administrator fostered connection with one of the Redford family participants, while an observation at a West Bloomfield School District Strategic Planning Forum resulted in discussion about the study with several Black families. Importantly, once study participants completed interviews, I also asked for recommendations for other family participants.

For each family, I interviewed caregivers twice, and with six of the seven families, I interviewed at least one of their children. One family declined to have one of their children participate in an interview, representing a limitation of the study. Interviews with caregivers ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours, and interviews with children ranged from 15 to 60 minutes. The children I interviewed ranged from ages 9 to 22. Table 1 includes pertinent family demographic information, including the types of schools that families had accessed. Notably, the table also includes caregivers'

professions, which I used as a proxy for families' socioeconomic status. All families have been given pseudonyms.

Initial caregiver interviews aimed to understand families' educational experiences in schools and communities. For example, I asked open-ended questions about caregivers' K–12 educational experiences and their perceptions and emotional affect toward the communities where they were educated. I also asked caregivers whether and how their own educational experiences—whether through formal schooling or communal experiences—shaped their choices for their children's schooling. I interviewed caregivers first, which provided a broad timeline of families' educational histories. I then interviewed their children to garner their perceptions of the schools and communities their family had navigated in metropolitan Detroit. Lastly, I interviewed caregivers again to clarify any perceptions, beliefs, and/or events previously expressed that influenced families' perceptions of place, geographic movement, and school choices.

#### *Data Analysis*

I employed a comparative-analysis method (Fram, 2013; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) to make sense of data throughout the research process. Hence, I examined field notes, analytic memos, and interview transcripts to engage in an inductive analysis of data that identified commonalities, differences, contradictions, and themes across different pieces of information (Boyatzis, 1998). To a lesser extent, I also engaged in a deductive analysis, establishing a small set of *a priori* codes (e.g., school-choice decision-making, place attachments, conceptions of opportunity) to remain mindful of research questions and theoretical framing throughout data collection and analysis.

I coded data in multiple rounds by using ATLAS.ti data-analysis software. Early rounds of coding were used to gain an initial understanding of families' experiences, and I frequently referred to analytic memos completed after each interview in which I wondered about perceptual commonalities and differences within and eventually across families. Looking across interview data and analytic memos helped me code descriptive dynamics, such as "Detroit ties," which captured familial and communal connections that families maintained with the city, among others. After all data were collected, I then engaged in thematic coding to identify broader trends and analytic concepts. Importantly, I coded with attention to themes within families, within the two suburbs, and then across all data. For instance, thematic coding within and then across families helped reveal the intergenerational nature of place attachments, as some children had not resided in Detroit or other urban cities, yet they shared their caregivers' affinity for these places. Together, multiple rounds of coding helped illuminate and identify important nuances in structural and sociocultural factors affecting

TABLE 1

*Family participant demographic information*

Family	Suburb of residence	Family structure	Year of relocation	Former place(s) of residence	Type of schools enrolled	Caregivers' education	Caregivers' employment
"The Naders"	Redford	Remarried grandmother, helping raise grandson	2011	Detroit, MI; Westland, MI; Canton, MI; Ecorse, MI	Zoned public for grandmother's house	Grandmother has graduate degree; mother is high school graduate	Grandmother owns tax-preparation business
"The Muhammads"	Redford	Single mother, five children	2009	Detroit, MI	Online charter; public charter	Mother has some college	Mother is school bus driver and community organizer
"The Robinsons"	Redford	Married parents, five children	2006	Detroit, MI	Zoned public	Parents graduated college; father has graduate degree	Mother is stay-at-home mom and civic leader; Father is graphic designer
"The Nelsons"	Redford	Married parents, two children	2010	Detroit, MI	Public charter	Parents graduated college; mother is pursuing graduate degree	Mother is insurance professional; father is restaurant owner
"The Fosters"	West Bloomfield	Single mother, two children	1995	Detroit, MI	Graduated from zoned public	Mother has graduate degree	Mother is dentist and former Detroit public school teacher
"The Johnsons"	West Bloomfield	Married parents, three children	1995	Southfield, MI; Lancaster, PA	Graduated from zoned public	Parents graduated college; father has graduate degree	Mother is insurance professional; father is engineer
"The Owens"	West Bloomfield	Married parents, three children	2002	Lathrup Village, MI	Zoned public	Parents have graduate degrees	Father is human resource professional; mother is business manager

families' place attachments and school choices in metropolitan Detroit.

### *Contexts of Study*

Redford and West Bloomfield—the two suburbs where family participants resided—were chosen to reflect the increasing yet varied racial and socioeconomic diversity of U.S. suburbs and suburban schools (Diamond et al., 2021). A previously conducted and unrelated study in Redford helped identify the changing racial demographics in the suburb. Informal conversations with a range of caregivers, educators, and Detroiters then aided in identifying West Bloomfield as an affluent suburb in the region with a growing Black student and resident population.

As shown in Table 1, West Bloomfield families relocated from 1995 to 2002, while Redford families relocated from 2006 to 2011. As such, the sociopolitical conditions influencing families' moves undoubtedly varied, yet disinvestment from Detroit schools and other public institutions has been ongoing (Baugh, 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Sugrue, 2014), affecting Black families residing in metropolitan Detroit for decades. As data will show, families' decisions were influenced by particular yet interrelated shifts in metropolitan Detroit's political economy

*Redford Township.* Four family participants resided in Redford Township, an inner-ring suburb located in Wayne County, Michigan. Redford shares an 11-mile border with the west side of Detroit and is comprised of working- and middle-class residents with a median household income of \$57,000 in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). Like many other U.S. inner-ring suburbs, Redford has experienced swift racial demographic change. In 2000, Redford was overwhelmingly White, with approximately 8.5% Black/African American residents. By 2019, Black/African American residents had increased to 42%, and Redford schools were majority Black, with an approximate 74% Black student population during the 2019–2020 academic year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a).

Two of the four Redford families had students enrolled in one of two school districts that serve a majority of students in the suburb (i.e., South Redford and Redford Union), while the other two families used public charter schools in the suburb. Families cited the affordability of homes in Redford following the 2008 recession as influential to their decision-making, reflecting economic and migratory trends common to several U.S. Midwest urban cities and their inner-ring suburbs (Wilkinson, 2017). As such, Redford families' socioeconomic status played a consequential role in shaping their choices.

*West Bloomfield.* Three family participants resided in West Bloomfield, an upper-middle-class suburb located in



FIGURE 1 *Detroit metropolitan municipal boundaries, with indicators for Detroit, Redford, and West Bloomfield*

Oakland County, Michigan, with a median household income of \$104,000 in 2019. See Figure 1 for a map of the Detroit metropolitan area that indicates where Detroit, Redford, and West Bloomfield are located in the region. West Bloomfield particularly prides itself on being home to populations of Jewish, Chaldean, Black, and Japanese residents, although the suburb remains predominantly White. In 2000, approximately 5.2% of West Bloomfield's population was Black/African American, and by 2019, Black residents had increased to 12.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). During the 2019–2020 academic year, the Black/ African American student population of West Bloomfield public schools was approximately 34% (Michigan Schools Data, 2021). See Table 2 for Black/African American resident growth in West Bloomfield and Redford from 1990 to 2019.

Only one of the three West Bloomfield families had children currently enrolled in the local public school system. However, the other two families had children who had matriculated from West Bloomfield's school system within 3 years of the interview. The earlier relocations of West Bloomfield families suggest their socioeconomic affordances when compared to Redford families, who predominately moved after the 2008 recession. In the Findings section, I remain mindful of similarities and differences between the two suburbs as they affect families' choice making and continued relationships with Detroit.

### **Key Themes: Detroit as a Foundation**

All families in this study held affinity for Detroit. The city provided connections to familial, social, and cultural communities, and—for some caregivers—a sense of self. In the first theme, "Rooted in Detroit," I focus on families who moved directly from the city. These families were especially protective of their home, guarding the memories, relationships, and learning developed within a place that has endured significant change and structural violence. I show that

TABLE 2  
*Percentage of Black/African American residents in West Bloomfield and Redford in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2019*

	1990	2000	2010	2019
West Bloomfield	2.0%	5.18%	11.4%	12.5%
Redford	0.69%	8.54%	24.4%	43.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019a, 2019b).

although families exited Detroit due to challenges in public schools, their connection and care for the city remained highly salient to their community and school choices in suburban contexts.

### *Rooted in Detroit*

Families who relocated from Detroit were aware of the city’s challenges, yet this knowledge was not all encompassing or a deterrent from recognizing strengths within the city. Rhonda Foster, a single mother and dentist in her 60s, moved to West Bloomfield from the city in 1995, the summer before her eldest child began high school. Early in our first interview, Ms. Foster decisively stated that accessing educational resources was her “main reason” for moving to the suburb. She liked the college-preparatory curriculum, small class sizes, and wide range of extracurricular offerings in West Bloomfield schools. She reflected that “I don’t think Terry [her son] had a class with more than 20 people in it.” Additionally, Ms. Foster assessed that “they offer everything from not only theater and sports, but also jewelry making, 10 different languages—just a wide variety of things that were available for you to take. I liked that.”

Ms. Foster was motivated by the educational amenities offered in West Bloomfield schools, but her experience as a former teacher in Detroit’s public school system proved equally influential to her decision-making. Ms. Foster adamantly believed that many state policymakers intentionally operated Detroit’s public school system to reproduce social inequality in the region. She analyzed that Detroit’s school system largely worked to keep “people in lower classes because that’s where you get your cheap labor.” She elaborated, “So you know, truthfully, part of me moving out here was to get my kids in a position so that they can *move up*.”

Like other caregivers reared in Detroit, Ms. Foster’s formative life experiences imbued meaning in Detroit’s expansive geography. She shared that she was born on “Pallister . . . near the [Grand] Boulevard and 12th Street,” which is near downtown Detroit. During her middle-school years, Ms. Foster’s family then moved to a neighborhood in northwest Detroit, on “Santa Rosa [Street], which is near Livernois and 7 mile . . . near Palmer Park . . . [where] we had a lot of doctors’ kids and professional parents.” Although she still resided in the city, Ms. Foster explained that family and

friends felt that her family was “so far out” from where they had previously lived, which indicates how movement and socioeconomic stratification were present in her childhood experiences. Nonetheless, when Ms. Foster relocated out of Detroit proper, it was with reluctance, given her experiences and grounding in the city. She explained:

The only thing I felt is as a Detroiter—and I still consider myself a Detroiter—you kind of feel like you’re letting your city down and you know, you’re taking away the tax base and all of that kind of stuff.

Indeed, Detroit was Ms. Foster’s homeland and, to a lesser extent, her two children’s as well. Rhonda Foster’s 22-year-old daughter, Monét, was born in West Bloomfield, yet she described her grandmother’s house in the city as a “second home,” sharing childhood memories of “hanging out with cousins from the east side” of Detroit. Monét shared, “I know there are some things that I probably will never understand [about Detroit] . . . but I still feel like I have a connection,” which demonstrates the often intergenerational nature of families’ place attachments (Brown, 2018; Fullilove, 2016).

The Fosters and four other families decided to relocate from Detroit to support their children’s educational access and social mobility. However, their moves required emotional labor, given their place attachments to Detroit communities. As shown through Ms. Foster’s analysis of Detroit’s public school system, most families’ place attachments were ambivalent, reflecting the longing that can result from departures caused by inequitable structural conditions (Fullilove, 2001; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020).

*Place Attachments and School Choice-Making.* Some caregivers’ connections to Detroit encompassed experiences of belonging, learning, and love in Detroit schools. Addressing the role of place attachments to families’ suburban moves and school choices, these memories and experiences proved consequential to their perceptions of what constitutes a quality school in suburban contexts.

Nita Robinson, a partnered Redford mother of five children and civic leader in her early 50s, relocated from Detroit in 2006. Her family reluctantly moved from the west side of Detroit due to the high homestead taxation rate in the city and the cost of maintaining a large, older home. Additionally, Ms. Robinson and her husband were no longer satisfied with Detroit schools. Her three eldest children briefly attended Detroit public schools (DPS) in the late 2000s, yet she assessed that “DPS was going down at that point.” After considering charter schools in the city and in neighboring suburbs, Ms. Robinson and her husband decided to prioritize their children attending schools within the community and municipality where they lived—like they did when growing up in Detroit. Indeed, Ms. Robinson linked her attachment to Detroit as growing from positive and affirming experiences



as a child in the city's public school system. With a reminiscent smile, Ms. Robinson reflected that "I had wonderful experiences" in DPS in the 1980s. She particularly enjoyed making friends with other children in her neighborhood schools, so much so that she did not want to attend Cass Technical High School, a highly regarded selective enrollment magnet school near downtown Detroit. However, once enrolled at Cass, Ms. Robinson appreciated the varied extracurricular activities and resources that were available to her, explaining:

Back then, art was still prevalent. Band [reflective pause] I was in band the entire time I was in high school. We had debate teams, and we had a lot of things in DPS back then, and then I got to Cass, and it was ridiculous. Everything was available. . . . We had great teachers back then, had a lot of resources. I was trying to find that for my own kids.

Thus, Ms. Robinson's positive experiences in DPS were not only integral to her learning and development; they informed how she thought about educational quality and opportunity for her children. The Robinsons desired for their children to attend school in a system with a "close-knit feel. . . . [I]t was only one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools [in South Redford School District]. Everybody seemed close-knit, like a family."

Importantly, the Robinsons also appreciated the changing racial demographics in the inner-ring suburb. Imani, Ms. Robinson's daughter, explained that as the number of Black students had grown in the suburb, they "call[ed] out teachers often now. . . . [K]ids are getting more open-minded and actually speaking up about things that are bothering them." Likewise, Ms. Robinson, a family leader in the district, was encouraged by the growing number of Black teachers and administrators in Redford schools. She explained that they had "brought a whole new regimen on how to do things. They're not passive, and they're fair." Even when the Robinsons shared experiences of racism in Redford schools, they saw the navigable nature of the school system as attractive because it allowed them to engage with district leaders and educators to ensure fair treatment.

Across families and suburbs, the presence of Black students and teachers proved influential to their choices and decisions to remain in suburban schools. Detroit's public system has historically employed a large Black teaching staff with explicit commitments to educating Black children (Franklin, 2004). Therefore, some families' familiarity with Black-led schools and learning experiences may have also shaped their appreciation of changing racial demographics in the two suburban school systems.

#### *Allied With Detroit*

Two families—the Johnsons and the Owens—moved to West Bloomfield from other suburbs northwest of Detroit.

Amid ambivalence about the quality of schools and safety in the city, these families also maintained meaningful ties and regard for Detroit.

Debra Johnson, a West Bloomfield mother, reared in a working-class family in Memphis, Tennessee, candidly explained that her family had never considered living in Detroit as transplants to the region. Instead, in 1994, her family moved from Pennsylvania to Southfield, an adjacent suburb of West Bloomfield and northwest Detroit. Ms. Johnson shared that her family chose Southfield because many of her husband's colleagues at General Motors resided in the suburb. A year later, the Johnsons chose to relocate to West Bloomfield due to the highly rated school district and the affordability of homestead taxes when compared with Southfield. Ms. Johnson reasoned that "for my money, I want my kids to feel safer. I want them in a quality school, and if I can save on taxes, the better." Thus, the Johnsons' decisions were undoubtedly motivated by the perceived quality of West Bloomfield schools, coupled with attention to cost savings and community features, such as safety. Yet Ms. Johnson was quick to explain that this perception was not due to perceived deficits within people who resided in Detroit.

As the child of a factory and sanitation worker, Ms. Johnson was familiar with the immense labor and care in working-class Black communities. She explained that although her parents lacked formal education, they were "very strict about education." Importantly, Ms. Johnson clarified that her parents not only encouraged formal education but instilled values of community and regard for others that she perceived not all formally educated people to possess. Ms. Johnson's upbringing influenced how she raised her three children. She explained that she was "trying to build a whole person. . . . [W]e want to evolve to higher and better [referring to educational and career achievements], but those grassroots things, that fundamental stuff, that *foundation* is most important." Hence, Ms. Johnson appreciated the educational resources offered in West Bloomfield schools. Yet she realized that in a predominantly White school and community setting, her "children needed to be exposed to their own race." She explained that it was important for her children to know "about our life-long experiences and the stuff that we've done that's been passed down from our parents to us, [and] to them. . . . [L]et them see there's something bigger than all of us out here [referring to West Bloomfield]." Thus, the Johnsons were intentional about attending cultural offerings in Detroit, such as events at the Charles Wright African American Museum, and regularly traveling back to Ms. Johnson's hometown, Memphis, Tennessee.

Ms. Johnson explained that she perceived Detroit as akin to Memphis. She asserted, "I'm not from Detroit. I'm just passionate about Detroit . . . so, Detroit can be like Memphis, Tennessee, where I'm from. There are issues there. But I'm here in Michigan, so I've got to do what I can do here." Ms.

Johnson conveyed a protective care for Detroit, identifying how racialized politics of place and the high cost of living—namely, excessive car- and home-insurance rates—fostered structural violence in Detroit and other predominantly Black urban communities. Still, Ms. Johnson was careful to assert the continued value of Detroit to her families’ development and foundation.

Notably, the two families who had not resided in Detroit lived in West Bloomfield, suggesting the geographic limits of Black out-migration from urban cities (Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). However, for these two families, their place attachments to Black spaces and communities still shaped their movements to secure holistic and culturally rich educative experiences for their children (Lacy, 2004; Montgomery, 2006). A desire to remain connected to their racial and cultural identities and, importantly, to refute dominant notions of anti-Blackness tied to place were key to these families’ perceptions of the city. As the next section shows, this desire led some families to (re)vision municipal boundaries and borders to meet their needs.

### **Anchored in Detroit: Recasting Boundaries and Borders**

This section examines how families perceived and navigated municipal boundaries to meet their holistic needs. For some families, this included (re)imagining municipal borders and boundaries to foster a sense of belonging sparsely accessible in the suburbs. Indeed, five of seven families expressed that their decision to relocate to Redford or West Bloomfield was influenced by the suburb’s proximity to the city.

#### *Blended Borders Between Redford and Detroit*

Jade Muhammad, a Redford mother, community organizer, and bus driver, moved to the suburb in 2009. She appreciated that Redford offered such amenities as spacious, affordable homes and quiet neighborhoods. However, as a Detroiter, she liked that Redford’s socioeconomic dynamics and community interactions reminded her of the city. She explained:

You’ve got a lot of nice areas in Redford, where it’s like the ranch-style homes, it’s chill, secluded, it looks more suburban, but still a city feel. I think that’s why people [Detroiters] still like Redford, because it still feels like the city a little bit . . . I mean, because it’s still blue collar, even though it’s, like, more affluent homes in certain neighborhoods.

Similarly, Ms. Muhammad’s 13-year-old son, Curtis, characterized Redford as “a mixture of a city and a mixture of a suburb put together . . . because it’s still in the area of Detroit and part of the city.” Curtis perceived the border between Detroit and Redford as permeable due to the public charter school he attended in the suburb. The school

is located close to Redford’s shared border with Detroit, and many of Curtis’s classmates lived in the city. As such, Redford largely served as an extension of the city for the Muhammads. The suburb met the family’s desired housing and schooling needs while providing a similar culture to the city.

As a working-class single mother with an Islamic religious background, Ms. Muhammad sought well-rounded, culturally responsive educational experiences for her children. This desire led her to choose charter schools, where her children could develop “entrepreneurial skills” and gain exposure to “nature- [and environmentally] oriented careers.” She explained that at Curtis’s school, there were “so many after-school activities. I mean, it’s like a front-and-back list of a paper [with after-school offerings]. So, that’s been my main thing.”

From her own K–12 educational experiences, Ms. Muhammad recognized the limits of formal schooling in meeting her children’s holistic needs. Therefore, she was comfortable not only decoupling her family’s housing and school choices by seeking out charter schools but also seeking family-led and communal learning experiences. Ms. Muhammad’s continued attachments to the city were linked to her family’s involvement in a sustainable-living collective of Black families, many of whom actively homeschooled their children. She described this collective of families as

African-centered . . . just wanting to be independent of a lot of the suppressive standards [in schools and society]. Like, one of the mothers, she carves out opportunities for them [children] to have entrepreneurial skills, or another dad is really science-oriented and focused. Just using everyday opportunities for children to learn.

Through her organizing and relationships with like-minded Black families, Ms. Muhammad worked to create opportunities for her children to build various outdoor skills and a sense of self-determination. Ms. Muhammad believed that homeschooling would become more prevalent because there were just too many examples of Black families “getting beat by the system, and people are tired of it. Like you know, [so] I’m pulling my child out [of the school system].” Black families’ refusal to participate in school systems that fail to meet their needs is a form of placemaking that resists the salience of anti-Black racism and municipal boundaries in shaping access to educational resources (Mazama & Lundy, 2012). The Muhammads’ geographic moves—relocating to Redford and accessing communal learning experiences in Detroit—were about creating a metropolitan landscape that functioned to meet their family’s holistic needs.

#### *Spanning Borders From West Bloomfield to Detroit*

Families in West Bloomfield also identified that their perceptions of proximity to Detroit influenced their decisions.

Significant physical distance separates the two municipalities, with approximately 40 minutes' driving distance from West Bloomfield to the city. Unlike that of Redford, this distance serves to reify boundaries and borders. However, the Fosters and the Owens, who both have family ties in Detroit, explained that this distance was manageable and routine for their and many other Black families living in the suburb. West Bloomfield families described their frequent navigations across city-suburb divides to access various cultural and extracurricular activities, such as piano lessons and mentorship programs, and to attend Black churches.

Recounting her deep familiarity with the city, Rhonda Foster reimagined the municipal divisions between West Bloomfield and Detroit. She explained:

I know I live in West Bloomfield, but I still consider this Detroit. I know there are purists who, if you live north of Eight Mile, you're not in Detroit, but I just consider this all Detroit . . . [because] if I'm going to St. Clair or Richmond [exurbs north of Detroit], it just seems like it's so far away. I can be traveling to a place in Detroit and still have to travel an hour, but it doesn't seem like I've been traveling that far. I think it's because anywhere I am in Detroit, I know . . . well, if my car breaks down here, I can get off, I can catch the bus that runs here. I know how to get to someplace from someplace. It's just home.

Ms. Foster's attachment to the city shaped her perceptions of proximity to Detroit. Detroit was her home, and she internally desired to maintain ties with the city. Further, reclaiming the metropolitan region as "all Detroit" suggests how families, particularly caregivers, worked to reconcile emotional discord about leaving the city.

Even with families' ease in navigating the distance between West Bloomfield and Detroit, their efforts required significant socioeconomic resources. West Bloomfield families were able to leverage their resources to maintain their place attachments to the city and maximize their access to different communal resources and institutions. This effort is also a form of placemaking; however, socioeconomic status aided families' agency in navigating unjust spatial and educational landscapes (Bell, 2009).

### Discussion and Conclusion: Embracing the City

Although families moved to access educational resources for their children, more notably, they navigated and (re) imagined municipal borders and boundaries to meet their families' needs. Families' key needs included maintaining connections to communities that provided care, communal learning experiences, and a sense of belonging. Although lacking widely accessible and well-resourced public schools, Detroit still met this need for families. Hence, families' multifaceted needs were not accessible in the suburbs or in the city alone.

Families' meaning-making of their choices shows that their perceptions of what constitutes a quality school and

community are in part place-bound. By *place-bound*, I mean that even as families move in pursuit of educational opportunity, the spaces and places where families live and create community—past and present—influence their choices. Families' attachments to Detroit supports studies that find that families have distinct histories and social lives that affect their perceptions of what constitutes quality schools and communities (Bell, 2009; Cooper, 2007; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Ewing, 2018; Montgomery, 2006; Pedroni, 2007). Further, centering place attachments provides windows into Black families' consequential socio-spatial networks and alternate mapping practices that are underrecognized by researchers and education policymakers.

Therefore, embracing the city entails families' care and close regard for Detroit amid geographic movement. In U.S. metropolitan regions heavily shaped by racial segregation, exclusionary politics, and anti-Black policymaking, embracing the city is a strategic and affirming move that families make to counter dominant spatial practices that hinder Black families' educational access and opportunity and, ultimately, to support their children's learning and well-being. Importantly, embracing the city remains attentive to families' geographic relocations and socioeconomic affordances that differentiate them from families who remain in Detroit. Like a family member who has left home, they are likely still accepted, but differences may be apparent. Key differences include the resources and labor that families could leverage to span formal boundaries and borders and families' meaning-making and choices in response to ambivalent place attachments. Indeed, many middle-class and poverty-impacted Black families have intentionally remained in Detroit due to their political commitments and care for the city.

Future studies should examine the role of place attachments in Black families' school choice-making and, more broadly, acts of educational agency in different U.S. metropolitan areas. Majority Black urban cities, although possessing similarities, are positioned and racialized differently in local political and economic landscapes. The impact of families' place attachments should be understood at local and comparative levels to avoid homogenizing regional, socioeconomic, and sociocultural differences among Black families.

Black families often struggle to fully access educational resources in suburban school and community settings (Lareau et al., 2021; Lewis-McCoy, 2014, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2017; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021). Moreover, history has shown that moving to the suburbs is rarely conducive to the structural conditions needed to create more racially just urban educational landscapes (Holme & Finnigan, 2018). Given these realities, state and school district policymakers should seek to learn from the perceptions and agency of Black families as they work to access quality schools and



learning experiences that support their children. Families' experiences can aid in understanding needed equity efforts in education landscapes experiencing urban disinvestment, high levels of school-choice options, racial and socioeconomic segregation, and demographic change. Students' and families' feelings of belongingness must be considered as particularly significant in schools and communities. This consideration requires not only attending to student outcomes but collaborating with Black families to shape school culture and honor their multifaceted educational experiences and priorities (Irby, 2021).

Black people have maintained relationships and enacted care for their children across space and time, often creating their own sense of place and community (Ewing, 2018; Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Lipsitz, 2007; McKittrick, 2011). Embracing the city, with focus on metropolitan Detroit, helps consider the importance of socio-spatial attachments to Black urban communities that persist and orient Black families' community perceptions and school choice-making in suburban contexts.

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### Open Practices

The data and analysis files for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.3886/E171981V1>

### Notes

1. The 2020 Census results have been challenged by key Detroit officials. This challenge asserts that population loss in Detroit between 2010 and 2020 is likely less than represented by the 2020 Census (Afana, 2021). In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 3.3% of the Black population was undercounted nationwide (Tareen, 2022).

2. Other qualitative methodologies often include triangulating participants' claims. Depending on one's research questions and the aims of the study, a phenomenological approach may preclude full or robust understandings of the inquiry at hand.

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