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Seeing Like a Chocolate City: Reimagining Detroit's Future Through Its Past

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BOOK REVIEW

**Seeing Like a Chocolate City:
Reimagining Detroit's Future Through Its
Past**

Sheila R. Foster*

Introduction

Detroit holds a special place in American history, especially its urban history. As Michelle Anderson captures so beautifully in her book, *The Fight to Save the Town*, the rise and fall of Detroit maps onto so many other important cultural, political, social, and economic moments of the twentieth century. Among them are the industrialization of the American economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Great Migration of African Americans to northern states during the Jim Crow era, the impact of Motown and Black music on American culture, the devastation of many American city cores by rioting in the late 1960s, the white flight from these cities, the subsidization of that flight through federal government programs, the resulting resegregation of American schools and life, the deindustrialization of American cities, and the move to a knowledge economy.¹ Anderson's chapter on Detroit, addressed in this short Review, deftly weaves together stories of real people who lived through so many of these moments. These stories are what makes her book not only heart-wrenching but also so full of hope for places like Detroit.

The familiar narrative about Detroit is one of a magnificent rise to economic and cultural greatness in the early twentieth century followed by a precipitous decline in the latter part of the century, at which point it became a largely Black and poor city that in 2013 faced the largest municipal bankruptcy

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1. See generally THOMAS J. SUGRUE, *THE ORIGINS OF THE URBAN CRISIS: RACE AND INEQUALITY IN POSTWAR DETROIT* (1996).

in this country's history. This oft-told narrative is factually correct but incomplete, in my view.

As Anderson rightly notes in her book, some of the ways in which this narrative is told represent a “white gaze on Detroit.”² To Anderson’s immense credit, she focuses on how this narrative of Detroit’s decline is “false by omission,” ignoring the ways that Detroit has been “a refuge for African Americans in the shadow of slavery and racial violence since the city’s founding.”³ Her chapter on Detroit centers the experience of Black Americans, from the eighteenth century to the present, and the importance of Detroit to Black history.⁴ Yet, even as deftly as Anderson writes her short history of Detroit and how it arrived at the city it is today, her account is still missing an important part of that history.

What is left out of Anderson’s narrative and left out of most reporting on Detroit—or quickly skirted over—is the role of the Black middle and professional class in stabilizing or holding up the city during the period often associated with the city’s decline. This Review focuses on the period roughly between 1970 and 2010. This period falls in between the well-documented “White Flight” out of the city on the heels of the 1967 riots and the less well-documented “Black Flight,” particularly of the Black middle and professional class, out of Detroit in the late twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first century. This late twentieth-century story of Detroit is largely missing from Anderson’s otherwise beautifully written chapter on the city, as it is in most books and articles written about the slow disintegration of what was an economically and culturally rich city.⁵

I have a deeply personal attachment to Detroit which serves as a guidepost for this Review’s musings on what we miss in telling the story of Detroit. The city is my birthplace, the birthplace of my father, and the place where my parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins settled into middle-class and professional Black life. Although my immediate family left the city in the late 1960s, the rest of my family members stayed in Detroit until the end of the twentieth century. Some family members never left, and live in middle-class neighborhoods that

2. MICHELLE WILDE ANDERSON, *THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE TOWN: REIMAGINING DISCARDED AMERICA* 193 (2022).

3. *Id.*

4. *See id.* at 193, 231. Anderson notes, “Black history on that land helps explain Detroit’s history, and Detroit’s history helps explain Black history nationwide.” *Id.* at 231.

5. Anderson is not alone in overlooking this part of the narrative about Detroit. As author Ta-Nehisi Coates has pointed out, scholars have often disregarded the history of the Black middle class.” Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Detroit Was Like Cheers: Everyone Knew Your Name*, ATLANTIC (Mar. 9, 2011), <https://perma.cc/W5PQ-MDB3> (“Since the days of E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* [sic] through Malcom X’s riff on ‘House slaves vs. Field slaves,’ into our present time, the narrative treatment of the black middle class has typically ranged from outright contempt to freakish curiosity to utter disregard.”).

have remained intact over the last century. Throughout the years, I saw the tapestry of Black success and joy—and also of Black resilience and resistance—which helped to build and sustain Detroit even in its darkest days.

If we shift the gaze just a little to focus on what happened to the Black middle and professional class in Detroit over time, we might learn something about what held the city together for so many years—even after Whites fled to the suburbs. We would give a bit more agency to people who held the city up, culturally and economically, and who could be key to Detroit’s ability to set itself on a growth trajectory that is both prosperous and inclusive. To do so, we must view Detroit as a “chocolate city.”⁶ In their book *Chocolate Cities*, Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria F. Robinson map Black survival and Black joy across a network of cities and towns where Black culture is maintained, created, and defended. They do so to glean insight into the ways Black populations across cities have managed to sustain themselves and their communities regardless of the racism, segregation, and violence that they faced.⁷

Viewing Detroit as a chocolate city offers neither a rebuke nor a corrective of Anderson’s positioning of Detroit and the people within it trying to reinvent the city. Rather, it is a supplementary tale that can help move us away from the “deficit frame” in which late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Detroit is most often viewed. Seeing Detroit as a chocolate city centers the histories and perspectives of Black Americans as “consequential to patterns of change, inequality, and development.”⁸ Finally, viewing Detroit as a chocolate city might help us to imagine a future Detroit that reinvents itself through an investment in the communities and neighborhoods that helped to build and sustain chocolate cities in the past.

I. The Roots of Black Success in Detroit

To Anderson’s credit, her chapter on Detroit holds so much truth about what made Detroit a haven for Black cultural and economic life starting in the pre- and post-bellum eras and throughout much of the twentieth century.⁹ Out of necessity, since this is not a book about Detroit, she paints Detroit’s history in broad strokes. This broad scope chronicles the general economic trends,

6. A chocolate city is a geographic concentration of Black life “where Black people make and revise places through tight-knit community networks of place makers, cultural production, and the consolidation of political and economic power.” MARCUS ANTHONY HUNTER & ZANDRIA F. ROBINSON, *CHOCOLATE CITIES: THE BLACK MAP OF AMERICAN LIFE* 179 (2018).

7. *Id.* at 4-6.

8. *Id.* at 5.

9. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 193-94.

successes, and hardships of the Black community. However, what it leaves out is important to appreciating the deep roots of Black success in the city over time.

As a supplement to Anderson's account, and as has been chronicled elsewhere, it is important to emphasize that the early twentieth century was a golden age for Black businesses in the city. It seeded what would become a significant Black enterprise community in the city in later decades. As Anderson notes, early twentieth-century Black commercial and professional success was unfortunately accompanied by widespread discrimination—particularly in the real estate market where Black entrepreneurs were barred from prime property.¹⁰ However, as others have noted, Black commercial and professional life flourished despite widespread exclusion and discrimination.

The Black business community, leading into the 1930s, bonded together to survive economically.¹¹ Collective organizations and ventures, such as business groups and associations, benefited the broader Black community by promoting self-help and boosting businesses and were crucial to maintaining Detroit's business community in a time of economic crisis.¹² Black insurance companies formed to provide for corporations rejected by white companies, and Black financial institutions formed in their own right, providing loans and establishing a financial review section in *The Detroit Independent*, a local Black newspaper.¹³

Although Anderson notes in passing the impact of the Great Depression and the 1943 race riot in Detroit,¹⁴ what is interesting about this period is the fact that there was an acceleration of Black entrepreneurial dominance in the city notwithstanding the hardships and rampant discrimination of this era.¹⁵

10. See *id.* at 195-96.

11. See JOHN C. DANCY, SAND AGAINST THE WIND: THE MEMOIRS OF JOHN C. DANCY 128-36 (1966); KAREN R. MILLER, MANAGING INEQUALITY: NORTHERN RACIAL LIBERALISM IN INTERWAR DETROIT 35 (2015); RICHARD W. THOMAS, LIFE FOR US IS WHAT WE MAKE IT: BUILDING BLACK COMMUNITY IN DETROIT, 1915-1945 214, 217 (1992).

12. See Mayor's Inter-racial Committee, *Thrift and Business* 26-27 in THE NEGRO IN DETROIT (1926) (noting the development of business organizations, including a cooperative insurance association, to build confidence in business leaders); DARREN J. PERKINS, BUSINESS IS WAR: THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF BLACK AMERICA 229 n. 77 (2010) ("The Harlem [S]tock Exchange of New York City was formed in 1921, to transact sales of [African-American] securities, also in 1926 in Detroit, a national stock exchange was opened for the same purpose (Jones 1970). You can do the same in order to raise capital for business ventures, land acquisition and development."); THOMAS, *supra* note 11, at 190-214 (discussing Black business organizations, newspapers, financial institutions, and professional classes).

13. See THOMAS, *supra* note 11, at 184-87.

14. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 196-97.

15. THE NEAR EASTSIDERS, DETROIT'S NEAR EASTSIDERS: A JOURNEY OF EXCELLENCE AGAINST THE ODDS 16-18 (2008).

This acceleration was due in part, ironically, to the 1943 race riot which sparked a massive exodus of white businesses out of Detroit.¹⁶ Most white businesses sold their properties to Black entrepreneurs, the remaining white businesses relied on Black workers for management and labor, and reduced competition allowed Black entrepreneurs to flourish (especially in the Paradise Valley and Black Bottom areas, as discussed by Anderson).¹⁷ Black organizations were able to prioritize Black business innovation and expansion, capitalize on emerging opportunities in the insurance and credit markets by setting up their own companies, and fostering a black “self-help” consciousness that helped residents plan for the post-war economy.¹⁸

This period of thriving Black enterprise and manufacturing success did not last beyond the late 1960s, of course. It did, however, provide a foundation for a self-sustaining Black middle class once the city’s fortunes began to decline. We know well the story of decline in the 1950s and 60s, and Anderson powerfully recounts it.¹⁹ Federal urban renewal legislation and programs tore down entire neighborhoods, which devastated Black communities.²⁰ This exacerbated real estate and business crises in Black communities, displacing Black businesses and homeowners.²¹ At the same time, industrial decentralization was pushing more Whites to the suburbs and devastating the local tax base.²² The 1967 riots further harmed Black businesses and fueled further white flight of taxpayers and businesses.²³ The 1970s and 1980s were marked by a range of urban challenges, including the rise of foreclosures and abandonment throughout the city resulting from “predatory inclusion” in federal housing programs.²⁴

16. See Kendra Darcell Boyd, *The Great Migration and Black Entrepreneurship in Detroit 204-05* (May 2017) (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University), <https://perma.cc/CV6M-7KDG> (discussing the white flight migration patterns in connection to growing Black businesses); see also WALTER WHITE & THURGOOD MARSHALL, *WHAT CAUSED THE DETROIT RIOT? AN ANALYSIS* 5 (1943).

17. See Boyd, *supra* note 16, at 204-05; ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 198.

18. See THOMAS, *supra* note 11, at 184-86, 190, 194, 196-97

19. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 199-206.

20. *Id.* at 199-200.

21. *Id.*

22. See Thomas J. Sugrue, *From Motor City to Motor Metropolis: How the Automobile Industry Reshaped Urban America*, AUTO. IN AM. LIFE & SOC’Y, <https://perma.cc/6X2R-NSAG>.

23. See SUGRUE, *supra* note 1, at 259-271 (chapter discusses aftermath of riots on Detroit’s economy); John Gallagher, *Detroit’s Black Middle Class Emerged From 1968’s Upheaval*, GO.SANANGELO (Mar. 18, 2018), <https://perma.cc/6TNU-L5EE> (“It was the twin threads of black opportunity and white backlash that most dramatically changed America in 1968. It’s those threads that still underlie much of the unrest and culture wars in America today.”).

24. ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 203-04.

II. Black Resilience After the Decline

Anderson's chapter primarily focuses on the role of Detroit as a haven for Blacks in the early twentieth century and then the city's precipitous decline. A reader might wonder, however, about life in Detroit after the 1967 riots and the early part of the twenty-first century when Detroit was heading toward financial ruin. As Anderson is careful to emphasize, although this period had "tragic, ugly parts" there was also "beauty."²⁵ She does not specify what that beauty was, though she poignantly notes that the beauty arising from the resilience needed to survive in these days was "not as easy to photograph as fires and looting."²⁶

Part of this beauty was the resilience and, as my family experienced, the success of the Black middle and professional classes despite the variety of challenges faced by the city. As Anderson is careful to note, "Against the odds, a thriving Black middle class developed, and they helped shape and maintain the city several decades longer than their white peers."²⁷ In many ways, the Black community adapted and thrived by capitalizing on Detroit's assets. These included access to excellent educational opportunities and public sector positions, as well as civil rights and affirmative action policies that increased representation. The city's Black residents became teachers, city attorneys, and firefighters. High wages, comprehensive health insurance plans, and pensions from these roles provided a foundation for the Black middle class.

In 1973, Coleman Young was elected as mayor, despite not receiving the majority of white votes. Anderson points to this election as Detroit's most "dramatic demographic turning point."²⁸ The Black share of Detroit's population grew from 44% in 1970 to 67% in 1980.²⁹ At the same time, the white share of Detroit's population declined from 56% to 34%; the white population had decreased since 1950.³⁰

25. *Id.* at 206.

26. *See id.*

27. *See id.* at 205.

28. *Id.* at 202.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.*; Kim Kozlowski, *Detroit's 70-Year Population Decline Continues; Duggan Says City Was Undercounted*, DETROIT NEWS (updated Aug. 13, 2021, 12:36 AM ET), <https://perma.cc/28U9-DRMJ>. Anderson focuses on some important regional headwinds for Black Detroiters during this time which facilitated the white flight and regional segregation. Suburbs resisted regional cooperation with Detroit's new government. Strategies included blocking public transportation links between the city and engaging in anti-busing activism to prevent school integration outside of the city. Anderson notes the impact of these decisions on low-income Detroiters and families, particularly on those who did not own or share a car. *See* ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 202-03.

We know a great deal about white flight from Detroit. That is part of the standard narrative. But the story of Black middle- and upper middle-class flight is a story that has not yet been told.³¹ While Detroit was a majority Black city by the 1980s, it was also an economically mixed one. It could never have survived, fiscally, without stable middle and professional classes. As such, my hypothesis is that even as working class and low-income neighborhoods struggled economically, many middle- and professional-class Black residents stabilized Detroit during these years. They built on earlier periods of Black economic and cultural success in Detroit. Their resilience likely, in my view, helped to keep the bottom from falling out of Detroit, until they fled the city.

Some statistics tell an interesting story. Between 1970 and 2000, Detroit's Black population grew steadily from 44% of Detroit's population to 82%, while its White population declined from 56% to 12%.³² At the same time, while a large amount of household wealth left the city during these years (the share of upper middle-class households declined from approximately 25% to just below 10%), the middle-class population remained relatively stable.³³ In 1970, about 40% of Detroit households were middle class, defined as having an income between 80% and 200% of the national median household income.³⁴ In 1980, that figure remained close to 40%, dropping to approximately 32% by 1990, going back up to about 35% by 2000, and then dropping significantly to approximately 25% by 2017.³⁵ Economically successful Whites had completely abandoned Detroit by 1980, leaving behind poor Whites.³⁶

31. *See id.* at 214. Although Anderson mentions “Black flight” at one point, referring to it as the “stream of middle-class families moving to the suburbs,” she does not give much context. *See id.*

32. *See infra* Figure 1.

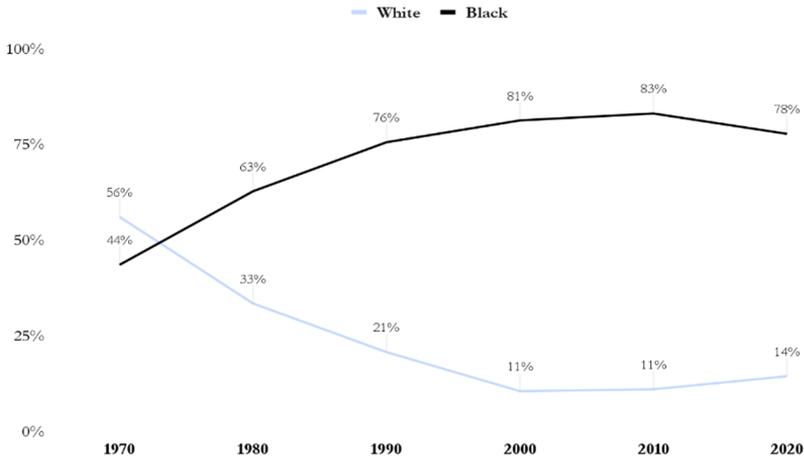
33. DETROIT FUTURE CITY, GROWING DETROIT'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS: THE OPPORTUNITY FOR A PROSPEROUS DETROIT 14 fig.1 (2019), <https://perma.cc/US9M-MHSP> (depicting Detroit Households by Income, 1950-2017, based on U.S. Census and American Community Survey data). The Report notes that “[e]ven though the prevailing story of Detroit is the rise of the suburbs and decline of the city, in the later part of the 20th century, though the number of white residents fell substantially, the African-American population remained restively stable.” *Id.* at 14.

34. *Id.* at 14 fig.1. In 2017, “middle class” is defined as households earning between \$46,100 and \$115,300 per year. *Id.* at 22.

35. *Id.* at 14 fig.1.

36. *See* Reynolds Farley, *Chocolate City, Vanilla Suburbs Revisited: The Racial Integration of Detroit's Suburbs*, 19 DU BOIS REV. 1, 9 (2022) (noting that by 1980, “among metropolitan Whites below the poverty line, one in four remained in the city,” and that “[a] generation later, almost all Whites—98%—were suburban residents”).

Figure 1:
Demographic Population Trends of Detroit – 1970 to 2010³⁷
(percentage of total population)



Putting these statistics together, that means that there was still a significant portion of Black middle-class, and some upper middle-class, households that remained in Detroit throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. This is the Black Detroit I knew. They were my family members and their friends, and later they were my University of Michigan college friends and their families. They established and came from communities of Black professionals and often the Black “elite” whose success was rooted in early twentieth-century Detroit. They lived or grew up in a number of upscale neighborhoods—North Rosedale Park, Indian Village, Sherwood Forest, Boston-Edison—that were home to a large and prosperous Black population in Detroit.³⁸ Some family members remain in Detroit, living

37. For the 1970 census figures, see Timothy J. Kenny, *Detroit in the 1970's: A Preview of the Coming American Racial Crisis* 5 tbl.1, (Master's Thesis, Loyola University Chicago) (May 1977), <https://perma.cc/B832-FP8N>. For census figures from 1980 to 2000, see Off. of Pol'y Dev. & Rsch., U.S. Dep't of Hous. & Urb. Dev., *SOCDS Census Data Output: Detroit City, MI*, HUD User, <https://perma.cc/EPW5-WT3F>. For 2010 and 2020 figures, see *Selected Characteristics Of The Total And Native Populations In The United States*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://perma.cc/NFQ2-YVZC> (select “2010: ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables” and “2020: ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables” from dropdown menu. For 2010 & 2020 figures, White population figures include White Latinos.

38. See, e.g., Coates, *supra* note 5.

in intact middle-class neighborhoods with good housing stock. The wealthier ones left at the turn of the century or shortly thereafter.

Palmer Woods is a neighborhood that I know well. My mother's brother, an M.D. who had his own private practice and worked at one of the city's major hospitals, raised his family there from the 1950s until at least the 1990s. Understanding how the Palmer Woods community came to represent Black success in Detroit and when it began to experience Black flight can help us contextualize broader demographic trends from the 1970s to the early 2000s.

Charles Burton, a prominent Detroit developer, curated the Palmer Woods Historic District in 1915.³⁹ The neighborhood, situated within the historic Palmer Woods Park, catered to Detroit's elites. District streets lacked curbs, minimizing the pedestrian traffic and "grime" of the city.⁴⁰ This exclusive perimeter neighborhood represented an oasis from city life, allowing white wealthy residents to exclude undesirable Black and immigrant migrants.⁴¹

After racially restrictive covenants were deemed unconstitutional in 1948, unraveling previous exclusionary efforts,⁴² wealthy Black families purchased homes in historically white neighborhoods, and white residents fled to the suburbs. Real estate agents profited from these demographic shifts, selling newly vacated homes at a significant markup to wealthy Black families.⁴³ For Black families able to escape the heightened racial tensions in the city, homeownership in white neighborhoods offered opportunity and stability. Nevertheless, few Black families immediately moved to Palmer Woods. The first wave of Black residents settled only in the late 1960s, impacted by the reprisal of race riots.

As the number of Black residents increased, Palmer Woods established an identity as the pinnacle of Black Detroit success, and of Black success in

39. Maureen Feighan, *Beloved Palmer Woods Celebrates 100 Years*, DET. NEWS (updated Sept. 18, 2018, 8:37 AM ET), <https://perma.cc/3J6R-6RRW>.

40. *Id.*

41. *See id.*

42. *See Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1, 20 (1948). *But see* ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 198 (noting that covenants were still recognized and obeyed between private parties and that social pressure to comply with covenants, as well as realtor discrimination, still excluded Black people; and that these covenants remained largely effective until the Fair Housing Act of 1968).

43. *See* SUGRUE, *supra* note 1, at 203-04; *see also* Scott Martelle, Opinion, *How the Wheels Came Off Detroit*, N.Y. DAILY NEWS (July 21, 2013), <https://perma.cc/FU7C-ET42> ("In the 1960s, agents would hire young, black women to push baby carriages through white neighborhoods, then the agents would go door-to-door to sign up new listings 'before it was too late.'").

America.⁴⁴ Palmer Woods is still the wealthiest neighborhood in Detroit and the wealthiest majority Black area in Michigan.⁴⁵ For decades, however, Palmer Woods residents remained insulated from the city's escalating crime rates, failing schools, and high tax rates.⁴⁶ Like other fancy neighborhoods with large Black populations, the neighborhood remained stable throughout much of the late twentieth century. As the century came to a close, unfortunately Palmer Woods became susceptible to many of Detroit's troubles.⁴⁷ The area experienced Black flight due in large part to rising crime which they could no longer insulate themselves from.

For some, Palmer Woods was more than just a neighborhood for Black Detroiters—it was a protest.⁴⁸ Black residents invested in Detroit, appreciating its past and fighting for its future. This neighborhood represented the American Dream for Black Detroiters, and Black pride keeps residents here. Dermatologist Lorna Thomas recounted: “I live here because I chose to be in Detroit. I am not stuck. I could be anywhere I want.”⁴⁹ Resident Elliott Hall affirmed this narrative, stating, “Every advantage I received in my life came out of the city of Detroit. . . . We always have to believe things are going to turn around in a city that we love so much.”⁵⁰ Palmer Woods is a manifestation of Black hope in Detroit's future, combatting Detroit's decline.

III. Black Flight and Loss

Black resistance and resilience did not last much into the twenty-first century for many in the Black middle and professional classes. The reality of

44. Ta-Nehasi Coates referred to Palmer Park as “American black elite's most majestic enclave.” *Palmer Woods: The American Black Elite's Most Majestic Enclave*, DEADLINE DET. (Jan. 2, 2013), <https://perma.cc/992M-VV93>.

45. Chris Kolmar, *The 10 Richest Neighborhoods in Detroit, MI for 2022*, HOMESNACKS (April 6, 2022) <https://perma.cc/8YZH-5BQF>. The neighborhood is now approximately 64% Black, with almost 45% of residents holding a master's degree or higher, and a median household income of approximately \$133,500. See *Palmer Woods*, NICHE, <https://perma.cc/EBU2-U8VJ>.

46. See Coates, *supra* note 5. Detroit imposed substantial taxes to offset declines in the overall tax base, including income taxes, property taxes, and utility taxes. Home and auto insurance rates also increase the cost of living in Detroit. Farley, *supra* note 36, at 10-11.

47. See Ta-Nehasi Coates, *The Other Detroit*, ATLANTIC (Apr. 2011), <https://perma.cc/PT73-83WZ>.

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.*

50. *Id.*

Detroit's decline became evident to Black elites in the 1990s,⁵¹ spurring the first wave of Black flight to the surrounding suburbs. Since 2000, Black Detroit has lost over 180,000 residents.⁵² The percentage of middle-class households in Detroit dropped off significantly, from about 35% to approximately 25% between 2000 and 2017.⁵³ By 2019 the majority of the Black middle and professional class in the metropolitan region lived in the suburbs.⁵⁴

Many of the Black middle class and elite moved to the suburbs of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties.⁵⁵ As the chart below shows, in the counties that saw the largest increases in Black migration, the trend started in the 1970s and accelerated sharply at the end of the twentieth century and beyond. In many cases, the percentage of Black residents in those counties doubled or tripled. As the chart shows, some of this migration was well underway by the 1980s. Suburbs like Southfield, Inkster, Pontiac, and Highland Park had sizable Black populations as early as the 1970s, which only increased over time.⁵⁶

51. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 206 (describing an anecdote about a man being driven around Detroit by his father in the 1990s and remarking on the obvious depopulation and blight that was setting in).

52. Dana Afana, *Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan to challenge 2020 census results howing population decline*, DETROIT FREE PRESS (Aug. 12, 2021), <https://perma.cc/ZER5-NC3L> (“The U.S. Census Bureau’s previous results show the city’s population plummeted by 25% to 713,777 people from 2000 to 2010, with more than 180,000 African Americans leaving Detroit.”).

53. DETROIT FUTURE CITY, *supra* note 35, at 14 fig.1.

54. Farley, *supra* note 36, at 9.

55. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 212 (noting that Oakland County benefited from this flight and became one of the wealthier counties in America as Detroit shrank).

56. Some of these places are now majority Black. In others that are majority white, many Blacks live in majority Black communities or neighborhoods within the suburban town. See Farley, *supra* note 36, at 13, 25 n.3; see also Mike Wilkinson, *Black Flight to Suburbs Masks Lingering Segregation in Metro Detroit*, BRIDGE MICH. (Dec. 6, 2016), <https://perma.cc/3NZC-XAXG> (“Wayne State University law professor Peter Hammer notes that even as African-American families leave Detroit for the suburbs, blacks and whites continue to live largely separately, even within suburban communities” such as the City of Warren).

Table 1:
Suburban Black Flight Trends⁵⁷
(Black percentage of total population)

Rank	County	Municipality	Overall Change	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2014
1	Oakland	Southfield	68.9%	0.1	9.2	28.9	54	69.9	69
2	Oakland	Lathrup Village	68.4%	0.1	3.9	22.8	49.7	60.9	68.5
3	Oakland	Oak Park	57.5%	0.2	12	34.1	45.7	57.1	57.7
4	Wayne	Harper Woods	49.3%	0	0.1	0.9	10.2	45.3	49.3
5	Macomb	Eastpointe*	39.2%	0	0.1	0.2	4.7	29.3	39.2
6	Wayne	Highland Park	35.3%	55.3	83.5	92.4	93.1	93	90.6
7	Wayne	Redford Township	32.0%	0	0.1	0.7	8.5	28.7	32
8	Wayne	Inkster	31.6%	44.5	56.4	62.2	67.3	72.6	76.1
9	Wayne	Romulus Township	30.3%	12.1	17.4	21.7	29.8	42.7	42.4
10	Wayne	Van Buren Township	28.1%	0.4	3.8	7.6	12	28.5	28.5

*formerly East Detroit

Black prosperity and wealth has all but vanished from the city of Detroit.⁵⁸ In this respect, Anderson is right to focus the last half of her chapter on Black land loss and the concomitant infusion of capital into the city by outsiders

57. See Wilkinson, *supra* note 56.

58. See DETROIT FUTURE CITY, DETROIT FUTURE CITY: 2030, at 1 (2022), <https://perma.cc/Q6NC-JGPV> (noting that “[h]ouseholds of color make up over 90 percent of [Detroit’s] population” and “about 75 percent of [those] households earn less than \$50,000 per year”).

who, in the wake of the subprime mortgage market collapse, “shifted into bulk land speculation, single-family rental markets, and land-installment contracts.”⁵⁹ Detroit has historically stood out in one important way: Black homeownership.⁶⁰ As Ta-Nehisi Coates poignantly put it, “Detroit is the only city in the country where more African-Americans own homes than rent.”⁶¹ Unfortunately, as Anderson explains, the twenty-first century ushered in a new “predatory” business model and an “eviction machine” leading to a new bottom for Detroit’s Black community.⁶² Anderson appropriately gives recognition to the new migrants, mostly young and white, who are fighting back against these abuses. She chronicles the work of nonprofits, academics, and lawyers who are doing amazing work to help the mostly Black homeowners remain in the city and to resist predatory property tax and foreclosure practices.⁶³

Anderson ends her chapter on Detroit, and her book, full of hope for places like Detroit. There is hope in the city’s willingness to allow homeowners to cure their tax debts and to reimburse landowners for past overpayment of property taxes.⁶⁴ There is hope in the fact that Detroit is attracting new migrants and businesses. There is hope in the fact that Black Detroiters survived and somehow thrived “in the wake of white supremacist economic violence and industrial collapse.”⁶⁵ There is hope in the fact that Detroit has moved past the country’s largest municipal bankruptcy and is in the process of reinventing itself.

Yet even Anderson admits that hope may not be enough. Anderson powerfully concludes that “moral debts to Black Detroit remain unpaid.”⁶⁶ More than a moral *debt*, my view is that the city owes a moral *duty* to help rebuild the Black middle and professional class for the twenty-first century. Detroit Future City (DFC), a nonprofit think tank in the city, wisely identifies

59. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 217.

60. See *id.* at 216 (noting that Detroit was majority homeowner pre-2016); see also Coates, *supra* note 5 (pointing to Detroit’s Black homeownership rate of 53% as compared to national White homeownership rate of 56%).

61. Coates, *supra* note 5. He also notes that Detroit’s Black business class remained strong over time, despite its troubles. *Id.* (noting that Black businesses are often profiled in the monthly “bible” of Black entrepreneurs, *Black Enterprise* magazine).

62. ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 220-21; see also Bernadette Atuahene, *Predatory Cities*, 108 CAL. L. REV. 107, 109 (2020).

63. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 225-31.

64. See *id.* at 231. Although, as she notes, the efforts to stabilize and restore land values could have happened without foreclosures of occupied homes. The city had enough vacant land to go around. *Id.* at 233.

65. *Id.* at 234 (quoting *History*, ALLIED MEDIA CONF., <https://perma.cc/GY5K-WSTA>).

66. *Id.* at 233.

rebuilding the middle class in Detroit as key to Detroit's ability to fully reverse its decline and grow equitably.⁶⁷ It estimates that this would require an increase of at least 27,700 Black middle-class households in the city.⁶⁸ Rebuilding a vibrant and equitable Detroit would also require revitalizing middle-class neighborhoods, specifically Black middle-class neighborhoods.⁶⁹ Neighborhoods like Palmer Woods.⁷⁰

Conclusion

As Anderson's book makes clear, the early twentieth-century entrepreneurial and labor force foothold that Blacks established in Detroit helped to set the city apart in U.S. urban history. It also made Detroit, as Anderson notes, an important part of Black history. Detroit was especially important to the rise of the Black middle and upper class, perhaps more than any other U.S. city. Detroit at one point, in the early twenty-first century, had almost as many upper middle-class Black households as Chicago, despite having almost 100,000 fewer total Black households.⁷¹ Even after the "decline" of Detroit, successful Black Detroiters helped to sustain the city until the city's problems became theirs.

Detroit today is often referred to as a "tale of two cities."⁷² The city's recent resurgence has helped stem population losses, added new private sector jobs, and stabilized parts of the housing market.⁷³ At the same time, the recovery is leaving behind the majority of Detroit's still-struggling neighborhoods, many of which suffer from underinvestment and remain socially and economically

67. See DETROIT FUTURE CITY, *supra* note 33, at 41.

68. *Id.* at 16. DFC also advocates for increasing middle class households of all races to match the surrounding region's wealth. This would entail adding 33,800 middle class households of all races, to bring the city's share in line with the surrounding region. *Id.* at 15.

69. See *id.* at 41. DFC defines middle-class neighborhoods as "those [census] tracts where more than 50% of the households are middle or upper middle class." *Id.* at 34. Middle-class African-American neighborhoods are defined as middle-class neighborhoods "in which more than 50% of all households are headed by an African American." *Id.*

70. As DFC notes, "Detroit's middle-class neighborhoods have recovered more quickly from the Great Recession than the remainder of the city's neighborhoods. Since 2010, they have seen an 8% increase in the number of households." *Id.* at 36.

71. Coates, *supra* note 5 (also noting that by 2004, one-sixth of Black households in the metropolitan region had incomes more than five times the poverty line).

72. See, e.g., ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 213-14 (asking "who [is] this new Detroit for?" and citing the belief by many that there are "'two Detroit's' in social, racial respects").

73. See generally BRETT THEODOS, ERIC HANGEN, JAY DEV & SIERRA LATHAM, COMING BACK FROM THE BRINK: CAPITAL FLOWS AND NEIGHBORHOOD PATTERNS IN COMMERCIAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND MULTIFAMILY INVESTMENT IN DETROIT (2017), <https://perma.cc/UCP6-W6EQ>.

isolated.⁷⁴ Anderson recounts an experience that many of us have had when we visit the “new” Detroit. As one native Detroiter notes, noticing the hustle and bustle of a revived downtown: “I’ve never seen so many white people in Detroit in my life.”⁷⁵

Given that Detroit has been a majority Black city for four decades, a central part of its recovery should leverage the entrepreneurial capacity and social stability of the Black communities that sustained Detroit during its darkest days. These communities are not necessarily the ones that live in the city now, although some do. They also include the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the Black middle class that are physically distant yet psychically and emotionally still connected to the city. Like myself, they are rooted in Detroit and its success. They endeavor to participate in the city’s recovery. Yet they also know that the Detroit narrative does not center their experience in Detroit’s past. It is difficult to imagine, then, that the city would center them as part of its future.

74. See generally Peter Applebome, *In Detroit’s 2-Speed Recovery, Downtown Roars and Neighborhoods Sputter*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 12, 2016), <https://perma.cc/48FL-2A2J>; Joel Kurth, *Are There Two Detroits? A New Report Says Yes, But...*, BRIDGE MICH. (Sept. 12, 2017), <https://perma.cc/ACF7-42VA>.

75. ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 214.