UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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A Critical Case Study on (Anti)Blackness, Geography and Education Pathways in Twinsburg Heights, Ohio

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Jalil Mustaffa Bishop

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Critical Case Study

on (Anti)Blackness, Geography and Education Pathways

in Twinsburg Heights, Ohio

by

Jalil Mustaffa Bishop

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Walter R. Allen, Co-Chair

Professor Shaun Harper, Co-Chair

In policymaking, social movements, and media, education pathways are presented as the primary solution for low-income Black communities. To examine this dominant belief, this study utilized a critical case study approach to investigate a historic Black suburban neighborhood, Twinsburg Heights, in Northeast Ohio. The study combined Black Studies, Geography, and Education to understand Black residents' experiences in three sites: the neighborhood, K-12 schools, and higher education. Using a multi-generational sample, 46 residents were interviewed

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about their education and life pathways. Residents' pathways were contextualized in the geographic history of (under)development in the Heights neighborhood based on archival documents, a local documentary, and oral histories. Findings show Black people's education opportunity is produced and their life pathways are structured at the intersection of anti-Blackness, capitalism, and geographic domination. At the same time, Black people practice place-making across the three sites that contest power. The places they form provide alternative models for valuing Black people both as human and outside their education outcomes. Recommendations focus on how education is a tool for racial justice, but not justice itself. Racial justice requires remedies and countermeasures that address racism in sites of schooling and redistribution that disrupts capitalism in wider society. The Heights neighborhood is one case that shows how Black people have imagined and practiced a racial justice that required more than degrees.

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In addition, my scholarly support system remains strong. To my advisors, Walter Allen and Shaun Harper, thank you for supporting a project on a small town most have never heard of. With your guidance, I was able to conduct a study that matters for my community and contribute to our field. You two are a key part of my development as a scholar and for that I will always thank you. My other committee members—Tyrone Howard, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Pedro Noguera— you all provided time to develop my dissertation project and offered thought-provoking questions during my defense. Thank you for engaging my work and guiding me through this milestone. To my friends and colleagues who I have met in graduate school, thank

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you for listening to my rants, reminding me I have something to contribute, and pouring wisdom into me. Special shout out to Jonathon, Oscar, Sayil, and Antwann as four people who were transformative forces in my life as a scholar and person — "May the Bridges We Burn, Light the Way."

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Marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact … it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance … a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not found just in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.[1]

— bell hooks

Our analyses honour the violence by naming it (as wrong and unjust) and asking the condemned to escape violence and join to the very system that thrives on anti-blackness! This is the Fanonian predicament that underwrites the academy: the subhuman is invited to become human on terms that require anti-Black sentiment.[2]

— Katherine McKittrick

Chapter 1 - Worth More Than a Degree

I am seated at the table across from my partner, with partners from the other team on each of our sides. All the elements are present: drinks in our hands, a deck of cards being dealt, shit talkin', and Black people. "We 'bout to set y'all's asses." "No y'all not, my hand's fire." "Don't renege." "Y'all about to get set." "We going board."

The table we gather around becomes the boundary of our world. Our interaction is ritual-like and becomes more important than the card game itself. We argue about whether racism is real or if Black people are just lazy. Everyone gives their serious takes on the latest celebrity gossip and political scandals. Half-jokingly, we comment on our cousin who is "on some dumb shit," and we talk about the times when we were young together "on some dumb shit" too. Like always, we come up with the next scheme for how the family can make money together because "we sick of being broke." The whole time, we know this—our path to mobility—is as much a game as cards. The rules are already set; but we take ultimate responsibility for our successes and failures. We are the ones who decided to play. Some of us are going to win, and many more of us will lose. For a while now, we have accepted that success and winning requires the right combination of skill and luck. True for cards and true for life.

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The game of spades and its predetermined rules become background noise. The feeling of being connected to each other and the joy of being able to speak our truth become the focus. This card game is our Black place. Only we can conjure up our Black places. Be it a card game, a cookout, or holiday dinner, we infuse these sites with affirmation and honesty. Unsurprisingly, once we were gathered around the table and inhabiting our place, I experienced clarity on why I chose my dissertation project.

This clarity came to me in a question from my cousin who said, “Jalil, nigga. You done graduated from the Ivy League and you about to get your Ph.D., how you writing a dissertation about education opportunity being a myth?” I responded that “my education success story ain’t the whole story… Now throw your card down, so I can win this book.” As the game continued, I tried to explain more about my education pathway.

Everyone in this card game was from the same neighborhood where our families have lived for multiple generations—Twinsburg Heights, Ohio. In the Heights, there was a range of income levels. Many of us, however, intimately knew the type of generational poverty where, as far back as you can tell and as far as you can see, every Black person around you is broke. Like so many of us, I believed school was my way out.

My life work has been dedicated to researching whether systems of schooling—from K-12 to college— can provide social mobility for poor Black communities? The question initially reflected my own belief around schooling. I was deeply invested in the belief that if I worked hard in school then I could “escape” poverty. I approached schooling methodically. I earned straight A’s, served as class president, ran varsity track, and engaged in service work. For middle class white students in my school, this would have been enough to secure their pathway to college and reproduce their class status. For me, Black and poor, an additional burden was placed

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upon me. I had to prove not that I was one of them, but that I wanted to be. White students early on made it clear to me that none of my success in school would ever make me equal to them, but they still wanted me to testify that they were the thing to be. In the same conversations where they would reduce my whole being to a racist stereotype— "Jalil can you rap for me?"—they also would ask me to answer, "why are all the other Black students lazy," "why don't they care about their education," or "how can racism exist if *you* are successful?"

Throughout my life, these conversations have played out again and again with students, teachers, counselors, principals, and professors. These conversations reduced me to a narrow notion of Blackness and called for me to testify to the legitimacy of meritocracy and whiteness. Before I learned it was wrong, I answered these questions. I testified.

In high school, I co-founded an African American Achievement Club that brought Black boys together one day each week. I tried to convince them that they needed to work harder and focus on school. As a sophomore, I helped seniors fill out their college applications. My majority white school proudly supported the club; it assured them that white racism was not the issue. Then it became public knowledge that I was being recruited to a few Ivy League schools for track and field. White students, counselors, and principals declared this achievement was only because I was Black.

Before, race had "nothing to do" with student achievement in Twinsburg schools; now my whole pathway to college was defined by it. This was a wakeup call to the reality that my role as the "high achieving" Black student was to testify for whiteness. My role was not to move up and it damn sure was not to rise above white people in my achievements. After I graduated, I heard from other high achieving Black people in my hometown of Twinsburg who experienced the same white discouragement and harassment. If we were the so-called "best of the best" and

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still white people tried to limit us, then what were they doing to the Black students who refused schooling as a barometer of worth?

After graduating from high school, I went to Dartmouth College and my consciousness evolved, somewhat. I did not believe Black students were lazy by choice. I instead attributed low academic performance to a lack of information on how to take full advantage of their schooling and prepare for college. I wanted every Black person to have an opportunity at a college like mine, where resources were abundant, academic advising and support were pervasive, and career networks were robust. I worked in Dartmouth's college access programs and admissions office. My goal was to learn strategies to bring college knowledge to poor Black people. But in my senior year, I had another wakeup call.

The college, I realized, was just recycling Black people from the same schools and networks. Each year the pool of Black students was recruited from the same private, charter, and public schools. In response, I researched Dartmouth's history of Black student recruitment. I learned that the college enrolled its first sizeable class of 81 Black students in 1969, when the college was an all men's school.[3] Then in 1972 the college went co-ed and, even with a pool of both Black men and women, the class sizes of Black students were still around 80 students. My Class of 2014 had 87 Black students and the recent Class of 2017 had 84 Black students. In 48 years, Dartmouth only increased its Black freshmen enrollment by 3 students.[4] I could go back to my high school and provide all the college knowledge to each Black student, they could execute that knowledge to its fullest potential, and still they had little chance of being accepted into an institution like Dartmouth. My experience making it to an elite college was not the model; it was the exception. I was the exceptional, token Black person.

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After graduating from Dartmouth and enrolling in an Education Ph.D. program, I planned to focus on the institutional racism in higher education that excluded poor Black people. My research plan was to document high-achieving Black people in college to prove that low admission numbers had nothing to do with our ability. I wanted to provide evidence that the real issue was the racist admissions and recruiting policies of these institutions. Then, I had yet another wakeup call right before I was scheduled to move to begin the program. In Ferguson, Missouri, a young man named Mike Brown was killed by police officer Darren Wilson. The killing represented a historic and ongoing pattern where unarmed Black people are gunned down by police officers who claim to fear for their lives—although the officers are the ones with self-defense training, weapons, and backup. However, the media initially focused not on the paradoxical claims surrounding Mike Brown's case; instead, the debate raging across the media was whether or not he was college-bound.[5] I thought to myself, "What the hell did his status as a college student have to do with the value of his life?" Then I realized the answer: everything.

College status and education credentials are not solely about who works harder nor about providing a pathway for social mobility. Systems of schooling are about sorting who has value and who does not in the United States. I place systems before schooling to emphasize the systemic way that schooling institutions are interconnected to each other and other institutions in society. In my work, I refer to the sorting process through which school institutions assign different values to people as *education violence*. Education violence functions through sorting Black people into categories of value and disposability based on their schooling credentials.[6] Systems of schooling provide unequal opportunity for Black people to earn degrees then societal policies converge to devalue those labeled uneducated. Education violence makes the results

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seem commonsense: gentrification of "degree-less" Black communities, closing schools with "uneducable" Black students, and blaming "uneducated" Black people for election results.[7]

Furthermore, as an academic achiever, I had some value, but only if I fulfilled my role to testify for whiteness. In that vein, the media's debate was really to try and decide if Mike Brown was a witness for whiteness—if he had a potential testimony that this white society is a meritocracy, and if Officer Wilson maybe killed the wrong type of Black person. Unsurprisingly, Brown's college status (he was going to Vatterott College) quickly became irrelevant once the media gathered enough evidence to mark him as a Black person outside of value: a criminal. [8]

Now in the final year of my doctoral program, I am still waking up. Schooling is thought to be beneficial or a neutral space, untouchable by white racism, where hard work beats the odds every time. Systems of schooling are considered a gift. They are not. They are not a gift. While these systems must be transformed, Black people's value must be remembered outside of their performance in these systems.

During the card game with my cousins, I said, "education scholars, policymakers, and reformers like myself are suspect." We are suspect because the hyper-focus on increasing college degrees—which generally means a bachelor's degree from a predominately white university—is not about or for poor Black people. It is about using a white standard of what it means to be educated, productive, and valuable as the standard for Black lives. There is an almost unquestioned belief that bachelor's degree attainment is a silver bullet for racialized poverty.[9] Often college access research and conversations ignore the fact that most Black people are not even attending bachelor-degree granting institutions; or that student debt from college enrollment is now an edifice of racialized poverty. Thus, poor Black students' experiences are not at the center of our questions, discussions, findings, or solutions. Too often educational scholarship

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reflects the 9 percent of Black students at elite institutions like Harvard or even Howard rather than the majority of Black students at ITT Tech or Malcolm X Community College.[10] Only through marginalizing Black students' experiences outside elite universities can college degree attainment be so easily confused as the goal rather than just one strategy to reach the goal of Black freedom.

Shocking my family, I said that my education justice work should not be primarily about Black people earning high school and college degrees. My work is to declare that Black life has value and matters outside of education credentials. My education justice work is to help abolish systems, structures, and thinking that would leave some without full livelihoods based on what type of degrees they have. Education violence requires tokenized, valued, and "educated" Black folks—to testify to whiteness as the standard.

I am writing this dissertation to interrogate whiteness. But more importantly, I am writing to center Blackness and call attention to the meaningful ways that it materializes in card games, families, communities, and freedom dreams. Poor Black communities deserve more than education justice work that dangles degrees in front of them like a carrot. They deserve to testify, lead, and imagine what other ways of education and being are possible for Black people.

Foremost, I focused on Twinsburg Heights because it is where I am from, where I am an insider. In this dissertation, I wanted to understand how my education pathway differed from my neighbors without positioning it as the standard. My exceptional story does not prove education opportunity is the rule in poor Black communities. Most of my peers who lived in the Heights never were treated as the special Black student with promise, provided with proactive support, nor lucky enough to be recruited to an elite college and the networks leading to a doctoral program. My exceptional story hides racial inequality across systems of schooling. Thus, it was

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necessary for me to explore, in this project, the rules of education opportunity for my community. I wanted to know more than just the exceptional stories of "those who made it." I wanted to focus on the collective experiences and perspectives that represent the Heights neighborhood.

My refusal to focus only on exceptional stories was not to say that they do not matter. Stories of Black people achieving social mobility through education opportunity are uplifting; they inspire me. However, it is the exceptionality that makes these stories dangerous. Exceptional examples normalize individual Black people overcoming racist odds and suggest that the rest of Black people and their communities just need to do better. For me, my hometown deserved more than a project on beating the odds; they needed one about changing the odds. In Twinsburg, pathways through schools and colleges do not always even the playing field. They instead reproduce the uneven, even treacherous, geographies that already exist for Black people in the Heights.[11]

The Heights represents a common story and case of the racist geographic development that occurs in Black communities. Across the United States, the geography of cities, suburbs, and rural towns reveals how white communities hyper-segregated from communities of color.[12] The Heights' geography is no different.

My hometown is a type of "outsider within" community. In essence, there are three Twinsburgs: Twinsburg City, Twinsburg Township, and Twinsburg Heights. The Heights is home to a working-class unincorporated Black neighborhood that sits on a hill inside, but divided from, the predominately white affluent suburb, Twinsburg City (population of 19,000).[13] Located between Akron and Cleveland, Twinsburg Heights developed in the early 1920s and 30s from dual Black migration, those who moved from the U.S. South to Cleveland then to the

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Heights or straight from the South to settle in the area. The community has served as a home to Black people seeking opportunity and a place of their own. For most of its existence, the neighborhood endured little investment of resources with every marker of a neglected place: toxic waste sites, an interstate highway, power station, substandard housing, railroads, and racist policing.[14] Currently in the neighborhood, there is a public housing complex and homes on a 3 by 7 street grid where the nearly 1,000 almost all Black residents live. The Heights community serves as a place where many Black families can have land, a home, and a community of their own, where Black culture and agency can be cultivated.[15]

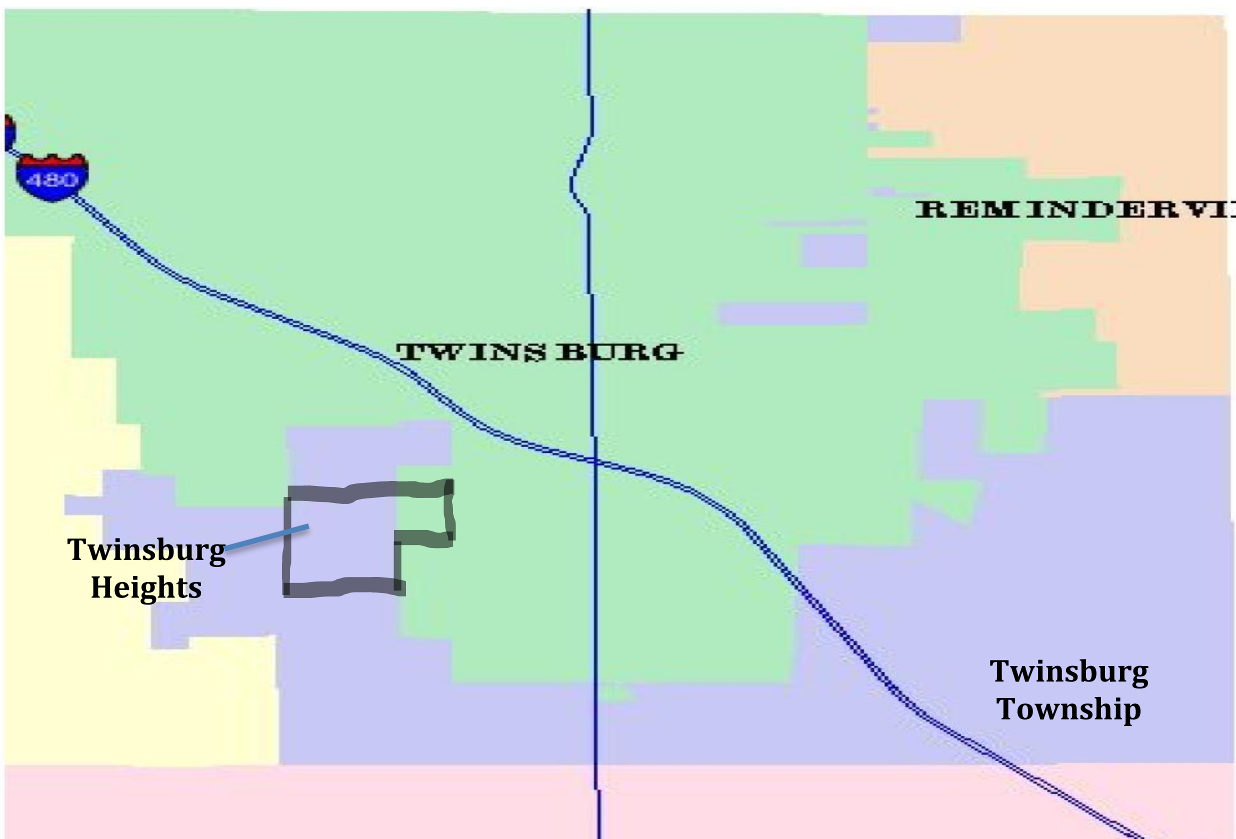

Figure 1.1. Map of the three Twinsburgs. Source: Twinsburg Township Small Community Redevelopment Toolkit (2014)

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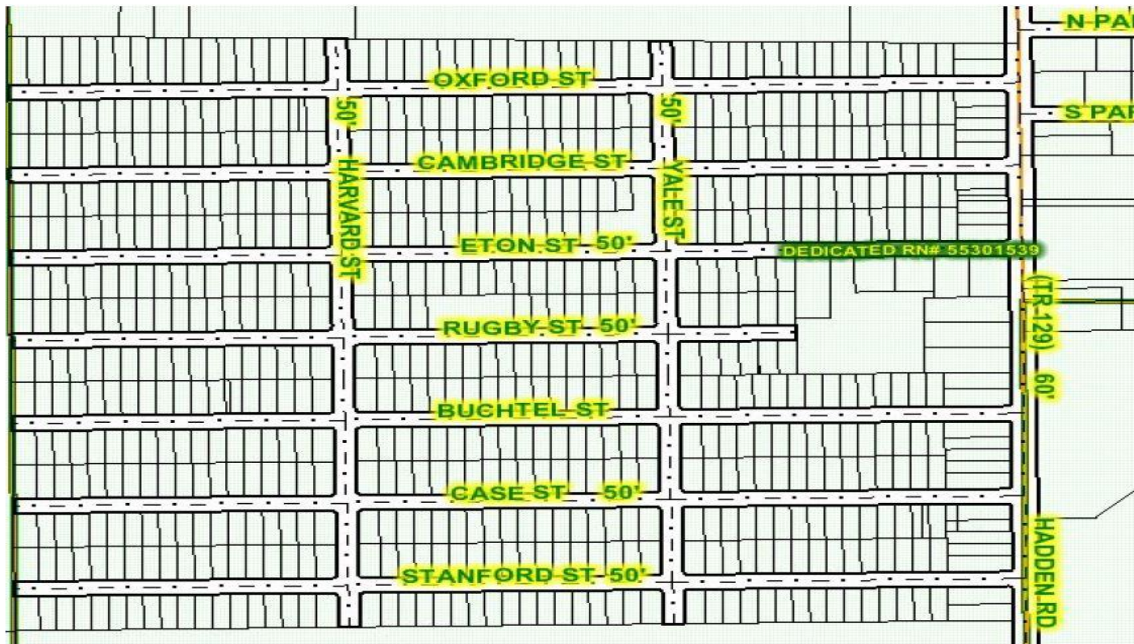

Figure 2.1. Map of the streets in the Heights and their grid formation. Each street is named after a prestigious college or school. Source: Twinsburg Township Small Community Redevelopment Toolkit (2014).

The geographic location of the Heights on a hill within but not of Twinsburg City provided a compelling case and lens on education opportunity. The proximity to the city granted the neighborhood access to the Twinsburg City School District (TCSD) since its beginning in the 1920s. In other words, my community for over 90 years and prior to *Brown vs Board of Education* has had access to a (1) well-resourced, (2) integrated and (3) suburban school district near (4) a network of local colleges. All four indicators discussed as necessary for education to be an engine of mobility in both scholarship and society. Yet, my community continued to experience generations of stagnate social mobility. Education opportunity may be a pathway out of poverty for individuals, but what about for the community and most of its residents? The historic and contemporary relationship that Heights residents have with education opportunity in Twinsburg schools and local colleges contradicts the notion that systems of schooling are social equalizers.

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As a type of quasi-control site, the neighborhood provides insights into the suburban geography. The suburbs often are romanticized in public conversations as havens of wealth and opportunity and positioned as the standard in education scholarship to argue Black students should be integrated into or placed in suburb-like school districts. As a 91-year-old Black community in the Twinsburg suburb and schools, the Heights demonstrates the idea of Black people in the suburbs is not new. There is a long history of racial struggle in suburban geographies that are similar and distinct from the more researched Black experience in urban setting and schools. Suburbs and their schools exist not outside racial power dynamics, but because of them. For the Heights, proximity to well-resourced places does not mean better opportunity and outcomes.[16]

The Heights is at a critical juncture where increasing levels of investment are changing the community. This uptick in investment is evident in white people—advantaged by whiteness, housing programs, generational wealth, and tax credits—gentrifying the neighborhood.[17] At the same time, the elderly residents who were children during the creation of the neighborhood are passing away. In my study, it was important to document their narratives related to the Heights community, integrated schools, and education opportunity. They helped to provide an understanding of the changes and circumstances faced today. Their stories spoke of a reality in which 1,000 Black people lived in a neighborhood with all the indicators of education opportunity available, but generation after generation the community remained in precarity. In the past, there was a lack of investment; now there is uncertainty about whether the neighborhood will remain a Black place.

The neighborhood shows that race and class still matter, even in the suburbs. Therefore, telling the neighborhood's story makes clear how race and class still matter in schools, colleges

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and universities, labor markets, and U.S. society. The main point is that there is no haven for Black people from the ways that the production of race and class accumulates into anti-Blackness, even in the education arena believed to be the great social equalizer. The story of the Heights and its community members' education pathways exposes what is impossible in current systems of schooling and begs for enough honesty to imagine more possibility-filled futures.

Research Design

I studied the Heights through a mixed-methods case study for 15 months. During this time period, I visited almost every month. I stayed in my childhood home, next to my neighbors, and became reacquainted with the flow of the community. The goals of the research design led to the research questions.

This study sought to confront the consistent claim that my neighborhood's racist history, Twinsburg's unequal schools, and poverty do not matter if one works hard. These realities matter. Together, they show how Heights residents live in an anti-Black society. Anti-Black treatment manifests in individual interactions, the operations of institutions, and structural policies. Despite this anti-Black landscape, my community was still expected to beat the odds in K-12 schools and colleges, which I refer to as systems of schooling. The problem is that systems of schooling are created by and exist in this society. They often are not an escape from anti-Blackness but a space where it is expanded and reproduced.[18] Thus, this project connected the reproduction of anti-Blackness to the development of the Heights neighborhood and the development of Black people in educational spaces. Further, I advance an argument throughout this dissertation that the over-reliance on education opportunity as a singular solution masks anti-Blackness rather than ending it.

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As much as this is a study about anti-Blackness, it also is about what the Heights community has done to sustain for nearly a century. Along these lines, I was interested in how Black residents of the Heights value and empower themselves in the face of racial hatred and structural injustice both within Twinsburg city and the country at large. As such, this study examined education and life pathways in the neighborhood, K-12 schools, local colleges, and labor markets. The following three questions guided my research:

1. How are Black Heights residents' education pathways structured within the local geography of Twinsburg, Ohio?
2. In what ways is Black life sustained and valued in the Heights neighborhood's historic and ongoing struggle to exist?
3. How does the geographic history of the Heights predict the education opportunity provided to Black people?

To answer these questions, I designed a mixed-methods case study that utilized historical and qualitative methods. A documentary, local newspapers, and a community-created archive served as the sources for the history of the Heights. I analyzed a 2016 oral history documentary called *Voices of the Hill* that featured 20 elderly residents from the Heights who were children in the founding families of the neighborhood. The documentary project collected 252 documents such as photographs, maps, and newspaper clippings from residents which I analyzed as a community-created archive. In addition, based on findings from the documentary, I conducted additional oral histories with residents to explore political battles, community knowledge, and Twinsburg City's racism. I also examined 2,231 issues of local newspapers like the Twinsburg Bulletin, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, and the Akron Beacon Journal from the 1950s to the 2010s. These forms of data collection allowed me to develop the first written history of the neighborhood. My analysis focused on how the geography of the Heights, Twinsburg, and related institutions produced and were produced through race and class (see Notes chapter for more on methods and analysis).

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I then conducted 46 interviews with multiple generations of Black community members on their experiences living in the Heights and their education pathways through Twinsburg schools and local colleges. This multi-generational approach allowed me to have conversations with residents from the following groups: high school students (10th-12th grade), young adults (under 30 years old), and parents (with a child under 30 years old). There were 15 residents in both the high school student and parent groups and 16 residents in the young adult group (see Table 1.1).

Community members were recruited to this study through postings on social media, canvasing the neighborhood with flyers, and word of mouth. In the interviews, everyone was asked to share their experiences growing up or living in the Heights and their education journeys through systems of schooling and then asked additional questions based on their stories. For example, high school students were asked how they were preparing for life after high school. Parents were asked to share what type of college messaging they provided to their children based on their schooling experiences. Young adults were asked to reflect on their college experiences, which ranged from graduating to exiting. All interviews ended with community members providing their explanations for education issues in the Heights and possible solutions. Together, the oral histories and the interviews provided community-created timelines and narratives from the founding of the neighborhood until today.

Lastly, my neighborhood for decades has gathered through community cookouts. Similarly, I co-hosted two community cookouts to share my research and allow the 104 community members in attendance to discuss and challenge my findings. I partnered with the Twinsburg Heights Neighborhood Association to host the cookouts and ensure that the discussions informed the ongoing work already occurring in the community.

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Table 1.1 Characteristics of Residents Interviewed

	Demographics		
Multi-Generational Resident	25		
Gender	27 Women	18 Men	1 Non-Binary
Average Age			
High School	17 years old		
Young Adult	24 years old		
Parents	47 years old		
Enrolled in College*	25		
Completed Associate's or Higher*	12		
Completed Certificate*	4		

*Only includes young adults and parents

This study represented the Heights community in all its complexity, from the local role models to the ones community members said, "we still praying for." The people profiled in this study included twins who both became doctors, parents who wanted more for their children than they had themselves, people who were just trying to make it day to day, teenage parents who now have professional careers and others whose passions lie outside of schools. Through the interviews, oral histories, and cookouts, I talked to over a hundred residents to understand connections between the Heights and education opportunity. Our conversations were not just research. We shared how we loved our home, dealt with racism, and wanted more for those who come after us. It was not possible to understand the Heights just through the way it was marginalized. My community members reminded me that their self-definition and self-determination was what matters in this story.

Theoretical Lens

The Heights is not just an example of anti-Blackness. It is home. I had a family member on almost every street. I grew up surrounded by my grandmother, cousins, aunts and uncles. In

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my household, there were my parents and 5 siblings. My best friends lived all around me. Everyone in the neighborhood was Black; they looked and talked like me. We all knew each other. Our parents knew each other, many of them grew up together in the same neighborhood. For residents, the Heights meant family and neighbors, community-built churches on every block, and summers filled with vacation bible school and cookouts. My understanding of myself was in relation to my understanding of the Heights—all I knew and loved existed in that neighborhood. It was my Black world.

Thus, I conceptualized this study through geographer Katherine McKittrick's theory of a Black sense of place.[19] McKittrick argues that a Black sense of place is the physical, creative, and imaginative geographies that Black people create in contestation with geographies of domination. Black places or geographies can be as physical as neighborhoods, as creative as lyrics in a song, or as imaginative as locations in a fictional book. Black places often are bound up in geographies of domination. Twinsburg exists as a geography of domination surrounding the Heights neighborhood. A geography of domination is designed and operated through anti-Blackness, which employs *different methods of control* like assimilation, exploitation, displacement, neglect, and murder. I reference geographic domination as an extension of racial domination. The latter term focuses on what happens to a group of people while the former term focuses on what happens to the places people inhabit; together, they focus this study on the interplay between race and place for Black people.

Often the ways in which Black people and the places they inhabit are dominated becomes the sole focus of anti-racist work. Anti-racist scholars and activists document the oppression of Black people then appeal to society to include and value the racial group. McKittrick supports this documenting of oppression but pushes scholars to not end the story of Black people and

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places with oppression. She calls for anti-racist analysis to focus on Black people's place-making: how we create and sustain sites that value Black life across time and space. Black place-making provides the different ways of being that Black people live out in a society opposed to us. The Heights is a Black sense of place, a geography that sustains because of Black people's imagination and labor. This Black place-making matters. The struggle to create a place of our own also is a struggle to define Black humanity in a society that says we are without it. In this study, I utilized the Black sense of place theory not to ignore oppression or romanticize the Heights community but to illustrate lessons from telling both geographic sides of a Black neighborhood.

I chose the theory of geography because the production of place and education opportunity are deeply connected. The field of geography studies the production of place physically and symbolically through social meanings and relations, among people, across landscapes, and within ongoing changes. Education and geography already are linked together in the large body of work on residential segregation and opportunity. It is treated as commonsense that where one lives will determine their quality of education in the U.S. Many who have studied race and K-12 schools cite how zip codes are a strong predictor of children's educational outcomes.[20] Zip codes are numerical representations of places; the affluent, white places often have more tax revenue and, therefore, better funded schools with well-trained teachers and high-test scores. Even college enrollment is shaped by geography. For freshmen college students, 57.4 percent of them will enroll in a college within 50 miles of their home.[21] Simply put, where one lives in this country predicts what institutions, networks, resources, and life chances are available. Critical race theorist William Tate refers to this reality as the geography of opportunity.[22]

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Yet, geography and education are not only about physical places like neighborhoods, schools, and college. Nor is the geography of education opportunity only about proximity to resources. Places also function as symbols. This is demonstrated in the constant comparison between suburban and urban schools. The former is idealized as white and affluent with high academic achievement and the latter is discarded as Black or Latino and poor with low academic achievement. The terms suburban and urban are symbols that, even without naming a physical place, generate an imagined place with preconceived meaning, social relations, and locations. The imagined education places constructed in thoughts match real or material examples. Sociologists refer to this as social construction, meaning what people imagine in their mind is what they materialize in the real world. However, social constructions often become so normalized that they seem natural. In education, race, class, and gender are studied often as social constructions. But I follow geographers who include place in this category. Hence, there is nothing natural about suburbs being imagined as white and affluent; society designed this in the same way it has designed urban as Black and poor.[23] A case in point is a childhood story that reveals how the symbol of the Heights became reality more than the physical characteristics of the neighborhood for white Twinsburg residents.

When I was in eighth grade two white girls from school rode their bike to my neighborhood from the affluent part of town; the ride probably only took 10 to 15 minutes. When they showed up, they made comments like "Wow, you all have houses," and "look at all the kids playing." After spending time with us, one of them concluded "this place is not that bad. I was afraid I was going to get shot." For most of my life, these two girls went to school with me and my neighborhood friends. They knew the Heights was where many of their Black peers in school lived, only a short bike ride away from their own neighborhoods. Yet, they imagined a crime-

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infested place where their Black peers existed without homes, ability to play as kids, and in fear of being shot. Eighth grade is the moment that sticks with me, but this was a reoccurring experience living in Twinsburg. Similarly, this experience was shared by residents I interviewed regardless if they graduated Twinsburg High School in 1965 or were graduating in 2017. Imagining the Heights as a symbol of chaos and criminality allowed, even naturalized, the underdevelopment of the neighborhood as a place without value.

Hence, the ability to transform symbols into places is a question of power. It is the power to not only name a place but also decide who will live there, how they will be treated, their life chances, and the opportunities available. As mentioned above, place is produced through people's imaginations and vice versa. As such, the Heights neighborhood and Twinsburg City School District are created, the racial ideas surrounding the two places are created, and impactful policies and decisions are created. These creations or social constructions determine the extent to which Black people have education opportunity and a thriving neighborhood. However, this power resides not only in white power structures and institutions in Twinsburg but also in structures of Blackness in the Heights. The Heights remains in existence due to a structured network of resistance and imagination.

Linking the physical and symbolic relations in Black places led to a field called Black Geography.[24] Here, scholars focus on the production of place both through anti-Blackness and Black people's struggles to create more livable places. This was applicable to my study on the Heights. I aimed to engage both the anti-Blackness that sustains the geography of domination in the neighborhood and the community's power to create a Black sense of place. Black Geography as a field of study documents Black people's collective power to engage in place-making where

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Black life has value. No story of a Black geography can be complete without acknowledging this collective power.

As one of the founders of the field of Black Geography, McKittrick argues, "the ways in which blackness has been translated as ungeographic is my central interest here, because it *cites/sites* how dispossession is an important racial narrative, which socially and economically rates ownership, domination, and human/life value." She goes on to state "that the ungeographic is a colonial fiction, sometimes cast in real life, thus functioning to determine how we only seem to see Black geographies in hierarchical, stereotypical, human/inhuman terms, and therefore as ostensible impossibilities."[25]

I aim to interpret this quote into simpler terms. McKittrick references Blackness as ungeographic to highlight how white supremacy in the U.S. treats Black people as always *without*. Without human value, community, and land. Marking Black people as without or dispossessed "is an important racial narrative" that makes the pattern of us receiving the short end of the stick always seem natural or commonsense. Thus, viewing Blackness as ungeographic or placeless means viewing Black people as having no entitlement to a geography, a place, or home.[26] However, McKittrick's use of the word "translated" in her argument means that Blackness is more than the ways in which white supremacist projects translate it into "dispossession." Blackness defined as ungeographic, dispossessed, fully dominated, or un-human is a "colonial fiction" and myth. Yet, work that only exposes the myth can do the same work it aims to combat—solely narrating Black people only as down and out. McKittrick is calling for work on Black communities to move beyond just narrating us as oppressed or claiming that our solutions can only come from the systems that oppresses us. Black geographies form through challenging geographies of domination. Therefore, Black people's place-making is

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a source of how to disrupt power. McKittrick wants to change how "we"—referring to those interested in liberation for Black people—value Black geographies and learn from their anti-racist struggle.

There is a large body of work that focuses on Black people's place-making as freedom-making. Herbert Aptheker documents how escaped and freed African slaves, known as maroons, built their communities in the mountaintops, swamps, and forests across the United States. Aptheker explores how the communities "offered havens for fugitives (runaway slaves), served as bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations and, at times, supplied the nucleus of leadership for planned uprising."[27] The maroon communities were early examples of the interdependence between Black people's freedom and place-making.

Focusing on first half of the 20th century, Isabel Wilkerson interviewed over a thousand Black people who migrated from the U.S. South to the North and West. Wilkerson details the Black communities that formed on the margins of cities, the Black people who built and owned houses in the heart of white racial covenants, and the Black spaces, from juke joints to train porter unions, that offered joy and stability during hardships. Marcus Hunter shows how the Black people who migrated to Northern urban ghettos, who are referred to as Citymakers, re-made them into Black cities that influenced politics, culture, and policy across the U.S. Andrew Wiese's scholarship expanded the Great Migration to the suburbs. Wiese documents how Great Migrators carried their traditions of place-making and place-disrupting from the South to Northern and Western suburbs. In each work, these scholars demonstrate how Black people's place-making was targeted with violence and subjugation. The existence of Black places and place-making were acts of insubordination in an anti-Black society. From the maroon societies to the suburbs and the many landscapes in-between, Black people have continued and invented

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place building strategies and tactics that make freedom a lived place. This is why Black geographies contain both the labor of the past and the hope of the future.[28]

In this study, I too aimed to understand Black community members' place-making. My focus is on how residents have and are making, disrupting, and re-making place in the Heights. Further, I focus on how their sense of place shapes their place-making across education pathways in the Twinsburg School District and local colleges. The theory of a Black sense of place focused my analysis on how Heights residents encounter and resist anti-Black meanings, social relations, and locations in their lived experiences. While it may be clear that "where" one is will determine their education, Black geography expands this claim to consider how where one is also reflects "who" one is. Thus, people are viewed through the places they are in and places are understood through the people who are in them. These understandings are always filtered through power dynamics like race, class, and gender.

Documenting a Black sense of place and place-making across three sites –the Heights neighborhood, Twinsburg schools, and local colleges –was critical to my study. The geographic contexts of these sites are connected. The three sites are where Black people are thought to be placeless or out of place. Poor Black communities are thought to be non-valuable locations and, instead, only spaces of chaos and criminality.[29] Black children in schools are thought to be out of place because "they don't care about their education."[30] Black adults in colleges are thought to be in the wrong place, often assumed to be trespassers before students.[31] This study speaks against placelessness as a "colonial fiction." In locating Black people's place-making across each site, our life-making tactics also become known. I am invested in how Black people valuing Black life reimagines places and their function—be it the suburb, systems of schooling, or society.

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In sum, McKittrick's theory of a Black sense of place challenges "traditional geography" which make place seem like it "just is."[32] Likewise, I challenge traditional education work that normalizes meritocracy, which allows credentials and degrees to decide life chances. Often traditional and even critical scholars can privilege the way society is over the way it should be for human needs to be met. In traditional education, the rules of meritocracy seem unchangeable, and white-dominated perspectives serve to marginalize views that disrupt investments in the status quo. Data and figures become the only so-called "data driven" facts that are valued in decision-making. All notions of collectively are erased so Black places are imagined as disconnected spaces and Black people's academic (under)achievement is strictly individualistic.

The achievement "gap" between Black students and their white peers becomes a natural hole or chasm rather than human-made. Even traditional ideas about where useful geographies and educational contexts can exist are often fixed to certain locations—affluent neighborhoods and suburban schools. Poor and Black places are deemed not productive and, therefore, not of geographic significance. Knowledge from alternative sites like Black families, neighborhoods, or culture is not valued, thus not included in schooling.[33] The devaluing of Black places and knowledges allows for dehumanization and legitimizes the different methods of control. Primarily, the fields of geography and education intertwine in the discourse around "education pathways"—the belief that there are opportunity-filled pathways for students to move along from P-20 schools and beyond if they make the right choices. This pathway is an ideological geography with material consequences in education spaces. Education as an assumed pathway to social mobility is the commonsense belief I hope this project disrupts.

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Notes on Anti-Blackness

Many people already understand racism as being against Black people in one's words and actions. This is a common definition of racism taught in U.S. society; as a result, the injustice of racism is thought only as an individual bias: fix the individual, fix racism. However, racism is more complicated than this individualized definition, and solutions must be more dynamic than changing hearts and minds. Stating explicitly how I understand and study racism is necessary in a society where the term has many definitions, manifestations, and silences.

Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues that "racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[34] In other words, racism operates through formal state-based channels as well as informal processes that are extralegal or so permissible that even laws do not govern them (e.g. continued school segregation despite it being outlawed in 1954). Racism involves individuals but is defined and consequential due to the ways interlocked systems create exploitation and vulnerability that sentences groups viewed as different to premature deaths. The production of these oppressive relations and systems occurs through racial capitalism—the structural ways in which profit is exploited from groups rendered different through race and other intersecting power dynamics. These groups are not just Black people. In history, for example, it has also been Italian and Irish immigrants; even though now they are viewed as white. Currently, Latinx, Native, and Asian people of color also experience systemic racism. These groups make evident that racism is not solely a difference of skin color. There are ever-changing and interlocking ways to make groups different and vulnerable. [35]

In my definition of racism, I follow McKittrick who borrows heavily from Gilmore and Sylvia Wynter in my focus on anti-Blackness as a unique form of racism. Wynter states "it was

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to be the figure of the Negro (i.e., the category comprised by all peoples of Black African hereditary descent) that it was to place at the nadir of its Chain of Being; that is, on a rung of the ladder lower than that of all human."[36] Thus, a study of anti-Blackness means documenting how Black people are defined outside of human, a social construct, and any rights that status may bestow. Further, a focus must also remain on how racial capitalism exploits Black people existing in the category of unhuman through race, class, gender, and sexuality power dynamics. At times, anti-Blackness is about setting up profit-making schemes off the bodies of Black people and their inhabited geographies through rendering us unhuman and placeless. In other situations, as a friend of mine put it, "white people will starve just so Black people don't eat." Protecting white supremacy becomes more important than creating policies and practices that would benefit everyone. Anti-Blackness functions in dynamic and context-specific ways. Still no critical story about Black people can be told without naming anti-Blackness and then refusing to give it absolute power. McKittrick reminds scholars that even in sites of anti-Blackness, Black people navigate the "crevices of power" and "the last place thought of" to provide alternative notions of being human and creating place. The ways Black people navigate power in the Heights and systems of schooling are the most important lessons from this study.

Outline

I had three main goals for this project. First, I aimed to document how the Heights is a Black sense of place and an example of what it means to value Black life. Second, I worked to expose the myth of education opportunity and how it hides and normalizes the racist development and inequality that Heights residents endure. Third, I propose ways forward that privilege Black people as valuable regardless of what degrees they do or do not earn.

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The organization of this book moves the reader through scholarship on education opportunity, locating a Black sense of place in the Heights, schooling experiences in high school and college, and possibility-filled futures. Chapter One provides a history of the geographic development of the Heights neighborhood and the role of different agents like school leaders and elected officials. This chapter also discusses the collective role of marginalized Black residents in developing the Heights community. The Heights residents' struggles to create and sustain their neighborhood against geographic domination provided the context in which education pathways were built. Focusing further on the struggles of Heights residents, Chapters Three and Four show how Heights residents navigate the Twinsburg City School district under a race- and place-based stigma. The contestation between Heights students and school leaders over place provides key insights into understanding student achievement and education opportunity at the K-12 level.

In Chapter Five, residents' post-high school pathways, mainly to college, are documented from the application process to on-campus experiences. Here, the symbolic and built geography surrounding the Heights is connected to residents' college opportunity and outcomes. Chapter Six discusses residents' life trajectories after college, with or without a degree, in local labor markets, the Heights neighborhood, and with student loan debt. Chapter Seven provides recommendations on how to connect education to place and place to education to strengthen Black people's education pathways. Further, the chapter discussed how freedom requires more than a degree. In conclusion, I center what is *necessary* for Black lives and communities to matter rather than solely what is *pragmatic,* from the perspectives of the residents.

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If we can't drive, we will invent walks and the world will envy the dexterity of our feet. If we can't have ham, we will boil chitterlings; if we are given rotten peaches, we will make cobblers; if given scraps, we will make quilts; take away our drums, and we will clap our hands. We prove the human spirit will prevail. We will take what we have to make what we need. We need confidence in our knowledge of who we are.[1]

—Nikki Giovanni

Chapter 2 — Twinsburg Heights — A Black Sense of Place

Present-day education pathways in the Heights cannot be understood outside of history. An education pathway increasingly is defined as P-20, meaning the places—K-12, college, and labor market—people should move through to find mobility and opportunity. Yet, these places do not exist disconnected from each other or their local contexts. Each place along the imagined education pathway is built within a local geography. Without history, one can only say what that local geography is but cannot say how it came to be. The geographic history of a place, in this case Twinsburg Heights, shows the beliefs and ideas that drive the decisions which determine how a place emerges and re-emerges. Together, a historical and contemporary understanding of a local geography reveals the constant process of place-making through power, policies, and contestation.

Tracing how a neighborhood, town, or city came to be often leads to tracing how systems of schooling came to be because both are deeply connected. Since the beginning of the United States, schools and residential places have been built alongside each other or acted as reproducing forces for one another. In early U.S. colonies, the college was among the most prized institutions, like the church, and viewed as the authority on knowledge and future development. Even today, neighborhoods market themselves as up and coming (read: white and affluent) through building new well-resourced and exclusive K-12 schools. Institutions of schooling have a long history of serving as legitimizing systems for and within residential

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places.[2] Thus, a geographic history can explain both the how and why behind the development of neighborhoods and education pathways.

In the case of the Heights, I present its historical beginning with the founding of Twinsburg and its first school in the 19th century to show how anti-Blackness existed well before the Black Heights neighborhood formed. Then, I explain the Heights' early beginnings in the 1920s to demonstrate how a Black community disrupted Twinsburg's identity as a white place. Next, I trace the constant contestation, in the latter 20th century, between the Heights and white Twinsburg through the key role that local schools had in development. Heights residents' political strategies are documented to show how education was connected to and treated as an issue of (under)development. Likewise, residents' success in controlling development creates openings for the expansion of low-income Black people's ability to live in the neighborhood and access the Twinsburg school district. Lastly, I explain the neighborhood's present-day geography and contestation and what it means for education pathways. Heights residents' struggle to have a Black sense of place within a geography of domination provides lessons on both building and enduring power. Schools were not an escape from this geographic history but sites of extension and reproduction.

"They Hated Us Before We Were Ever Here" (1817-1865)

Twinsburg (originally spelled Twinsburgh) was the last area settled in 1817 in what is known today as Summit County, Ohio. Much of the documented early history of Twinsburg comes from a book published on the centennial anniversary of the town.[3] The area that would be named Twinsburg was found, not discovered, through following "[natural] water courses and old Indian trails."[4] Ethan Alling first bought about 400 acres of the land and named it Millsville. Aaron and Moses Wilcox of Connecticut bought about 4,000 acres of nearby land from the

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Connecticut Land Company and convinced the Millsville settlers to merge under the title Twinsburg. The Wilcox brothers named the settlement Twinsburg because they were twins. [5]

The settling of Twinsburg was not happenstance. Alling and the Wilcox twins were a part of the settler colonial movement following the American Revolution, in which the U.S. government displaced Native Americans to sell land to white settlers. The state of Connecticut turned over ownership of 120 miles of land in Northeast Ohio to the Connecticut Land Company. This area of land was called the Western Reserve. Here was an early example of how racial capitalism was driven by both private companies and the government to develop land through displacing people, in this case Native Americans, marked as non-human. Schools were at the heart of this development plan because the $1.2 million in profit from selling Native Americans' land was sent back to Connecticut to fund public schools.[6]

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that the settler colonial movement occurring at the same time as chattel slavery created relations based on a "settler-native-slave triad."[7] In this era, to settle was to be white, to be dispossessed and erased was to be Native, and to work as free labor was to be Black. For white settlers to assert that they were the only ones who could own land, they had to make other groups "landless."[8] For Native Americans, the U.S. government and its white citizens led a deadly and cultural, although incomplete, genocide against them. This genocide involved the violent killing of Native Americans but also the epistemological violence or destruction of Native peoples' knowledge and ways of knowing. This epistemic violence occurred often in boarding schools where Native people were coerced into schooling institutions to be educated into whiteness—away from indigeneity.[9] For Black enslaved people, their landless status was legalized when U.S. law labeled them as property. Black people were the tools that could labor on the land, but not own it.[10]

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The racial violence—direct, epistemological, and geographic—employed against Native people matters in the study of anti-Blackness in schools. Arguably, Natives were the first group to endure how U.S. systems of schooling educate people marked as inferior. Education opportunity was presented to the group as the only way to become a white-defined person or human. This early education violence goes on to resemble, though not twin, the systemic violence Black people later faced upon entry into U.S. systems of schooling. Schools extended and reproduced the racial logics Tuck and Yang define: "The settler positions himself as both superior and normal; the settler is natural, whereas the Indigenous inhabitant and the chattel slave are unnatural, even supernatural."[11]

Schools helped to normalize this settler-native-slave triad. The Wilcox twins convinced the Millsville settlement to become Twinsburg through promising land, but also promising two main institutions of development: a church and school.[12] These two institutions helped white settlers, in a place like Twinsburg, not only define themselves but also mark who they were not. White settlers were humans who were landowners, Christians, and relied on rationale. They were not Black or Native, people who were the other without property, religion, or reason (education).[13] As such, the first prominent building in town, built in 1831, served both as a church and a school called the Twinsburg Institute. Reverend Samuel Bissell, a key leader, operated Twinsburg Institute as a boarding school. The school-church partnership dominated early U.S education because together these institutions were thought to sort who was moral, human, and valuable and sort out who was not.[14] It is estimated that the Twinsburg Institute educated thousands of people from the Midwest, hundreds of whom were Native American students.[15] Reverend Bissell expressed his views and experiences on teaching Native Americans at his boarding school: "Our doors were open to them [Natives], feeling that we were under the

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strongest obligation to help a poor neglected and injured people…Others followed these from seven different tribes, east and west, until the whole number reached over two hundred. Most of them remained, on an average, at least a year. All boarded…with books and stationery."[16]

Here was an early example of how white educators rhetorically employed education as providing help to "injured people" without acknowledging how said people became injured. Furthermore, schooling was positioned as the ultimate assistance for oppressed people rather than addressing or challenging how Twinsburg's settler colonial project inflicted injury and death. Education as a pathway or opportunity to uplift injured people in Twinsburg was established early, reflecting a pervasive 19th century ideology in U.S. society. According to this ideological premise, Natives were offered a limited version of personhood if they submitted to cultural annihilation and white-designed knowledge systems. In the era of slavery, this was not an option for Black people. The goal was not to erase them through assimilation but continuously reproduce Black people as a free labor force.

While Twinsburg was a white-dominated geography, there was at least one Black person there since the beginning. The first Black person is only referenced as "the colored boy" or "Tone, the colored boy" in the history section of the Twinsburg centennial book.[17] Although he lived with the original Millsville settlers before the founding of Twinsburg and the Institute, he was never listed as a student. He was only cited as an unpaid janitor next to the names of white paid janitors and students in Reverend Bissell's church/school.[18] Despite Tone living into adulthood, the references to him only as a "colored boy" in the centennial book written over one hundred years after his death makes his position in the town clear. He was the other—imagined as a child incapable of adulthood but capable of free labor.

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To be sure, Native Americans and the first Black person, Tone, were barely in the Twinsburg archives. Twinsburg's white sense of place cannot bear the reality that these marginalized stories tell. Yet, the subtle presence of those marked "other" still reflects the subtle ways in which anti-Blackness and settler colonialism worked in a place like Twinsburg. A town that imagined itself as separate from Southern slavery or "injury" of Natives. In fact, it was the sites described as progressive, the church and school, that captured the uneven power dynamics governing the town. These sites foreshadowed and reproduced relations in which white settlers led a racial project that continuously defined Black people as other than human. These settler-native-slave logics never only marked non-humanness but also utilized changing methods of control: assimilation, exploitation, displacement, neglect, and murder. These logics positioned Black people as not human and, therefore, placeless; their relationship to land was only to work it for white people's profit. Yet, it was not land that Black people first were excluded from owning; it was their body.

Through this exclusion, the category of human was constructed.[19] For Black and Native people to own themselves or be within the human construct was unimaginable, illegal, and violently opposed. Institutions of schooling reproduced these logics that denied "injured people" self-definition and self-determination. While the rest of this chapter focuses on the contested development of the Heights community, it is important to remember that Twinsburg's adoption of racial logics began well before Black people disruptively moved into the town. As I said to myself in the archives, "they hated us before we were ever here."

Black as Human, Heights as Home (1920-1954)

For the next 110 years, all of Twinsburg was united under a township designation, a unity that was more than living in the same town but also being people who were read as white. This

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white-only unity was threatened, however, when farmland was turned into a settlement for a "negro community" in 1927.[20] Charles H. Brady and his father bought farmland, surveyed it into lots and became the first white person in Twinsburg to allow and encourage Black people to purchase land on a large scale. The neighborhood was called Twinsburg Heights.[21]

Brady's benevolence was debated among community members who were children in the first families to move to the Heights area. Some believed that Brady initially called the neighborhood the Heights and named the first streets after elite colleges such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Yale to attract prospective white land- and homeowners. The area's position on a hill with swampy lands, however, deterred white people from moving there. In contrast, the possibility of owning land, building a home, and escaping Jim Crow oppression made Twinsburg Heights attractive to Black people.[22] Like the maroons before them, unwanted land allowed Black people to avoid unwanted racism. Furthermore, Brady offered the land for $50 down and $10 a month.[23] This offer came at the height of the Great Depression (1928-1942) when the South's agriculture industry plummeted, and the North's industrial workforce declined by millions of jobs.[24] No group felt the Great Depression harder than Black people. As many labor historians have noted, Black people were the last hired and first fired well before the Depression. In this era, New Deal legislation that provided economic relief to people through employment protection, job programs, and retirement benefits largely excluded Black people.[25] The economic crisis in the rural South and the urban North caused the Black founding families of Twinsburg Heights to move into Twinsburg and build a community of their own.

The Heights was a destination for families leaving the South. They learned about the community from advertisements in local newspapers and word of mouth. The Peeks moved from Georgia. The Exums came from Mississippi. The Daniels moved from South Carolina. Both the

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Lardells and Brandons came from Alabama.[26] The move to the Heights was not just out of necessity, it was a hopeful choice. Catherine Lardell said, "my family moved up North and my siblings settled in Twinsburg, but I settled in Oakwood, OH. Once I visited Twinsburg, I loved it sooo much, we moved to the Heights that same year."[27] Constance Longmire, the youngest of 12 siblings in the Peek family, explained that her parents left the South when local whites threatened them for owning their own business. She said, "My father just bought a new Ford truck and received a cow that was a wedding gift. He sold both of those, packed up the family, and moved North."[28]

Further, Twinsburg Heights was also a haven for Black families that first settled in Cleveland and Akron during the Great Migration that spanned from 1920 to 1970.[29] Black people were moving to find better racial and economic opportunities well before the Great Depression. Living in urban geographies like Cleveland meant living with Jim Crow of a different kind. Madeline Carter who moved to the Heights in 1938 said, "people moved here [the Heights] for freedom and autonomy. Cleveland had boundaries that confined Black people to certain neighborhoods and within those neighborhoods a house could be converted into apartments for 3 to 4 families."[30] Historian Isabel Wilkerson documents the racist policies that concentrated Great Migrators into urban ghettos where they faced mass unemployment, inhumane living conditions, and racial violence.[31] When a reporter from the Akron Beacon Journal interviewed Juet Daniels, at 75 years old, on why she first moved to the community in 1944, the reporter wrote, "When she found out that country homes were available in the township she begged her husband to move out of Cleveland. Daniels said, 'I prayed we could go there. I wanted a garden. The place was so green then, it looked like a pasture.' "[32] Similarly, Christine Golden, known affectionately as Goldie, at the age of 91, told a reporter from the

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(Cleveland) Plain Dealer, "When I came out here [the Heights], there was nothing. We were staying in Cleveland. They were talking about a settlement."[33] Goldie continued to say that the Black settlement was growing because people were attracted to the Heights' first Black church known today as Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church. [34]

The Heights became a symbol of freedom. Madeline Carter explained freedom as, "what you put up was yours, your palace. It didn't always look like a palace, but it was yours."[35] The homes in the Heights were built with whatever a person or family had. Some homes were built on a side of a car, others out of plywood, and many with only one room. The roads were unpaved and there was only one way into the community going up a hill. This meant that when it rained, no car could pass. Elderly residents recalled having to park their cars at the bottom of the hill and trek through mud up past their ankles to carry groceries or roll wheelbarrows of coal to their homes.[36] Still, the opportunity for a better life, self-determination, and landownership attracted Black families to move to the Heights. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the Heights quickly developed with dirt streets, a church on almost every street, self-built homes ranging in quality, and several businesses. With almost no development before Black people settled there, a close-knit community was created to survive.

However, as longtime resident Hubert Brandon described, "many Black families fled the South to escape Jim Crow, not realizing it had made its way North too."[37] The Heights lacked essential public services—water, sewage, and electricity—despite these utilities being available to Twinsburg's white population by that time. Heights residents had to dig wells, use outhouses, and create coal fires to light and heat their homes. Furthermore, isolation did not mean complete freedom from white racial terrorism. Resident Lushion "Luke" White remembered white people in Twinsburg sitting at the bottom of the hill in the Heights shooting at Black people's cars with

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shotguns. Edwin Battle, who was the first Black trustee, recalled, “When I first moved up here in 1929, there were two or three crosses burning at the end of Cambridge St.”[38] White also said, “the Old-Timers often described a movement among the white people in Twinsburg to move Black people from the Heights.”[39] Although isolated on the margins of Twinsburg, the Heights was central to Twinsburg defining itself by what it was not. Twinsburg was not thought to be poor, crime-filled, or stagnate—all of which were characteristics that the local government and white residents believed Black people and, therefore, the Heights symbolized. Before the Heights community formed, Twinsburg, in 1920, already transitioned from neighborhood schools to one unified school. The school, Twinsburg Elementary, was the only public education institution in Twinsburg from 1920 to 1957.[40] Local residents in all of Twinsburg attended Twinsburg Elementary through high school. This meant that Black children from the Heights had access to a racially integrated school district before any legal mandate.

At the same time, the school became the site where Black children learned that integration did not mean the absence of racism. Since Black residents in Twinsburg were segregated into the Heights, the schools became the main site where Black people interacted with white people. In the oral history documentary, many Black residents shared childhood stories of white students degrading them for their Black physical features, their type of clothes, or being from “the bad place” in Twinsburg. Nonetheless, when elderly Heights residents reflected on their schooling experiences, they seemed unbothered by racism –it was not the main way they understood their lives in Twinsburg. Another early Black township trustee, John Curry explained that “you had to ignore [it] and adapt.” The school was a place where racist logics manifested but it also was a site where Black residents practiced collective affirmation. In the documentary, the Daniels siblings who attended Twinsburg schools in the 1940s and 1950s commented on how

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Heights children "stuck together" as the only Black students in the school. A sibling remembered that if, "you felt bad about your lunch brought from home, you just could look down the table and see other [Black kids] with the same food."[41] Twinsburg's racist logics and actions did not only manifest in interactions. At the institutional level, there was also the banning of Black athletes from sports teams, academic tracking, and the all-white school staff.[42] In Twinsburg, the school reproduced the hierarchal reminder of white as human and Black as other.

Ironically, the Heights and its Black children were often presented as full members of Twinsburg when presenting the school district publicly as racially integrated. A real estate agent advertising Twinsburg demonstrated the strategic use of integration in her 1954 article in the local newspaper. The agent wrote, "A private water company has served [Twinsburg] ever since 1912, and the county put in sewers that same year." In the next sentence, she wrote, "Our school has done a superb job of integrating Negro children attending from Twinsburg Heights."[43] When describing Twinsburg, the agent was speaking exclusively of the white community that had been serviced by the Wilcox Water Company for the last 42 years.[44] Twinsburg Heights, in existence for nearly three decades at that time, still was denied access to water and sewage. Black people, however, were strategically imagined as a part of developed Twinsburg in discussions of schools. Black people's presence was cited/sited only to show that the town and school were racially progressive. The reality of the Heights was erased from the record to hide how the town was racially oppressive in denying Black people's human needs.

The dynamic racism of Twinsburg, however, did not end Black life-making. Black people forged a type of autonomy over who they were and what type of place they had created. Black people's place-making was a form of life-making not unique to the Heights neighborhood. Sociologist Andrew Weise documents how Black suburban-rural communities in Northeast Ohio

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like the Heights created networks with each other through links such as church choirs and intercommunity baseball leagues.[45] In the Heights, the baseball team was called the Twinsburg All-Stars and they traveled to other towns such as Chagrin Falls and Ravenna.[46] Across Northeast Ohio, Black people disrupted domination through forming a Black sense of place.

If U.S. society declared on a systemic level that Black life had no human value, then the human value Black people in the Heights understood and created was different. The strategy of mobility guided runaway slaves, the Great Migrators to cities, and now Black people moving to the Heights. Black people moved, uprooted their whole lives, because they valued in their humanity. The new destinations became an opportunity to make a place that affirmed Black humanity.

In the Heights, this was critical because once Black people left their home and crossed into white Twinsburg to shop at the store, to send mail at the post office, or to learn in the school, they were considered out of place and not in full personhood. For Heights residents, a sense of place rooted them in a sense of self as they navigated sites of marginalization. This Black-created way of being human is what Wynter and McKittrick center as a source of anti-racist logics and freedom.[47] Practices of Black humanity in the Heights asserted that Black life had value, Black place-making was significant, and collective life-making was a necessity. For years to come, the Heights privileged preserving their Black sense of place above calls for an integrated Twinsburg. The community's battles with white Twinsburg proved that the only inclusion sought was one that included how Black people in the Heights sustained and affirmed Black life.

Twinsburg Schools — Agents of Racist Development (1955-1973)

In 1955, Twinsburg Township was provided an opportunity to grow its revenue, population, and status as a major locality in Summit County. The opportunity came when

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Twinsburg won the bid for the Chrysler Corporation to build the world's largest stamping plant in the area.[48] Even before Chrysler, Twinsburg was in an in–between state. Most white residents were referring to and conducting themselves as a village set apart from the Heights, although all of Twinsburg was still legally a township. The split emerged informally–the two areas of Twinsburg shared public services, paid taxes to each other, voted at times in separate and joint elections, and attended the same school district.[49] The prospect of the new Chrysler plant, however, solidified the split. Most of the white population in Twinsburg incorporated itself into Twinsburg Village in 1955. The 1950 census on the village estimated 880 residents.[50] Twinsburg Township became a predominately Black locality with most residents living in the Heights community (400 families) and scattered white-owned farms comprised the rest of the township.[51] The village's government became a mayor and council, and the township remained governed by a board of three trustees –all elected officials were white men. Heights residents repeatedly described the spilt as a racist decision and a major attempt to "kill off" the Black community.[52]

During this era, Chrysler was the primary driver of Twinsburg's growth as a village and eventually into a city. The Twinsburg Village incorporation occurred because the new designation legally allowed the locality to collect income tax revenue, which a township cannot do. Further, Chrysler chose Twinsburg with the expectation that it would only have to pay taxes to one entity, the Village.

The plan to bring Chrysler to Twinsburg Village through the exclusion of the Heights community was not just a local decision. A manufacturing plant of this magnitude was only possible through coordination and collaboration across local, state, and federal governments and private industry. This collaboration was evident at the 1956 ground breaking ceremony for the plant where over 500 politicians and business leaders were present, including the Ohio Governor

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Frank Lausche.[53] The racial exclusion was even more evident in the fact that the plant was built on 200 acres of land that bordered the Heights community.

Chrysler changed the whole economic ecosystem of Twinsburg and the region except for the community it was closest to: The Heights. In the summer of 1957, a plant that was 1.5 million square feet, 226,000 tons of steel, and that cost over $85 million was built.[54] The Plain Dealer reported in 1957 that 19 cities and over 13,000 Ohio firms received contracts and revenue from the construction of the Chrysler plant.[55] To accommodate such a large plant, railroad tracks were extended from Chrysler to surrounding cities, new roads were built for expected traffic, and the local telephone company converted to automatic dial.[56] Most impactful, Chrysler modernized local water and sewage systems. A water line was built and ran across two neighboring towns and into Chrysler's 50 miles of waterlines and 1.5-million-gallon water storage system.[57] The water line for Chrysler was built underneath the Heights community. In addition, a sewage treatment plant was built in Twinsburg Village, only a few miles from the neighborhood, and its lines ran on the border of the neighborhood. Soon after, another water line was built through the Heights, but this time to service Twinsburg Village (see Figure 1). To install these lines, Heights residents' front lawns and streets had to be dug up, but they were not permitted to tap into the lines for water and sewage. [58]

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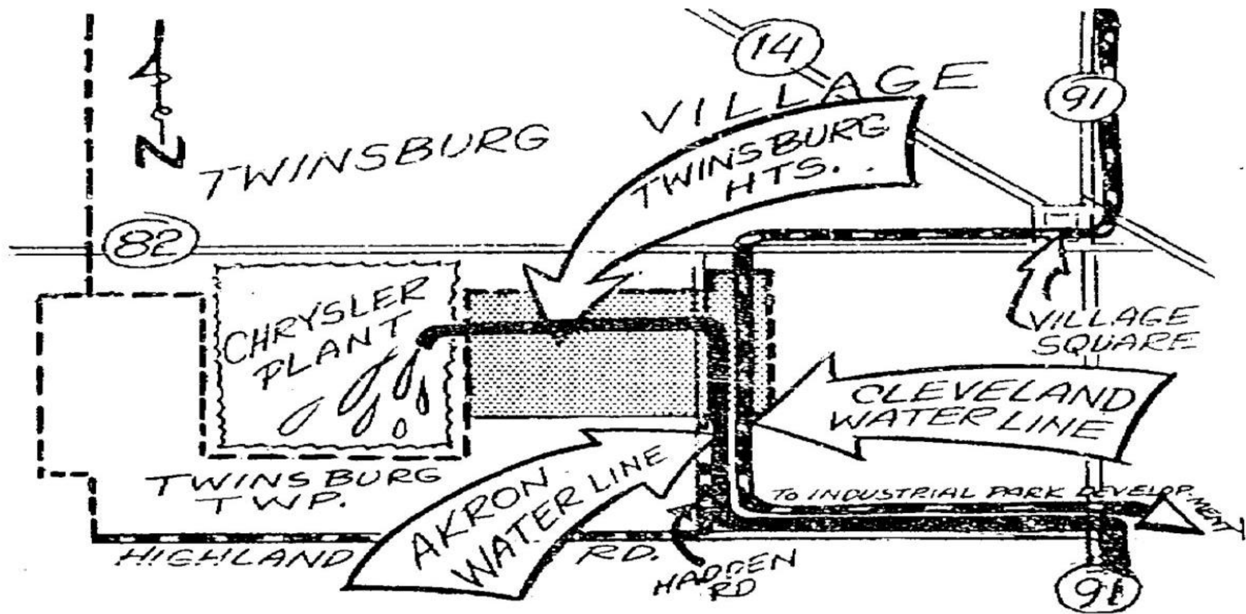

Figure 2.1. The Akron and Cleveland waterlines that were built in the Heights, but neighborhood residents could not tap into them. Source: The Plain Dealer, "Twinsburg Hts. Frustration: Sanitation," 1964.

From 1956 to 1966, Twinsburg Village's budget grew from $3.85 million to $46 million.[59] In contrast, the Heights neighborhood received no economic investment. While the Heights pooled resources and built community networks of support based on human needs, Twinsburg Village in partnership with Chrysler, state and federal governments, and surrounding towns inhumanely cut the Black neighborhood off from water, sewage, and modern development. Exclusion from public services already existed since the founding of the Heights but continued for over 30 years despite water and sewage lines underneath and on the borders of the community. The humanity created in the Heights was different than what existed for white people in Twinsburg and larger society. The category of human and citizen created for white people in Twinsburg always already excluded Black people by design. For Twinsburg Village leaders and residents, Heights residents' exclusion from human needs seemed commonsense.

Moreover, the Twinsburg school district was a government institution at the center of the Chrysler plant negotiations. Again, schools and their leaders were not just tools in development

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but active participants. Consultation from the Twinsburg school district was needed for two primary reasons. First, the plant greatly increased the population of the village. Chrysler at its peak would employ over 4,000 people; but in 1955, Twinsburg Village had a population of only around 900. As a result, the first suburban home development, Glenwood Acres, was quickly built in Twinsburg to accommodate the estimated immediate population increase to 2,200. Second, the school district was concerned with the expected tax revenue growth. Chrysler and Glenwood were estimated to produce $25 million and $1.5 million in revenue, respectively; however, these tax revenues would not be available until 1959.[60] This placed pressure on the school district to educate a growing student population without increased funds.

Some residents already felt that local levies were too high and for years placed the blame on Heights residents. One letter to the editor cited how when the local newspaper published properties with delinquent taxes most were in the Heights area.[61] The critique of the Heights community as a burden on the school district ignored how the neighborhood received few social services, nearly no investment, and faced intense local job discrimination. There was little incentive or possibilities for residents to pay taxes due to exclusion from employment and livable wages. Twinsburg's debates on the future of the school centered only on its growing population of white students. There was no documented discussion related to the already present Black student population.

The property and income tax revenues from Chrysler alone would comprise 72 percent of Twinsburg Village's budget at its peak.[62] This meant that the school district—a tax collecting entity—received a large part of its revenue from the plant. As a result, from 1957 to 1970, Twinsburg school district grew from one school, Twinsburg Elementary (presently known as the Old School) to five schools: Chamberlin High School (1957), Wilcox Elementary (1959), Bissell

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Elementary (1964), and Dodge Junior High (1970).[63] Every new school was given the last name of a prominent white family that originally settled Twinsburg—manifestations of the original white settler dream.

The school district and its leaders had strong stances on building new schools, population growth, and village levies, but remained silent on its whole Black student body being excluded from the development that Chrysler ushered in. The schools and Twinsburg Village did, however, show off its long history of racial integration. The local newspaper often presented pictures that showed Black and white children together in the classroom (see Figure 2). These frequent photos in the local newspapers, like the previous real estate agent's article, reflected Twinsburg's attempt to seem racially progressive through integration. Throughout the country, integrated schools became the measure of racial progress rather than an integrated society. This was a consequence of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision.[64] In Twinsburg, the tactic was to highlight integration in the classroom while ignoring anti-Black segregation and abandonment beyond school walls.

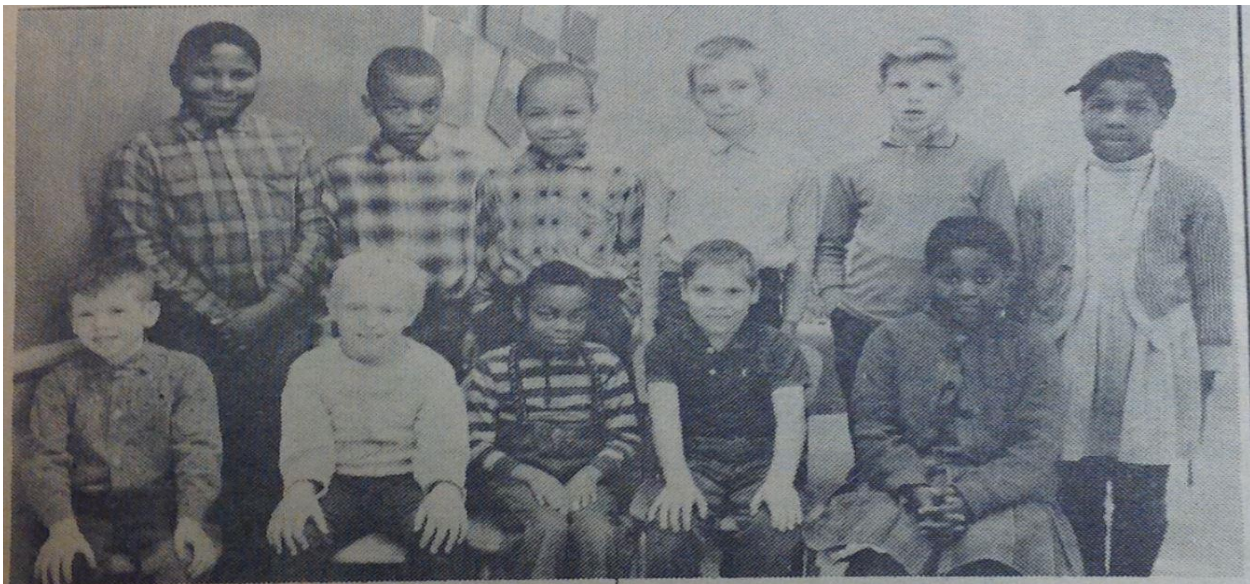

Figure 2.2. Example of interracial classroom photos often featured in local Twinsburg newspapers. Source: *The Bulletin*, February 16, 1966.

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The Heights Political Network

During this era, the Heights residents refused to settle for white Twinsburg's limited definition of racial progress and, instead, developed a strong sense of self and sense of place that laid a foundation for an active political network. Before Chrysler even opened, Heights residents organized. The six churches in the community, one on almost every street, served as spiritual, political, and joy-filled spaces. Through the churches, community members built communal networks and collective actions. One primary example was The Mothers' Club, which was comprised of church-going women in the community who sought to organize both recreational activities for youth and coalitions to seek community improvements. From the Mothers' Club came the Twinsburg Heights Recreation Center Club, which broke ground on October 3, 1950. The club designation allowed Mrs. Juanita "Madam Senora" Mix and Mr. Albert Mix to donate over three acres of land "that was not to be rented or sold but used for the sole purpose of the club." Heights residents served as the founding officers for the club and established a board of advisors comprised of both community members and outside volunteers from nearby towns. Returning home from work, Heights residents, men and women, worked and laid the foundation brick by brick for the first structure on the property. Additional funding, supplies, and labor for the club all came from donations and volunteers.

The club quickly became a cornerstone of the community. It was the social and political headquarters for the Black residents. By 1965, the club became the Twinsburg Heights Community Center (THCC). The building transformed from a structure that operated mainly in the warmer months to a $21,260 building with electricity, heating, and running water that remained open year-round. Community members again labored to build this structure, which became a beacon of the modern development the neighborhood aspired to. The community center's leadership built

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basketball courts that became a primary hangout site for neighborhood youth and hosted "coffee hours" where poems, music, and dancing were shared. THCC also offered social programs including a food pantry, youth and adult education, home improvement assistance, job placement, and healthcare services.[65]

In the Heights, the primary strategy for racial progress was an organized struggle for a better future while at the same time finding joy. Social sites mattered in forming the Heights' Black sense of place. These sites allowed Black people to have moments outside of worry. In these spaces, they were not worried about white racism nor worried about how the bills were going to get paid. The affirming joy in the Heights allowed Black people to live in their self-defined humanity and their self-created place. As Hubert Brandon said, the Heights was a place where "Black people could just be human."[66]

Within the Heights, moments of joy and social sites sometimes led to political action.[67] For example, community organizer Luke White described how the center's political work formed from its role in organizing the neighborhood's baseball league.[68] Activities like sports, coffee hours, and church services allowed the community to understand what youth and families were collectively experiencing. Residents' lived experiences then transformed into organizing knowledge and strategies. I refer to the community's political organizing as the Heights political network.

The Heights political network framed education issues through how they intersected with other problems in the neighborhood. Gene Beer, THCC Coordinator in 1967, said, "our greatest hope is our educational programs" focused on the Heights youth. Beer connected this hope to the need "to develop good housing conditions and a better area for residents to live in."[69] The Heights was a Black community intentionally underdeveloped by white-owned industry and

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white-controlled governments in the Twinsburg Township and Twinsburg Village.[70] For the residents, there could be no real progress in education without addressing racist development. Along these lines, the Heights political network advocated for investment and redress for the community at the local, state, and federal government levels.

The Heights residents did not accept the false hope or promise that education alone could uplift their Black community. Residents in the political network understood that if Twinsburg Village devalued Black personhood, allowed Heights homes to deteriorate, excluded parents from livable wages, and denied them access to water and sewage, then schools also were no sanctuary for Black children. Likewise, integration was not viewed as a silver bullet. The community repeatedly voted down merging with wider Twinsburg; residents argued that a merger was one of many tactics to displace the neighborhood. Residents often cited mistreatment in the schools as evidence for why a merger could not be trusted.[71] This argument formed part of a larger campaign around what I will discuss later as the political network's community development strategies. It is critical to note that while the Heights was all Black, the residents had a range of perspectives on what was the best way to move forward. Scholar-activist Loretta Ross argues, "When people think many different ideas and move in the same direction, that's a movement."[72] The movement in the Heights had factions but moved towards addressing the following issues: water and sewage, home construction and improvements, road improvements, and support for adult and youth education.[73]

The Heights political network was comprised of formal committees and community groups, established in the 1950s and 60s (See Figure 3). The Community Action committee focused on understanding President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 "Poverty Bill" or the Economic Opportunity Act.[74] The committee sent delegations of residents, along with letters, to meet with

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county, state and federal officials on what aid was available for the Heights.[75] The Community Council, led mainly by the women of community, focused on what the community could do to support itself. The council employed a self-help philosophy that focused on residents cleaning up their yards and painting their homes. The council also organized women in the community to lead voter registration drives, job placement support, and "share updates on community improvements (or lack thereof)."[76] The Health and Welfare committee promoted healthy habits and organized health clinics that focused on the multiple sanitation issues in the Heights due to a lack of sewage. This committee also focused on educating mothers on infants' health and providing free transportation to "baby clinics."[77] The several churches in the neighborhood frequently planned dinners and cookouts for residents—a welcomed relief as many lived below the poverty line.[78]

The political network also conducted research, which I refer to as the Research and Reporting Team, which created and self-administered multiple surveys to understand residents' views and circumstances related to water and sewage, merging with Twinsburg Village, and other neighborhood issues. In addition, delegations of residents were sent to conduct research. The delegations visited and interviewed local and federal politicians and government officials. Further, they attended meetings like The National Conference of the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers to learn about government aid. The reporting team, often Amanda Vance and Joan Ford, wrote a weekly column in the Twinsburg Bulletin called Heights News. The column updated the community on survey results, responses from government officials, and upcoming community actions. The weekly column also reported a Shut-In Update. These updates were like the Sick and Shut-In lists in Black churches where the congregation was asked to pray for community members who were sick or in need of help.[79] The community's

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political network operated on multiple fronts and formed comprehensive solutions to interconnected problems in the Heights.

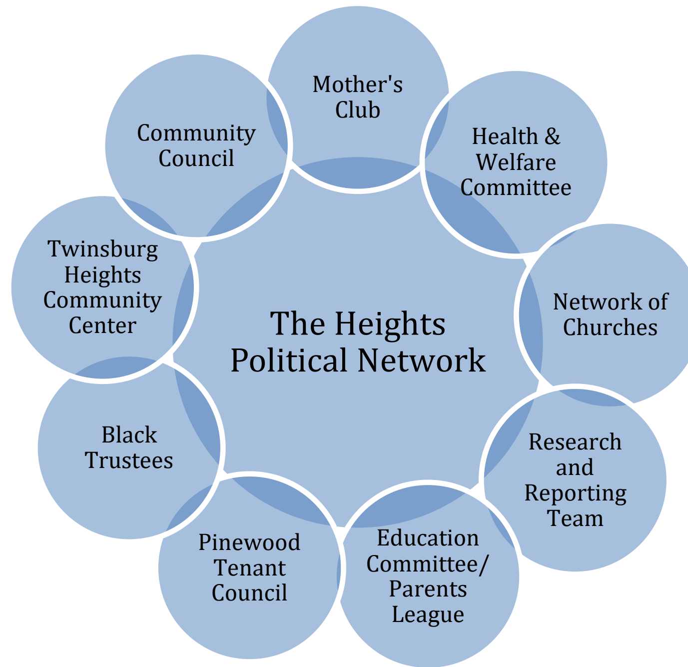

Figure 2.3 The Heights Political Network 1950s-1990s. Created by author.

The Heights political network placed special attention on the issue of education. The issue was primarily addressed through the network's Education Committee and the Parents League. In 1966, the Education Committee brought the federally-funded Head Start program to the Heights, at first only for summer sessions and then extended to full-year sessions for 30 children. (As I discuss later, Head Start becomes the first entry into schooling for most people interviewed in this project). In addition, the Committee negotiated 10 scholarships for Heights students to attend a nearby Montessori school. In 1967, the Education Committee nominated Heights resident Mary E. Sanders to run for the school board and she won. She was the first Black person to serve on a school board of education in Northeast Ohio, a position she would hold well into the 1980s.[80] The Parents League formed to address Heights students' mistreatment in the school and how Blackness was represented. The Parents League challenged the school

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district in multiple areas to contest anti-Blackness. They led school campaigns related to all-white teaching staffs, lack of “Negro History” in curriculum, racial exclusion from school activities like cheerleading, and Black students’ suspensions. The political network filled in some of these gaps through Negro History lectures in which they invited Black scholars and Civil Rights activists from around the country to give public lectures at Chamberlin High School.[81] In addition, the network recruited the first Black teacher to the district.[82] The reality was that integrated schools by law did not mean integration of education opportunity for Heights children.

Despite the 1960s ushering in the largest expansion of college access for people in U.S history, Heights youth still faced exclusion. They saw little improvement in their education opportunity despite federal legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which mandated affirmative action policies that, in turn, prompted higher education institutions to recruit more Black students. Similarly, Heights youth did not benefit much from the Higher Education Act of 1965, which established the federal financial aid system that provided massive funding for people to afford college.[83] Exclusion from college opportunity was not lost on Heights residents. Elderly Heights residents shared stories of how Twinsburg teachers often pushed or tracked them away from college—the only occupations imagined for Black people were factory and domestic workers. There were Black people from the community who were valedictorians and graduated college; but these were exceptions that did not reflect early community members’ overall experiences in Twinsburg schools.[84]

The Twinsburg schools were learning sites for anti-Blackness. In schools, Heights residents learned that they were viewed and treated unequally. Even if they could not name the structural policies of exclusion, and many could due to the political network, they experienced the reality of racism in their interactions in schools. A case in point was a new public pool built

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adjoining Chamberlin High School in the early 1960s. Heights students went to the same high school as their white peers in Twinsburg but were charged a $2 fee when white students paid $0.50. While the school was integrated, the adjoining pool was deemed only for residents of Twinsburg Village. Consequently, the Heights political network filed a case in 1964 with Ohio's Civil Rights Commission. This was the first case on racial discrimination related to a "municipal pool operation" in the state. To the relief of the Twinsburg Village community, the commission ruled against Heights residents. Edward Smolk, the Twinsburg Law Director, framed the ruling as a victory for the Village, describing it as being "completely exonerated …from the taint of discriminatory racial practices since such practices have not nor will not be engaged in by our village." He goes on to say, "the people of Twinsburg earnestly hope…the seeds of hatred and unrest be put aside."[85] This statement comes from a political leader in Twinsburg Village—a town that had excluded its only Black community from electricity, water, and sewage. In this era, Twinsburg Village repeatedly claimed to be interested in unifying with the Heights. However, it was more important to use its new revenues from Chrysler to develop a pool rather than fund the Heights tapping into its water and sewage lines. A policy decision that could have shown that the Village valued the development of the Heights community.

Even with a failed case, Heights residents were not silent on their treatment in the incident. One residents, Mr. Hawkins, said the "Heights does not need a pool…it is the principal…I personally would like someone to come forward….and help the Township get some water, sewage, and gas so we can live." Dora Smith, a Heights resident, wrote a letter to the editor in the Twinsburg Bulletin, pointing out that Heights residents already had their own pool once before, which Twinsburg Village condemned once "colored people took control."[86] In another letter to the editor, S.C. Abbey of Northfield, Ohio argues, "Chrysler

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Corporation…helped to build" the pool, and because it was a "Negro community" Twinsburg Heights was "gerrymandered out of the [economic] benefits" of Chrysler.[87] For the Heights residents, their fight was much larger than pool discrimination. The pool served as a hierarchal reminder of who has human value. Also, the pool revealed the uneven landscape of integration in the school district. Twinsburg schools served as the primary sites where the geographic domination that limited the Heights revealed itself in everyday policies and interactions. Residents like Mr. Hawkins connected the school-pool struggle to the underdevelopment of the Heights.

In response to Heights residents and supporters accusing Twinsburg Village of gerrymandering, a Twinsburg Village resident responded in his own letter to the editor: "I wouldn't attempt to evaluate gerrymandering boundary lines. Although I do know who creates ghettos, or more appropriately called slums. The people who live there and no one else."[88] This white resident evaluated the Heights as a slum— for him, the Heights was lower than even a ghetto. Like the resident, the larger community of white Twinsburg needed to render Heights residents placeless, making it appear as though they live outside of productive or valued places. The ultimate responsibility for the Heights underdevelopment was deemed belonging to Black people, not Twinsburg Village.

This explanation of why the Heights was underdeveloped reflected a Civil Rights-era discursive shift on the causes of Black poverty. It was no longer politically or socially acceptable to explicitly state that people were structurally unequal because they were "colored," "Negro," or "Black."[89] Twinsburg instead positioned the Heights as unequal and without because the residents turned their neighborhood into a "bad place." Place becomes the alibi for anti-Blackness.[90] Yet, these racist logics ignored Twinsburg Village's geographic domination that

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created the Heights into a poor community or a "bad place." More importantly, these logics marked the Heights without value—curtailing possibilities for recognizing its Black sense of place. Twinsburg re-imagined the Heights' geography as the primary reason Black people were inferior or unequal without ever having to mention race. Labeling a place bad was a racist and covert way to say that the people who inhabit that place were also bad. Because of these labels, both the place and people could be excluded, isolated, and controlled.

Repeatedly local newspapers referred to the Heights as a ghetto. Yet, Black people who lived there said it was home. In this vein, the Heights political network involved different groups of residents to engage in place-making through community development strategies. Two of the main development strategies employed by the Heights political network involved annexation. Annexation involves residents in one locality petitioning local governments or courts to move their land within the boundaries of another or new locality. In Twinsburg, white township residents often justified annexing their land into the village because the latter could offer better services such as water and sewage. Twinsburg Village often coordinated annexations to bring more land into their boundaries for residential and industrial development.[91] More land led to more development which led to more tax revenue. For years, however, the Heights was excluded from any annexation processes in Twinsburg. In fact, in 1967, the Township attempted to unify itself with Twinsburg Village while explicitly excluding the Heights.[92]

Nevertheless, residents of the Heights were able to strategically mobilize around the possibility of annexation during the rapid growth due to the Chrysler plant in the 1960s. This growth created a crisis in Twinsburg Village, which needed more land for new residents and businesses. To resolve this crisis, Twinsburg Village engaged in constant land grabs from the township. This crisis and resolution follows the pattern of uneven development that geographer

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David Harvey identifies as a key function of (racial) capitalism, which requires some places to be underdeveloped to be later developed and exploited for profit by businesses and governments in moments of economic crisis.[93]

In the case of Twinsburg, the Heights political network was able to take advantage of the constant contestation over land between white-controlled governments in the township and the village. In the first annexation strategy, the Heights lobbied to have the entire township annexed into the village only if the village committed to development instead of displacement of the Black community. With the second strategy, the Heights attempted to turn itself and surrounding land into its own village; this new status would give the Heights community control of its government to possibly tax industry within its boundaries or annex itself into the village. The first strategy failed on the voting ballot because Heights residents believed that displacement was likely to follow. Likewise, the second strategy was dismantled by the Township and Village through legal and illegal practices.[94] As a result, the Heights political network shifted to electoral politics to drive community development plans.

Following the failure of its annexation strategies, the Heights political network focused on gaining political control of the township through electing a board of majority Black trustees.[95] While Edwin Battle was the first Black trustee with wide support in the Heights community from 1962 to 1969, he served with two other white trustees during his tenure. Battle was the one to fight against the Township's infamous annexation attempt to unify all of Twinsburg except for the Heights.[96] The Heights political network organized around voting which resulted in a Black-controlled trustee board from 1970 to 1999, except for 3 years. Throughout the 1970s, Bennie Cross, Mary Banks, John Curry, William Baily, and Georgette Reed all served multi-year tenures as trustees. Battle would continue his service until 1977.[97] The Black trustees emphasized a goal

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to serve all of Twinsburg Township and collaborate with Twinsburg City (a new designation in 1969). However, the trustees provided the Heights the special attention it deserved.[98]

The Black elected officials were effective because they were members of the Heights political network. The Black trustees worked closely with community organizers like Luke White. White was often described as a Black militant in his organizing due to his critiques of Twinsburg, and his willingness to challenge anti-Blackness directly. At one point, he ran the Twinsburg Community Center with a nationally-known white militant named Reverend Wade Blank.[99] Community activists like White ensured that the movement to fund Black life in the Heights continued beyond election cycles and challenged racist policies. As a result, in 1972 the Heights political network successfully lobbied the U.S. Department of Federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and received $1.2 million in federal funding to cover 90 percent of the cost to pay for water and sewage systems in the community.[100] This victory in securing funding reflected the political network's commitment to securing a better future for Black children—the "greatest hope."

To be clear, the Heights' geographic history of uneven development—epitomized in the denial of water, sewage, electricity, and housing—matters in this study of education as a social equalizer. The story of the Collins-Price family helps to make the connections clear. Just four days after Christmas in the winter of 1965, Ruth Ann Collins, a 32-year-old mother who lived on Oxford Street, turned on the stove in her house to heat it. She lived in her small home with two sons. In the middle of the night while they were sleep, the fumes from the stove killed her, her youngest son Murthie, and placed the older son William in critical condition in the hospital. The sheriff on the scene reported that there were several houses throughout the Heights that had "faulty ventilation."[101] Without the ability to receive financing from a bank, Black residents built

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homes with whatever resources and knowledge they had. The faulty ventilation coupled with various heating methods meant that many Black families in the Heights had to gamble with their lives –risk fumes from the stove or freezing temperatures from the cold. While Ruth Collins was forced to take the first risk, Dora Jackson, a 79-year-old woman on Rugby Street, gambled with the cold. In 1975, Jackson had a broken coal oil heater in her home; many elderly people described coal heaters as another primary method used to heat homes and churches in the Heights. Her neighbor described asking her to come stay with him during the cold nights, but she refused and replied, "I got a home right here" but she did ask him to bring her some water the next day because "her water pipes had frozen."[102] She froze to death. Her body was found next to an ash pile from a makeshift fire in a house with blankets over windows, pieces of papers stuffed in wall cracks, and windows boarded with wood.

Education opportunity was limited for Black people whose lives were set up to end prematurely and impossible for those whose lives did end. Racism was never just about mean comments or stereotypes; it was about how rhetoric and logics partnered with structural policies and white agents to end Black life. Anti-Blackness was systemic and materialized throughout Twinsburg. It is telling that the zoning officers and delegations from the city, county, and state governments regularly reported that homes in the Heights were in dangerous situations—ticking time bombs of preventable and premature Black death. Rather than provided them with aid or relief, Black families were issued violation notices, fees and fines, and self-help rhetoric.[103]

On its own, education opportunity never could serve as a solution for community uplift without also addressing the anti-Blackness in health, housing, food, and neighborhood resources. It did not matter that Murthie attended an integrated school when the structural forces and white agents that shaped his geography of domination killed him. If William went on to struggle in

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school, it was not possible to question parental involvement when his mother was killed in a preventable death. In the era when education and college opportunity were vastly expanding, what chance did the Collins-Price brothers have when racism devalued their lives? President Johnson positioned education opportunity as the answer to racialized poverty, his administration framed it as a hand-up, not a hand-out.[104] K-12 schools and colleges were presented as social equalizers no matter the circumstances (or geographies) Black people lived in. Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe argue, "federal policy no longer embodied the idea that the government should intervene to alter the arrangements that resulted in the segregation of African American and Latino students in underperforming schools or to compensate them for their unequal access to educational resources. Federal policy focused instead on trying to improve their educational outcomes without disturbing the advantages of the wealthiest schools and their predominantly White, middle-class clientele."[105] Removing hand-outs or reparative justice as a policy solution meant racial and economic justice primarily was framed as a matter of Black people's work ethic in school rather than structural solutions. Education opportunity became a myth that masked systemic oppression in communities like the Heights.

Furthermore, what did education opportunity do for people like Dora Jackson, who were elderly and not in a system of schooling but still a part of the Black community? How did her life have value in a message of education opportunity that claimed only schooling could uplift poor Black communities? Simply put, the master narrative that education, especially integrated suburban schools, solved all issues had limiting consequences for the majority of Heights residents and deadly ones for some. Education opportunity as a "hand up, not a handout" functioned to mask anti-Black oppression and mark Black people, who did not achieve despite the odds, as non-valuable.

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The organized political struggle in the Heights did not just counter this master narrative on education opportunity but provided an alternative one. For the residents, education opportunity was connected to the extent that Black people's humanity was valued, and their human needs were met. Black residents were treated as valuable regardless of their level of education; most residents did not have credentials beyond high school. Similarly, the political network did not argue that education credentials were a prerequisite to having access to human dignity and needs. Residents wanted education and neighborhood development to be jointly pursued. The Heights political network often called out their white neighbors in Twinsburg for separating the two goals. Through a structural lens and collective organizing, the Heights political network brought federal attention to the neighborhood and refused organized attempts, across levels of government, to abandon the community. The Heights neighborhood was isolated but not "dying" like local newspapers consistently reported.[106] The community was full of Black life that community members found valuable. Their ways of valuing Black humanity, understanding education's intersections with other issues, and building a Black sense of place held lessons for the future.

Community-Controlled Development (1975-1999)

After a long political struggle, many households in the Heights finally gained *access* to water and sewage lines.[107] The Heights political network lobbied different levels of government, elected Black trustees, and created the Township Water District Board and the Water and Sewage Board to find HUD funding to make access possible.[108] There were several attempts since the 1950s to connect to the water and sewage lines already underneath and on the border of the community. Early on, Heights residents hoped that they could tap into the Akron waterline; however, the city of Akron claimed that the neighborhood of less than 1,000 people would be too

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much of a strain on the city's water supply. Soon after, the Heights attempted and failed multiple times to gain permission from Twinsburg City to tap into its Cleveland waterlines. In 1972 when the political network secured the $1.2 million in HUD funding for water and sewage, the community already derived a plan. The Water and Sewage board had already secured contracts with the Cleveland water company, rather than Twinsburg, in 1967 to access its water lines.[109] Also, the Research and Reporting Team had surveyed residents to find out who could and could not afford to tap into water lines.[110]As a result of these efforts, the 1970s marked the first time Heights residents had access to water and sewage lines. The Heights political network proved change to be possible for the small Black community on its own terms, through collective agency. Access proved to be just the first step.

The next step for the political network was housing. Beyond just water and sewage, the neighborhood's homes still needed repair and many households lived below the poverty line.[111] Many residents had substandard housing that was not structurally ready nor reliable to access the new water and sewage lines. When water and sewage came, some households could not pay the increased property taxes or the fines for not hiring a private contractor to install indoor plumbing before tapping into the lines.[112] As a result, some families, including children, were displaced. If families and children were displaced from their homes, then they also were denied education opportunity. The Heights residents who experienced decades of economic resources shifted away from the neighborhood to fund Twinsburg City and its schools now no longer could afford to live in the boundaries of the school district. The Heights political network quickly petitioned the state and federal government and was able to secure funding to cover the hidden costs of water and sewage for some residents.[113] Yet, many residents still lost their homes. For the political network, housing development was a human needs issue, but also an education issue for

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children. Heights residents focused on housing development that could benefit low-income and elderly families.

In this era, federal and state governments cuts funding for social services and welfare programs. Further, the country switched drastically from a War on Poverty to a War on Drugs; both campaigns focused on Black people as their own problem, the former offered self-help rhetoric and the latter inflicted punishment. Luke White described the economic times as "Reagan-madness," a reference to President Ronald Reagan's aggressive cuts to social welfare programs and anti-Black stereotypes like the "welfare queen" and "crack baby."[114] At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement had increasingly shifted to Black Power politics defined by Black nationalism and self-reliance. This more militant approach to organizing led to Black urban uprisings across the country, sparked by the shooting of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.[115] Several local reporters in Ohio argued that the fear of more unrest finally led to federal intervention in the Heights in the early 1970s.

Relief for the Heights came through the U.S. Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) when it designated the Heights area a "distressed rural community", which allowed the agency to allocate funding to demolish, renovate and build houses. For decades, the federal government had denied FmHA funding to the Heights because its population of poor people was too small or its proximity to Twinsburg City meant it was too urban.[116] The federal funding for housing was not new, Black people were just last to be considered. Since the 1930s, the federal government helped to build homes and subsidize mortgages throughout the country. Forms of federal support included mortgage subsidies, first-time homeowners tax credits, and mortgage-interest tax deductions.[117] This funding, however, was almost exclusively for white people. HUD acknowledges the white-only housing initiatives with this quote on their website: "Between 1934

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and 1962, the federal government backed $120 billion of home loans; more than 98 percent went to white families."[118] The federal government in partnership with the real estate industry helped create a white middle class from which Black families were excluded by design.

When it came to Black communities like the Heights, this type of no-strings-attached home-focused social program never existed. From 1974 to 1982, the Farmers Administration built 128 all-electric homes known as "Farmer Homes" for low-income families in the neighborhood. The homes allowed low-income Black families to move to the Heights and have access to the Twinsburg City School District. Again, the development was uneven. First, the Farmer Homes program built houses in white parts of Twinsburg Township with budgets of $60,000; but in the Heights, the homes were built with budgets between $30,000 to $40,000. Second, while many families thought they were in a housing program that understood and operated around their income level, they were not warned about the increasing property taxes in the township. In addition, the first Black families in the Farmer Homes were not warned about the extremely high electricity bills that they would face because of all-electric homes. Although a gas line was built underneath the community for Chrysler in 1958, the Heights neighborhood could not access it.[119] The Akron Beacon Journal reported on this issue in 1992: "some residents, unable to comprehend why electric bills were double and triple their mortgage payments, began abandoning homes. Many homes have been left vacant and unattended and have turned into eyesores."[120] Only a decade following the completion of construction in the Heights, the Farmer Homes program had largely failed. There were, however, those who stayed in the homes. Those who managed to stay, however, were held suspect by the federal government if they showed any sign of creating a comfortable home life for themselves. The Glover family, who owned a Farmer Home, remembered how an agent from the Farmers Administration conducted surprise

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visits to their homes and made them justify items in their home. They were forced to answer questions on how they afforded furniture or a new bicycle for their children.[121] There seemed to be an expectation that Black people in the Farmer Homes should be dirt poor but at the same time make enough money to afford high property taxes and utility bills.

Just as it had done in the past, the Heights political network organized. Hubert Brandon, who was a trustee at the time, explained that residents partnered with a former federal prosecutor and threatened to sue the Farmers Home Administration. In response, the administration agreed to place a moratorium on foreclosures and work with residents to figure out a solution to the high electricity bills.[122] In 1995, another group of residents sued with the claim that the Farmers Home Administration provided misinformation on the housing loans. The residents argued that it was never made clear that the subsidies on their federal housing loans would have to be paid back. Even when residents paid off their mortgages, they had to pay back this subsidy. For banks, this was a type of lien on the homes and they refused to allow Heights homeowners to refinance. Further, the subsidy-based lien was a negative mark on residents' credit scores. The Heights residents involved in the suit won and moved their loans from under the government to banks. This allowed them to avoid the subsidy repayment and have greater access to the equity in their homes.[123] The Glovers helped organize and lead the lawsuit and they noted how most people who qualified for the Farmers Homes had children or were elderly.[124]

My mother qualified and bought a Farmers Home in 1992 on Cambridge Street; as a new homeowner she did not participate in the lawsuit. She was provided two loans: one for the house and one to rehab the house, which was built in 1980 but vacant for years. My five siblings and I were all raised in the house. My mother's mortgage was $400 but her electricity bill was at times two or three times that amount. Like Dora Jackson and the Collins-Price family decades prior,

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my mother also had to decide if she would gamble our lives with the cold winter. When I was in the 1st grade, we had to move into my grandmother's house—also a Farmers home. We moved because my mom had to make the choice to pay her mortgage or the utility bill. She paid the mortgage and had us all live with my grandmother rather than in our house with no electricity, which also meant no heat or hot water. We did not move back into our Cambridge house until I was in the 6th grade and my mom found a better paying job.

Here lies the connection between uneven development in Black children's neighborhoods and education pathways. The high turnover in Farmers Homes almost always affected children. My mom and grandmother struggled for us to stay in Twinsburg because they wanted us to have access to a school district with resources that were not present in Cleveland, where they both moved from. We were fortunate. We had our grandmother. Other households in the Heights with children had to move, lose access to Twinsburg schools, and carry the debt of losing their homes.

Development was not simply progress; it too was a power struggle. Development plans were driven by government, non-profit, and business partnerships. When it came to Black communities like the Heights, local residents often were excluded from input on these development plans and policies.[125] The inclusion of residents' lived experiences of racism and poverty would require development policies that remedied historic disparities and countered ongoing racism. Without residents, these plans often comprised renewal efforts and practiced displacement.

Further, development was not open to all; it had requirements. When new homes were built, Black families already living in substandard housing within the community had to have the right credit scores or incomes to qualify for the mortgages. When new services and infrastructure improvements were offered, Black families had to have the money to pay the subsequent levies

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and property taxes that were passed. These requirements to participate in development were the technicalities of anti-Blackness. These unspoken requirements allowed community development to seem neutral and always a benefit without asking how Black people were going to be excluded. Simply put, while community development was a set of plans presented as beneficial for everyone, the technical ways in which the policy worked often displaced or limited Black people. Hence, policies of community development often reproduced anti-Blackness when it did not remedy and counter racial oppression. Investments in neutral and fair, rather than race-conscious and targeted, policies ensured that Black people in a society biased against Blackness failed to meet the requirements of development.

As the failure of the Farmers Homes program became apparent, the Heights political network lobbied for public housing to be built in the community. While the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority (AMHA) had conducted studies on the possibility of building public housing in the Heights since the 1960s, HUD consistently concluded that without proper water and sewage systems and better police and fire protection, no funding would be allocated for the project. With water and sewage systems built and contracts with nearby police and fire departments secured, the Heights political network successfully lobbied the AMHA and HUD to reconsider their decision. In 1981, a public housing apartment complex opened called Pinewood Gardens. With a budget of $6.2 million, 125 apartment and townhouse units were built on 16 acres of land at the entrance of the Heights. This was exceptional. The Heights political network won a decade-long campaign to bring the only public housing complex to Northern Summit County— a predominately white region of Ohio. Heights residents had priority and could apply right at the THCC, which provided needed relief for neighborhood families living in substandard homes. Further, Twinsburg Heights was safe, had well-resourced schools, access to Twinsburg

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City's shopping centers and grocery stores, and an established Black community. Consequently, Pinewood led to the largest influx of new residents in the Heights since the Mt. Olive church formed. For poor people throughout Akron and Cleveland, Pinewood had safe and high-quality homes to raise their children. While the tenants eventually became predominately Black, there were many white families that initially lived there too. It was an opportunity compared to the much older housing projects that existed in Cleveland and Akron.[126] More importantly, Pinewood allowed hundreds of poor Black children to have access to the Twinsburg City School District (TCSD).

In the early 1990s, the Heights political network won improvements for the first major road project in which asphalt was laid to replace the dirt streets and better ditches were dug to help with water drainage. Further, many of the dilapidated houses were demolished and vacant lots with debris were cleaned up. New Black families, often relatives of the Old-Timers, were moving into the Heights to build new homes.[127] Former homeowners that remained were almost all tapped into water and sewage lines. The apartment residents joined the Heights political network as the Pinewood Tenant Council and successfully lobbied for new parks in the neighborhood, the dissolution of the township police department, and fences blocking nearby industrial waste sites.[128] There was one final attempt to create a unified Twinsburg in 1994 but both parts of Twinsburg were divided. Although the Twinsburg City mayor supported unification, the city's zoning commissioner objected "to any agreement that would bring the township's low-income housing into the city." Trustees Brandon and Glover said respectively, "the township doesn't need the city because the township's industrial base is growing" and it would be like "a corporate takeover."

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The Struggle Continues

After the last failed merger, the township aggressively began pursuing a Joint Economic Development District (JEDD) formalized in 2002. A JEDD was a partnership with a nearby tax-collecting town, the Village of Reminderville, that allowed Reminderville to collect income taxes on businesses within the township and split revenue (30/70) with the township. Since townships are not legally allowed to collect taxes, the partnership created the Twinsburg Township's first substantial revenue source. [129] At the same time, more modern development occurred in the township outside the Heights community. For the first time, more affluent homes were built in what locally is referred to as the Twinsburg Road area—this road historically was where some middle-class Black families lived in the township. White families moved into the more affluent homes and reduced the voting bloc the Heights neighborhood had due to it being the largest residential area. By 2006, the township board of trustees, for about the first time in 36 years, had no Black elected officials.

In this period, the Great Recession (2007–2009) emerged and bankrupted people and industries alike. As just one example, the Chrysler Corporation filed bankruptcy in 2009 and the Twinsburg plant closed soon after in 2011.[130] Black homeowners disproportionately lost their homes due to racial income and wealth gaps, and subprime mortgages (see Figure 4).[131] Like labor markets, Black people were the last financed and first foreclosed in the housing market. One Township Trustee was quoted in a local newspaper: "The Twinsburg Heights area of the township was the neighborhood that was hardest hit," in reference to the recession. The article went on to report that "the township will be receiving Moving Ohio Forward demolition grant funding from the state of Ohio to help address the problem."[132] Rather than foreclosure assistance relief, the township responded to the housing crisis in the neighborhood with

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demolition. In 2014, the current all white trustees published a document, "The Small Community Redevelopment Toolkit" that outlined their redevelopment plans for the Heights community across the next decade. The plans—driven by government, non-profit, and industry partnerships—has resulted in the purchase and demolition of one whole side of the Heights neighborhood, the creation of local land banks, and gentrification. The land banks, which are township and county-operated, purchased vacant land and foreclosed property to demolish. The accumulation of land has allowed the township and county governments to control the development of the neighborhood without residents' input.[133] Further, the neighborhood experienced an influx of white homeowners attracted to "low-cost starter homes" in a "good school district" along with "new parks and public gardens" as one white resident described to me in conversation. The gentrification of the Heights mirrors geographer Neil Smith's definition of inner-city gentrification:

> Gentrification is a structural product of the land and housing markets. Capital flows where the rate of return is highest, and the movement of capital to the suburbs, along with the continual devalorization of inner-city capital, eventually produces the rent gap. When this gap grows sufficiently large, rehabilitation (or, for that matter, redevelopment) can begin to challenge the rates of return available elsewhere, and capital flows back in. Gentrification is a back-to-the-city movement all right, but a back-to-the-city movement by capital rather than people.[134]

The main connection in Smith's definition of gentrification to the Heights is the structural flow of capital as the key force that allows people, often white but more importantly middle-class, to gentrify. While Smith focused on the flow of capital from suburbs to urban places, the Heights' history complicates the popular binary in discussions of gentrification. The neighborhood shows that gentrification can occur wherever racial capitalism has suspended Black communities in crisis. Then, when capital is permitted to flow, redevelopment policies function as opportunity for some and displacement for others along race and class relations. In

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the Heights, gentrification is at the early stages. Black residents are still saying "look at all the white people moving in" rather than the later stages— "remember when the Heights was a Black neighborhood." Displacement of Black families is displacement of Black children from their school district. Like displacement processes prior, the Heights sits at a critical juncture where residents must continue to struggle for their sense of place in a local geography of domination. If the last 91 years offer any indication, the Heights as a continued Black place is possible.

Figure 2.4. One Resident's Self-Built Home. For over a decade, a longtime Heights resident built this house from right to left and by their self. When the 2007-2009 recession hit, the resident and their family lost the house; soon after, a white couple moved in. Source: Picture from "Small Community Redevelopment Toolkit" (2014)

Geographic History and Education Opportunity

The Heights' geographic history makes evident what geographers David Harvey and Ruth Wilson Gilmore call organized abandonment—the structural processes and policies that dismantle social safety nets first to regulate both people and places into states of crisis and second to exploit the crisis.[135] In the Heights, the abandonment was organized before the community ever existed because Black people were already sorted as subhuman in Twinsburg. The abandonment solidified when the Heights was excluded from all economic development despite an industrial source that produced hundreds of millions of dollars existing on its borders. The exploitation of the Heights materialized through constant land grabs and the buildup of

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industry on the Heights' borders where the land was marked as cheaper. Twinsburg City only included Black people when it was beneficial, ranging from showcasing its integrated schools or using the Heights community's poverty to qualify for federal funds.[136] The tools of development including segregation, annexation, zoning laws, government funding, relief programs, policing, housing and utilities were all used for racist ends in Twinsburg. These tools shaped and were shaped by the school district and its leaders in addition to multiple levels of white-controlled government. There can be no past or present-day conversation about Black students' education from K-12 to postsecondary in the Heights without accounting for racist development. The ways in which Black people in the Heights were read as less than and the ways that the Heights was abandoned have consequences for Black people's education experiences.

Without these uncommon connections between education and geography, the ideology of education opportunity hides organized abandonment or racist development. In Twinsburg, the ideology was first offered to Natives as a pathway into personhood and later to Black people to escape poverty into productive citizenship. The dominant logic then and today was that geographies of domination do not matter; one must just work hard in school to experience upward mobility. The upward mobility of individuals in schools is conflated to mean uplift for the abandoned places, ghettos, and poverty pockets that Black children live in. In other words, the history and ongoing practices of control—murder, assimilation, displacement, exploitation, and neglect—are deemed irrelevant in discussions of education opportunity and life chances. From the dominant perspective, if Black people and their community were poor and underdeveloped, it was because they did not work hard and care about their education. This ideology of education serves as a tool for those in power to mask their role in oppression.

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The justification of domination through the ideology of education opportunity, however, is questioned and challenged by many Heights residents. As Gilmore highlights, people in "forgotten places" who are "exhausted by the daily violence of environmental degradation, racism, underemployment, overwork, shrinking social wages, and the disappearance of whole ways of life and those who lived them, nevertheless refuse to give up hope."[137] Residents do find this hope in the dominant ideology of education opportunity—the belief that one can still beat the odds. They also find this hope in the belief that their Black sense of place, their community, will continue to exist and sustain them. These two sources of hope can inform and contradict each other. In the next chapters, I turn to interviews with students and parents from the Heights to explore the extent to which they place hope in education opportunity or elsewhere. Their reflections and stories help to understand the entanglement between geographies of domination and Black senses of place. Further, their narratives show how these entanglements manifest at the scale of K-12 schools and colleges. The geographic history of the Heights predicts the anti-Blackness students face in educational spaces and how those spaces reproduce and exploit uneven development. This history also shows that Black people have the agency to construct place. As such, attention is given to the different sites of place-making that Black parents and students from the Heights create on education pathways. My focus on geography refuses the individualization that dominates education research and privileges how Black people collectively experience and contest space and place.

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Misery is when you heard on the radio that the neighborhood you live in is a slum but you always thought it was home. [1]

—Langston Hughes

Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education. These opposing traditions were not, as some would explain, the difference between the mainstream of American education and some aberrations...Rather, both were fundamental American conceptions of society and progress, occupied the same time and space, were fostered by the same governments, and usually were embraced by the same leaders. [2]

—James Anderson

Chapter 3 — Twinsburg City Schools

The Twinsburg City School District (TCSD) has 5 schools: Twinsburg High School (9th - 12th built in 1999), R. B. Chamberlin (7th - 8th), Dodge Intermediate (4th - 6th), Bissell Elementary (2nd - 3rd), and Wilcox Elementary (Preschool - 1st). In 2017, the school district had 4,067 students—59 percent were white, 24 percent Black, 9 percent Asian, 3 percent Latino, and 5 percent Multiracial. Around 18 percent of students in the district were considered economically disadvantaged (receiving free or reduced lunch). The Twinsburg school district is consistently ranked a top school in Northeast Ohio and in the top 5 percent of schools in the nation. On the surface, the school district offers abundant opportunity: small class sizes, diversity, extracurricular activities, modern facilities, Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses, and sports teams.[3] In Twinsburg, the school district is a symbol for high quality education and a middle-class environment. As one high school student, Devin, told me, "If you are going to be poor and Black, be it in the Heights. That way you get to go to a good school."

The question, however, is "good" for who? As a former TCSD student, I suspected that these indictors of abundant education opportunity did not translate evenly for Heights students. When I graduated from Twinsburg High School there were about 30 people from the Heights in my class of 2010. In all four years there, I did not take one honors or AP class with a person

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from my neighborhood. Further, education opportunity seemed to continue to evade students from the Heights even after graduating from Twinsburg High School. When I reached out in 2016, prior to this study, to about 20 people from my class who were residents of my neighborhood, I learned that, despite almost all of them enrolling in college, only one graduated, earning an associate's degree.

Education scholar Tyrone Howard argues that "research often is me-search and it is our role as critical scholars to connect what we know personally with what research reveals empirically and descriptively."[4] My privileged pathway in the TCSD provided me with personal knowledge that there were schools within schools. Moreover, my experiences as a former student and resident of the Heights allows me to contextualize the ways that this uneven education landscape within Twinsburg shaped Heights residents' schooling experiences. Ultimately, however, I center Heights residents' own voices to locate where these within-schools were and to explain how they functioned for Black students. As the following narratives will show, the education pathways that residents navigated in TCSD formed not just for neighborhood peers in my graduating class but across generations.

This chapter turns to conversations with 46 Heights residents: 15 parents, 16 young adults, and 15 high school students. The parents themselves often graduated from the Twinsburg City School District. Their reflections on Twinsburg and it schools, as students and now parents of children who are/were students, highlight what has changed and remained the same across generations. The young adults all graduated from Twinsburg and were between the ages 18 and 28. A few of my classmates were interviewed in this group. The young adults more easily recalled memories and had enough distance to share critical reflections. The high school students were sophomores to seniors and provided key insights into the factors that shape Heights

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students' achievement and perceptions of college opportunity. They told stories and provided critiques of what was happening currently in TCSD. All names, except the twins' (per their request), were changed to provide anonymity to people who agreed to share their stories with me.

Across the last four decades, 1980 to 2017, Heights residents' education pathways are traced. This time period became salient because it marks a generational shift when Heights residents switched from high school-to-work to high school-to-college as planned or expected pathways. The themes that follow make evident that where people live and how that place is constructed matters for education pathways and opportunity. While the previous chapter demonstrated how the production of place, both materially and symbolically, determined what resources were invested into the Heights neighborhood and residents, this chapter shows how that geographic history flowed over into the school. In particular, the symbolic constructions of the Heights as a "bad" community strongly impacted the ways that students from the Heights were treated in TCSD. Schools do not offer an escape from the uneven material and symbolic construction of place—they reproduce it. It is in Twinsburg schools that all students, across races, rehearse and memorize the racist script about the Heights and the students that come from there. The stories that follow show that this suburban school district was not an educational haven. Racial power dynamics were and continue to be at play within the school district's culture, operations, and practices.

A Place for Black Children

Many Heights residents described entering TCSD as a type of cultural shock. To understand their experiences, it is first important to provide background on how residents described their neighborhood. Residents reflected on their neighborhood experiences prior to

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entering TCSD. Like the elderly residents in the documentary, the younger residents who I interviewed loved growing up and living in the Heights. In fact, not one person reported feeling like living in the Heights was a burden; many described it as "special" or an "experience they are grateful for." Eryn, whose family lived in the community for generations and who now was raising her own three children in the neighborhood, reflected on her childhood in the 1980s and 1990s:

> We were able to walk around the neighborhood or ride bikes. We had house parties up here, we had the community center for the children and we went up there. I mean, we really had a nice time. I also lived on a farm, so everybody came to our house. It was fun. Like I said, everybody knew each other. You could just leave your door unlocked and be all right. I had good memories growing up here. That's why I'm still here.

Likewise, Moe's parents moved to the Heights when he was born; they joined other family members who already lived in the neighborhood for two generations. Many residents, who were now parents in the study, were born at the beginning of modern development in the Heights. They remembered outhouses, makeshift homes, and dirt roads in the neighborhood. First, Moe's family lived in an old one-room house before moving into the Pinewood Gardens apartments. Moe described the apartments in the 1980s as a place that had "things you saw in the city like drugs and wannabe gangs; but that was just a few people. The majority were hard-working parents, elderly folks, and some white people too." When I asked Moe if he felt safe in the apartments growing up, he replied, "I always felt safe; I played everywhere. There were a few people into that unsafe stuff. Everybody in the Heights—although the people in the houses and apartments sometimes act like they're in separate places—were family. Family-oriented."

In contrast, Serena was not connected to a family that lived in the Heights for generations. In the 1980s, her single parent mother moved to the Heights after receiving a house in the Farmers Home program. She recalled quickly realizing that "everybody is friends and all

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the friends are cousins, so you had to be careful about what you said about anybody." She later commented on being grateful that "[her] mom could move from Cleveland, find an affordable house, and safe neighborhood."

Serena, Moe, and Eryn all were residents who spent almost all of their childhoods in the Heights and cited their positive experiences growing up in the community as why they live there as adults. For Serena and Eryn, they decided to raise their children there. It was common in the Heights for neighborhood children to grow up and become adult renters and homeowners. Black people intentionally chose to remain or move to the community.

While the abovementioned residents graduated high school in the 1990s, the residents who were current students or graduated in the 2000s also shared positive reflections on the Heights. Vindel summed up their (preferred pronouns) childhood: "The only thing I could really describe it being is a family at the end of the day, to be honest man. Like, everybody knew each other. If you got caught doing anything, your mamma and your daddy gonna find out. I used to say "How you know?" Like, Jalil you know what I'm saying. They said, 'Somebody saw this' or 'Somebody told me that.'"

Devin and Toni, both 17 years old, were each in families that moved around a lot but all within the Heights. They lived in the Pinewood Gardens apartments, and each lived in four different houses that their families rented. Devin said, "everybody up here growing up on the hill together we all know each other, everybody family up here. It's like our own calm and cool environment." Similarly, Toni exclaimed, "I really, really, really like the Heights and I like the community, and I like the people that's around here. Like if I was to get a home, if I could, I would just graduate, make my money, and I would get a house built in the Heights." The residents clearly loved their neighborhood, even idealized it.

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However, residents also shared feelings that it could be limiting. Shawn, 24 years old, said that the "the Hill [the Heights] is cursed. Some niggas get stuck up here and never make it off. They have babies, can't keep a job, and just broke like their parents." Shawn's comments were like an elder resident, Randy, who said in his oral history, "There was a church on every street along with a bootlegger and a drunk."[5] While Randy was referring to an earlier time, his comments made it clear that the Heights had been home for many residents, but that it also was a place where residents had to live with struggle. Shawn's use of the word "curse" described how that struggled played out for some residents across generations. For parents, they believed that living in the Heights was an ideal option within an arena of limited options for working class Black families. In interviews with high school students and young adults, there was a belief that they needed to escape the neighborhood, experience social mobility, then make the choice to move back. It seemed that the lack of choice rather than the neighborhood itself was the curse.

Still, the historic struggle to sustain the Heights bore fruit for the generations that came after. Because of the tactics that Heights residents utilized to sustain the community, an affirming Black place existed for children. For the residents, Blackness was normal growing up. It was the common. Their families, neighbors, and friends all were Black. Through segregation, Twinsburg practiced organized abandonment, isolating the Heights on a hill, on the other side of the highway. This marginalization had consequences on residents' life opportunities that cannot be understated. However, the Black people in the Heights turned their isolation into interconnectedness, where community and family could be used interchangeably. A Black sense of place did not necessary help community members transcend struggle, but it helped them survive it and aspire towards different possibilities.

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For example, the Black sense of place that existed in the Heights extended into the site that served as the first educational space for generations of Heights children: Head Start. As the reader will recall, TCSD was not the first site of schooling for most Twinsburg Heights residents. When residents reflected on their schooling experiences, the majority, like myself, began with the Head Start program in the neighborhood. Beginning in 1966, Head Start operated in the Heights for around four decades until the early 2000s. The high school seniors interviewed in this study were the last group of Heights residents to have access to a community-based Head Start program. Research finds the benefits of Head Start to include not only increased educational attainment for people when they are children but also as adults with outcomes like lower arrest and incarceration rates along with increased employment and health.[6] The program, which moved less than five miles away, became inaccessible for many low-income people in the Heights who did not always have access to a car or public transportation.

During its time in the Heights, Head Start was a school site that acted as an integral extension of the neighborhood. By the 1990s, Head Start was housed in a building within the Pinewood Gardens complex. Children who lived in the apartments as well as homes in the neighborhood enrolled in the program. I conducted a group oral history with four teachers in the Head Start program. Ora Harris, a part of the staff, served as Director of Head Start in the Heights for 30 years. Harris described pushing the boundaries of who qualified for the program to admit as many students in the community as possible. She argued that "it was critical for Heights children's future to be in a program that supported their early development and preschool education." The work of Ora Harris and her staff fits into a larger tradition identified in Historian Crystal Sanders' scholarship that documents how local Black women operated and transformed Head Start programs into an affirming educational space for Black children. Sanders

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argues Black women's education activism demonstrated what it means to radically connect schooling to community uplift.[7]

In the Heights, Head Start grew into a school site that was revolutionary, even by today's education standards. The program employed predominately Black teachers, who lived in the same community, attended the same churches, and raised their own children on the same streets as the enrolled students. The teachers were the students' neighbors. For Black children in the Heights, their education began with a schooling experience with teachers who understood and valued them. In interviews, residents often named a Head Start teacher as their favorite teacher out of all the K-12 teachers and college professors who they had. Tessa, a 25-year-old who just finished her associate degree, said with pride, "Pinewood Gardens' Head Start, all the teachers, they were real nice. I actually still keep in contact with many of them, and my son had them for Head Start, too, so I'm real close to them." Likewise, Bryan explained with gratitude that the teachers invested time "to work on my reading and learning when I was behind. That was something I ain't always get when I was in Twinsburg schools. So, when I see Mrs. Brown and them [Head Start teachers] I always say hi." At one of the community barbeques that I co-hosted, Ora Harris was given repeated praise and applause by parents and former students who remembered the impact of her teaching and leadership in Head Start.

In addition, many parents shared how they felt comfortable with the Head Start staff because they knew them as both teachers and community members. Likewise, Head Start teachers shared how when Heights students transitioned into the TCSD, parents often reached out to them. The Head Start teachers cited examples of helping Heights parents navigate the school districts' special education evaluations and/or alleged disciplinary issues with their children. My own parents turned to them to support me through speech therapy and special

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education evaluations in my transition into the TCSD. I asked the Head Start teachers why parents turned to them for continued support. Valerie Walker, a longtime staff member, responded, "the parents did not feel judged because they knew our stories. Like many of the parents of children in Head Start, we [teachers] had financial struggles, lived in the Pinewood apartments at different points in our lives, and some of us were single parent mothers too." Another Head Start teacher Ronnie Townsend said, "I wanted to be there for these parents like people were there for me and my kids in the neighborhood. I saw so much of myself and my struggles in theirs."

Parents' comfort with Head Start formed because the teachers viewed both them and their children as valuable. Head Start staff sought to understand and help ease Heights residents' sometimes complicated situations. Olivia, a parent whose daughter went through Head Start and now was a high school senior, reflected on her daughter's experience at R. B. Chamberlin Middle School: "My child never struggled in school. Then, in 7th grade and 8th they were struggling…. I went up to the school and my child said they were treating her with prejudice…treating her different 'cause she Black. I asked who are the Black teachers in the school and they [school leaders] could not name not a one. They named two people who ain't even teachers…My daughter said, 'one is the guidance counselor and the other one is the hall monitor.' I realized then Head Start was the only time [my daughter] had Black teachers like I did growing up in Cleveland." Olivia's connection between achievement and Black teachers aligns with research that finds that Black students' academic achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment increases when they have Black teachers.[8] Through Head Start, the Heights built a foundation for neighborhood children's education, affirmed their value in educational spaces, and provided a different model for school than the TCSD offered.

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The Heights was what Chanel, a parent who earned her Ph.D., called "our little world." In this world, family was nearby, children ran the streets in games not gangs, and neighbors knew each other's names. While the sense of place and sense of self developed in the Heights was not always acknowledged in TCSD, the place and identity both influenced how Heights students navigated the schools. Hence, it was not surprising when Carina, 27 years old, remembered enrolling in Twinsburg City schools as "leaving my Black world."

Re-thinking Suburban Education

Despite the cultural shock experienced by Heights residents upon entering TCSD, there was a shared sentiment among the high school students, young adults, and parents that they were fortunate to have access to Twinsburg schools. This feeling made sense given the large body of evidence showing that most low-income Black people who live in segregated neighborhoods often have access to under-resourced school districts.[9] Residents believed living in the Heights provided a different opportunity. In the Heights, families were Black, working-class, and segregated but they also had access to a nationally top-ranked school district. For many parents, they were fulfilling their role in society, setting their children up for a "good education."

Eryn moved her family around to surrounding cities before settling back in Twinsburg Heights. She said, "Oh, of course I want my kids to go to college and stuff. Twinsburg, you can't get any better than this, you know for those goals." Cindy, another Heights resident who returned to raise her daughter, elaborated on why the community was a "sweet spot" for her: "Well I think it's a good community for me to raise my child. She's gone through the Twinsburg School District starting in kindergarten. I think for the value that you get for your home and the school district…that was an excellent reason for coming back home. It's manageable, my house is not overpriced, it's pretty reasonable."

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Homes in the Heights are rarely priced over $110,000, compared to houses in Twinsburg City that can easily have a market price between $250,000 and $500,000. In addition, several homeowners, like Cindy, often first lived in the Pinewood Gardens apartments and then transitioned into a house in the Heights neighborhood. These low-cost and public housing options are not often in cities with well-resourced and high-quality school districts.[10] Within the Northeast Ohio context, many residents felt that living in the Heights was a rare opportunity among limited choices for low-income Black families. Parents cited "good schools" and "education opportunity" as primary reasons for renting an apartment or mortgaging a home in the neighborhood.

The high school students and young adults also referred to TCSD's education as "good," "excellent," and "hard work." Shauntel, the daughter of Cindy and a high achieving high school senior, shared a common perspective among residents on Twinsburg education: "I have a really good education because I look at some other people and just little things, like the way people talk and the way people ... the type of language they use sometimes is not ... I don't want to say I put myself above them, but you can just tell there's something that's different between them and me." When explaining how she knew TCSD offered a quality education, Ashley and other residents referred to "people in the city" not having the same education. When I prompted residents to elaborate, they revealed that the "people in the city" were Black and "the city" referred to places like Cleveland, Bedford, Garfield Heights and Maple Heights.

These cities are predominately Black working-class communities. Bedford, Garfield, and Maple Heights, like Twinsburg, are suburbs of Cleveland. In the local context, however, they are considered too Black and too low-income to fit into the suburb category. For many Heights residents, the "people in the city" lacked education because they "spoke without proper

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grammar." Most Heights residents with whom I spoke had lived in Twinsburg their whole lives and admittedly shared that they had little knowledge of life in the mentioned cities. Yet, these cities became a symbol that Twinsburg education was high quality because those Black people in the city seemed uneducated. The measure of TCSD's quality was not often based on what it directly provided to Black Heights residents, but that it offered an education better than that in nearby predominantly Black cities. Education in Twinsburg was defined by what it is not instead of by what it is.

To be clear, educational resources in surrounding predominately Black school districts are not equal to TCSD. Yet, it is hard to compare these school districts. In Twinsburg, per pupil school spending was $9,547 in 2017, whereas in Bedford, Garfield, and Maple it was $9,192, $8,709, and $8,567, respectively. Further, the majority of the students in the Black districts are low-income.[11] A better test or comparison would be how well low-income Black students perform in TCSD compared to the Black school districts. As discussed in the next chapter on student achievement, Twinsburg may not be a clear-cut better option when considering its outcomes for low-income Black students in the Heights. Nonetheless, the residents who moved to Twinsburg from an urban or majority-Black school district also supported the claim that TCSD was better. Nicole, 28 years old, said, "the beginning of my sixth-grade year was my first year in Twinsburg, and it was pretty different because I came from Cleveland public schools. I mean when I moved to Twinsburg, the work was harder and it was more advanced and a lot more pressure. I would go home and cry about it." Similarly, Brianna, a high school senior who moved to the Heights in 8th grade from Garfield, said, "I felt like I got smarter." When I asked her to explain how Twinsburg made her smarter, she responded, "In Twinsburg, we actually was doing work. It was hard for me at first when I first got here, 'cause it was like a whole, new,

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different plan for school and education. But when I went to Garfield, it was all simple stuff. Now, if I had went to Garfield, I would know everything, literally with no problems. But with Twinsburg, you have to study and get stuff done."

My critique of the "suburb good"—"urban bad" binary is that the former becomes the standard for quality education for Black people. Further, the term suburban becomes a proxy for white, and good education becomes a proxy for education in a suburban school. This binary is used not only by Heights residents but also by policymakers and researchers in national discussions on education opportunity.[12] From K-12 to higher education, there is a long-standing assumption that integration into white schools is better for Black students. The assumption continues despite the large body of work that finds that many predominately Black schooling institutions, despite societal racism and less resources, produce(d) better attainment and mobility for poor Black students.[13] For example, results from a study on public schools found schools that were predominantly students of color were more likely to enroll those students in gifted courses rather than school districts with low student of color populations.[14]

Simply put, Heights residents were correct that TCSD has more course offerings, financial resources, extracurricular activities, and higher graduation rates. However, the presence of resources does not mean that they are available equally. In fact, the abundance of resources in suburban schools occurs because white suburbanites often hoard resources. Hoarding occurs through white flight away from Black communities to specific suburbs. As they move away, they not only take tax dollars with them from the city, but also place demands on the state and county to prioritize investment in their suburbs and schools.[15] Opportunity hoarding does not end within school walls, a place thought to be neutral and ruled by meritocracy. School leaders and parents

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of students hoard education opportunity for white and middle students at the expense of Black and poor students—all within the same school.[16]

"Twinsburg Education is Good, but They're Racist"

Residents made it clear that TCSD created schools within schools. The praise for the school district was often followed with stories of racism. For example, Heaven said, "Twinsburg's education is good, but they racist." She went on to explain: "Overall the school district is a good school. I mean I learned, they did send me off very well to, you know, become an adult and pursue my other dreams in college and they prepared me education-wise. [But] overall, I feel like they weren't there for the kids in the township. I feel like the kids in the township, they had to stick together and have each other's back, but I feel like the district really didn't support, it didn't stick up for the kids in the Heights."

Heaven was a high achieving college student who, at the time of the study, completed multiple certificates, healthcare-related internships, an associate's degree, and was halfway through her bachelor's on her pathway to becoming a nurse. For her, Twinsburg's "good education" that set her up to achieve these milestones did not excuse the school district's neglect for Heights students overall. It was telling that she did not define their racism as mistreatment of Black students; she stated that it was mistreatment of the Heights students. Residents repeatedly defined racism as Twinsburg believing the Heights is a bad place. Entering the school district was where Heights children learned that the place they called home and felt affirmed was thought to be a "slum." Forty of the forty-six residents shared a story on how city residents believed that the Heights was dangerous or told their children "not to go up there." This marking of the neighborhood expressed a racist stereotype without using any racial terms. The school district was the primary institution, though not the only one, where Black children learned of the

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Heights stigma. The following script was a common reoccurrence for Heights residents in talking to their Twinsburg City classmates:

> *Heights resident*: "I live in the Heights."
>
> *City resident*: "Where is that?"
>
> *Heights resident*: "Behind Get-Go (gas station) and Bob Evans (restaurant) on the other side of 82 (highway)."
>
> *City resident*: "Oh my god. You live back there? I heard it is dangerous and has a lot of drugs."

This racist script reflects the stories that Heights residents shared. Often, city residents did not even know where the Heights was located, though it was less than two miles from their high school. City residents, however, did know it as a symbol—the dangerous place to stay away from. In the 1980s and the 1990s, the War on Drugs allocated federal funds to local police departments to crack down on marijuana, crack-cocaine, and heroin.[17] The Twinsburg Bulletin newspaper constantly reported on the police departments arrests and sometimes drug raids in the Heights community. The arrests and raids often found trivial amounts of drugs and money; yet, this hyper-policing was considered the best use of resources to address drug dealing and using.[18] There were drugs in the Heights community, and some residents did not escape the crack epidemic of this era, but there was no evidence that drugs were more a problem in the neighborhood than in Twinsburg City. Even if the label of "bad" made sense in the past, residents graduating high school in the 2000s did not understand it. They did not come to age in a neighborhood where drugs were a prominent feature.

Carina, 27 years old, shared her surprise in realizing how people viewed her home once she was enrolled in TCSD:

> It was a big shock... When you [are] in the Heights, you really don't go nowhere but the Heights. That's all you knew. When you went to…like your other friends who didn't live

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> up here, they live in like Abrams' Farm [a neighborhood with half a million-dollar homes], like [there was] nobody else outside playing or being at the park, or nothing like that, or it was just uppity people, snobbish people, it was a shock to us because in the Heights we thought everybody was the same. When you talk to people and they just think you're just in this horrible place, in this ghetto, and we really wasn't. We were just regular kids like them. To even know that they even thought like that about us, it was shocking for real.

Moreover, the stigma of the Heights as a bad place was not just held by white city residents. Lauren, a 27-year-old who grew up in the Heights and graduated with her bachelor's, shared that Black people who lived across the highway "thought the Heights was dangerous too." Unlike earlier generations in which almost all Black people in Twinsburg lived in the Heights, the recent Heights high school students and young adults grew up with a middle-class Black population in Twinsburg City. Starting in the late-1990s, there was an influx of Black people who moved into Twinsburg City mainly from Cleveland and surrounding Black cities. The Plain Dealer reported that, throughout the 1990s, the Black population in Twinsburg City tripled from 434 to 1,552 people or 9 percent of the overall population. Today, the Black population is almost 15 percent of Twinsburg City.[19]

The construction of the Heights as a bad place was a covert way to mark low-income Black people living there also as bad. Belief in the label was held across racial groups. The marking of Heights residents as "bad" occurred at the intersection of their race, class, and place. Through the intersection of these power dynamics, it became clear that Black students in the school not only had class differences but also place differences. Black students across the highway and in the city likely still experienced racism within the school, but their class and place status provided a buffer not available to Heights students.

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Interactional Racism

The Heights stigma followed students from the neighborhood into school interactions and the operations of the school district. Residents were asked to provide their earliest memory of experiencing racism. Like elderly residents in the Heights documentary, most shared a story about racism in one site: the school district. Residents' experiences with in-school racism occurred at two levels: interactional (personal) and institutional racism. The interactional level encompasses Black students' interactions with peers, teachers, counselors, and coaches. The institutional level captures racist busing, discipline, tracking, and other practices and policies of the school district. The experiences described below do not exhaust all the forms of racism that residents shared but highlight patterned and compelling examples.

Many students from the Heights first remembered racism in the form of anti-Black comments and teasing from their classmates in Twinsburg schools. Moe, Aaron, and Shawn gave the same example of white students calling them a nigger in elementary school. Serena, a dark-skinned Black woman with a wide nose, shared how white students and Black students constantly bullied her due to her features. Brittani, a 29-year-old doctor with a twin in the same profession, remembered a series of incidents in fourth-grade when white girls kept asking to touch her hair. At first, she always said yes, until "[she] noticed they would touch it and then laugh at [her]." These anti-Black remarks were not random or rare. For many Black students, negative racist comments from their peers of all races accumulated over years and compounded with the Heights stigma. If students confronted the perpetrator, they would claim they were joking.[20] If a teacher got involved, students repeatedly commented that the teachers "did nothing." This inaction on the part of TCSD teachers served to normalize the anti-Black humor projected at Heights residents.

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The anti-Black teasing experienced by Heights residents in Twinsburg schools operated not only through racial humor, but also through racist commentary about Heights residents' gender and sexual performances. In her work on intersecting power dynamics, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, "trading in racial stereotypes and sexual hyperbole are well-rehearsed strategies for achieving laughter; the most extreme representations often do more to reinforce and entrench the image than to explode it."[21] As Crenshaw highlights, anti-Blackness often occurs around laughter at the intersection of race, sexual, and gender-based jokes. Vindel's reflection on their (preferred pronouns: they, their, them) schooling experience is an example of how Heights students' multiple differences were the target of anti-Blackness, not just race alone:

> I was doing good in school until I started getting bullied. I was bullied for my hair, I was bullied for my looks. I was bullied for my nose. I was bullied for my ears. I was bullied for everything. People talking like I look like a monkey and shit like that. It would only be like two Black kids in the class…they [white students] would dog the Black kids so bad. The teacher wouldn't do nothing about it. So as soon as you got yourself up to stand up, you go on to detention. I'd say I was bullied all the way until I got out of Twinsburg. I ain't gonna lie. On top of that, me being gay and shit? Living in Twinsburg, I was the first person ... I swear, I feel like I was the first person out there.

On the surface, Vindel's experience with anti-Blackness was not different from other residents interviewed, in the sense that their race and place also made them a target. Vindel, however, faced a different type of anti-Blackness due to their sexuality and non-gender conforming presentation. They told me, "I dressed more like a boy and liked girls but I never identified as a boy or a girl. I just wanted to be called my name. I did not need a category. I just wanted people to identify me by my soul." The multiple differences—race, place, class, sexuality, and gender—that Vindel embodied reflected the way they were targeted. The same was true for Heights residents who identified as women and men. Yet, there was no other person who shared being bullied on the level that Vindel did.

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In a school district that still has no clubs, spaces, or initiatives to affirm and discuss sexualities and genders, it was unsurprising that Vindel, the only openly non-binary, gay resident in this project, reported the worst treatment. Their story serves as a reminder that addressing anti-Blackness in schools is not solely about affirming Black students' racial identity. Anti-racist work is about addressing all of the power dynamics in school that do not allow Black students to show up as full people and participate in education opportunity. Vindel loved the Heights, but also said it "was a hard place to be gay for me and other people up there I know kept it on the low until they could move away or still till this day." Crenshaw argues that groups or places that are considered home or affirming for one part of a person's identity must also be challenged for excluding other parts of how a person experiences the world. In the Heights and in the school, power operated at the intersection of race and other marginalizing dynamics.

In addition to the abovementioned comments that school leaders were "doing nothing" to stop white peers' racism, Heights residents shared that school leaders also directly perpetuated anti-Blackness. These school leaders include teachers, counselors, sports coaches, and principals. Heights students described school leaders as having low expectations of, punitive approaches toward, and dominant-based relationships with them. Bryan knew from his own experience and heard from "older generations" that school leaders in Twinsburg view Heights students negatively:

> 'He's from the Heights, Twinsburg Heights. He's probably mischievous. He probably ain't that smart.' They just feel like we're either not capable of doing things or that we're just rough, like we just end up being in trouble all the time or being nothing. There's examples of that, but there's a lot of people that are not examples of that. They just look at us as that's where the low-income people live, and that's how they're going to act, like low-income people.

Bryan was describing how Heights students faced anti-Blackness at the intersection of race, class, and place—the Heights stigma. When teachers found out where he was from, they

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believed that they knew who he was and what he was capable of academically. Bryan was not claiming that Heights students never caused trouble or were never disengaged. He instead interrogated the inability of his white school leaders to see Heights students as complex, whole people, different from each other, and their neighborhood as a support rather than a limitation. Like Heaven earlier, Bryan was naming the low expectations placed on Heights students. In her research, Julie Landsman refers to this treatment of Black students as "the racism of low expectations" where school leaders track, discourage, and limit academic achievement for Black people.[22]

The negative view of Heights students also extended into school discipline. Regardless if a resident reported never being sent to the principal's office or experienced multiple suspensions and expulsions, there was shared agreement that Heights students were more likely to be punished in ways that their white and Black peers from the city were not. Heights students commented on how they often were in trouble for "insubordination," which became a catch-all label for being late to class, talking back to a teacher, or not following classroom rules. Darren, 22 years old, described himself as constantly in trouble in Twinsburg schools:

> I think once you showed up on their radar, they kind of just focused in on you. And I've been on that radar. I remember going from…Dodge. I remember going from Dodge [4th-6th grade] to RBC [7th-8th grade] and the principal told me, 'I'm about to send all your suspensions, all your suspension write-ups, I'm about to send them to the next school. They about to know when you get there.' I was like damn. She signed all my suspension papers. She faxed them over to the next school, so they already knew who was coming in.

Many students described how school leaders put them on their "radar" and limited their chances to start fresh in the next school or with a new teacher. Each school year, new teachers and schools were informed of the students' prior behavior. Similar to Darren, Carina said "I only got in trouble in one class with one teacher who I believe was racist. I was in 4th grade and my teachers in 5th and 6th grade both brought up how they were not going to deal with my problems

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[with the earlier teacher]. I'm like come on, that was in 4th grade with one teacher." Despite their hopes to attain a positive reputation for themselves in Twinsburg schools, residents often described school leaders' initial approach to them as domineering, centering on discussions of punishments and consequences for past and imagined future "insubordination."

Likewise, school sports coaches were also invested in the Heights stigma. Heights students across generations described coaches of sports teams—football, basketball, cheerleading, and track—as racist. Moe, who graduated in 1996, said, "a couple of them white dudes couldn't even barely walk down the hallway, and they were on the basketball team. We already knew though, the older students told us, 'His mom's a booster.' It was just something that we just accepted, basically. It was either that, or don't play." A booster parent donated and helped raise money to fund school sports, and many Heights high school students and parents believed there was favoritism towards students whose parents were boosters. Booster parents were influential in sports ranging from football and basketball to cheerleading and drill team; their position allowed them to hoard opportunity. Further, multiple residents said that when they did not make a team, they were told it was because they "did not have the right attitude." Aaron heard this from the middle school basketball coach. Despite graduating 27 years apart, Brandy and Toni both reported hearing this comment from cheerleading coaches. Toni who graduated in 2017 said attitude really meant "not doing things the white way." Brandy who graduated from Twinsburg High School in 1990 elaborated:

> Honestly, I think it was the color of your skin and how you behaved. And your character as far as if you were Black but acted white. And I was me. And I'm gonna always be me…some of us didn't even feel comfortable enough to even try out. A lot of our parents couldn't put us in dance class and gymnastics, so we didn't have that experience. We didn't have that experience like others were afforded…to go to dance class since they were little. But we all looked at it like you had to basically act white in order to make it on the team. Even though some of us would have loved to have been a cheerleader, we

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> weren't even interested because we not gonna transform who we are just to make it and be accepted.

Brandi's perspective was shared by Toni which concluded that, as a Black girl, it was pointless to try out for the team. Toni did so anyway with her friends and she was the only one who made it. Ultimately, she quit because the team refused to consider her ideas on music and cheer routines. Together, Brandy and Toni's stories reveal how normalized the Heights stigma became across generations.

The Heights students were not oblivious to their mistreatment. Heights residents were conscious that it was not their culture, covertly referred to as attitudes and insubordination, that was the problem. They instead described the issue as their refusal or inability to assimilate into white norms in school sports and classrooms. As a result, Heights residents often stayed clear of and made note of spaces that were hostile towards their sense of self. In her work on Black students' oppositional stances to white norms in school, Karolyn Tyson argues that Black students who already perceive their school context as unequal are suspicious of white dominance because they experience it in daily interactions and practices. Further, Tyson calls for a focus on school structures rather than students' cultures as the arena that needs correcting.[23]

Institutional Racism

The school structure in TCSD was shaped by institutional racism, which extends and informs interactional racism. In Twinsburg schools, the Heights stigma was a perspective held amongst students and school leaders, but also an institutional practice and policy. Institutional racism is the established operation and mechanisms of institutions that reproduce and reinforce racial inequality, in this case in school culture and outcomes. Growing up in a neighborhood subjected to racist development and experiencing repeated racist interactions in school, Heights

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residents often suspected that Twinsburg schools operated through anti-Blackness. They described school practices and policies that they perceived to be racist.

Residents of the Heights often discussed a known practice of "Last Bus, Black Bus." In R. B. Chamberlin, the 7th and 8th grade school, students were sent to board their buses in waves. The Heights students—despite their desire, like most middle school students, to race to leave school when the dismissal bell rang each day—were the last wave to board the bus. Residents who graduated 10 years apart referred to this boarding process as an example of racism in their middle school years; it was an institutional practice sustained across time. Already stigmatized in school and living in the most marginalized place in the town, Heights students found it suspicious that they were the last group allowed to leave the building. Busing as a site of anti-Blackness also was an issue in 1986 when The Cleveland Plain Dealer reported that Heights students were protesting in R. B. Chamberlin (the high school at the time). For the students, the issue was that their bus picked them up late and constantly made them over 20 minutes late to school.[24] Here, Heights students wanted to arrive at school on time, and the institutional practice was to repeatedly transport them there late. Together, these busing issues raise questions on why Twinsburg schools have long struggled to figure out busing for Heights students.

School buses also served as transportable sites where anti-Black logics in Twinsburg City and the schools were transported into the Heights neighborhood. Heaven discussed a time when the city police were called to the "Black bus" because students were "talking back to the bus driver." The officers slammed a young girl into a window, causing another young girl to jump on the officer to remove him from her friend. The officers, in front of a bus full of children, arrested the two children. There was not a meeting with the students on the bus or any form of acknowledgement of the trauma that the Black children likely experienced. Heaven also

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commented that the people in the neighborhood never really did "anything but say 'that is how they [the police] do us.'" While timing or incidents on the bus may seem like easy fixes, they served as just one more hierarchical reminder to Black students that they were not valued in the same way as white students.

Institutional racism also shaped outcomes in school discipline. As noted in the history chapter, TCSD had been accused of targeting Black students in discipline since the 1960s. Residents shared that the issue continued. In 2004, there was a local outcry from the wider Black community in Twinsburg when the superintendent said that Black students' high suspension and expulsions at the elementary and middle school level were because teachers were "catching them early." The idea that Black students needed to be caught not only sounds more like a reference to animals rather than children, but it portrays the student group as inherently "bad." The superintendent's desire to catch Black students early suggested that the group would inevitably be a problem in need of punishment later. The superintendent went on to say, the disproportional rates were because a "higher proportion of them [Black students] come from split families and poor households."[25] Again, Black students' culture was centered as the problem while the school structure was left unquestioned. Still today, the anti-Black discipline approach persisted. From the elementary school to the high school, Black students comprised 50 percent or higher of school suspensions and/or expulsions, though they only make up 24 percent of the school district.

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Table 3.1: Black Students' Suspension and Expulsion Rates

School	Percentage of Overall Suspension Rate (In and Out of School)	Percentage of Overall Expulsion Rate
Wilcox Elementary (Pre-1st)	50%	50%
Bissell Elementary (2nd-3rd)	77%	N/A
Dodge Intermediate (4th-6th)	56%	N/A
Robert B. Chamberlin (7th-8th)	60%	60%
Twinsburg High (9th-12th)	50%	50%

Source: U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&eid=32143&syk=7&pid=2232

A school leader, who was new to the district, learned about my research project and reached out to me for advice in spring 2017. Black students, particularly from the Heights, were being suspended at a higher rate than earlier in the year. In their Twinsburg school, a rule was made in the last three months of the school year that "any referral to the office was an automatic suspension;" it was a one strike rule. The principal's justification for this hyper-punitive rule was that "students should know the rules by now." Such discipline approaches have become permissible in a time when society at large has a zero-tolerance approach towards Black communities.[26] In that vein, the school-to-prison pipeline has come to operate not just as a trajectory but as two institutional systems that, together, normalize Black children and adults as the problem and institutional punishment as the solution.[27] In Twinsburg, the institutional policies and school leaders created a suspension and expulsion pipeline that targeted Black students in general and Heights students specifically.

Lastly, academic tracking was another key area where the hierarchical reminder of student value became imprinted. In other research, tracking has been found to exclude Black students from college preparation courses and concentrate the student group into remedial and non-college prep courses.[28] Tracking is another formal policy that appears fair, but often serves racist ends through its unspoken function and implementation. The twins from the Heights,

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Brittani and Brandi, described tracking in Twinsburg. Brittani said: "I remember doing well in school, and being well-liked by the teachers, but there was this smart class, and I just knew some of the people in that class who would go off and do their own thing. Now I know it to be tracking, I didn't understand what that was back then. The older I get, the more I'm pissed off that I wasn't tracked at first." In a separate interview, Brandi added that a Black teacher in 4th grade talked to their mom because she was angry that the school did not place the twins in the gifted classes. Their parents advocated, and they were placed in gifted courses.

The six Heights residents in gifted courses described tracking similarly; most other residents did not know the term 'tracking.' In Twinsburg, tracking officially starts in 4th grade based largely on teacher recommendations and parent advocacy or lobbying. The 4th grade gifted students are not in separate classes yet, but they are pulled out of class for advanced math instruction, special field trips, and discussions on their superior cognitive abilities. In 5th grade, the gifted students take a test to see if they have advanced in math after having advanced math instruction. The test is open to all students, but it is likely that those with prior advanced math instruction are also the students who test high enough to be officially labeled "gifted." (I took the test in 5th grade without advanced math instruction and, subsequently, never was marked gifted in the school district, although I later enrolled in advanced courses). None of the seven Heights residents interviewed who eventually enrolled in courses on the gifted track were selected from this test except the twins.

The gifted track has a long-term impact: the same students identified as gifted in 4th grade took most of their classes together from 5th grade until they graduated from high school. They became the AP and honors students, scholarship recipients, and academic elite in the high school. Beyond high school, research documents how students in gifted courses are more likely

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to access a 4-year college that is selective and graduate from college.[29] In this study, the Heights students who were on the gifted track graduated in the years of 1994, 2006, 2010, 2016, and 2017. They all, like myself, described being one of only a few Black students in these classes and, in most cases, the only one from the Heights. This position of isolation experienced by Heights residents was the result of earlier tracking, which functioned to sort all students in TCSD but also uniquely limited education opportunity for Heights residents due to multiple forms of racism. As discussed in the next chapter, Black students' different academic tracks structured how they experienced and perceived racism in the school.

Black Students Provide Maps

Heights residents' experiences provide maps that locate where, how, and when power is functioning in TCSD. The residents' stories name how school leaders and classmates perpetuate anti-Blackness and locate where power operates: the classroom, sports teams, and the principal's office. They also name the "when" of power such as transitioning from the neighborhood to the school district and the assignment of gifted labels in 5th grade. McKittrick argues the identity and lived experiences of marginalized people provide maps. Likewise, Gillian Rose describes these experiential maps as contested "spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map…. [but instead are] occupied simultaneously."[30] In other words, spaces such as the school or the neighborhood are not mutually exclusive for Heights residents. Through the Heights stigma, residents simultaneously occupy these spaces through how they are treated and viewed. Likewise, Heights residents use their sense of place and sense of self to be conscious of the mistreatment they face in TCSD; they are able to map power because they are at the center of it. They remember Head Start and the neighborhood as (counter)examples to what affirmation and education can be like for Black people. Residents occupy their space in the school district

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well aware of the paradox. Their schooling was "good" defined as proximity to abundant resources and racist defined as the district's reliance on anti-Blackness to function.

Also, the Heights residents' maps locate school racism not as an aberration but an ideological tool for wider Twinsburg. In a study on racial inequality in a suburban school district, Amanda Lewis and James Diamond conclude that white parents and white school leaders maintain institutional racism through interactional racism. The two forms of racism need each other. The authors explain: "The point here is that inequality is built not only through structural arrangements and institutional practices but also through micro-level interactions. How do members of the white middle and upper class rationalize their positions in status hierarchies? They engage in ideological work, including the marking of symbolic boundaries between deserving and undeserving social actors, or people "above" and "below" others."[31]

The symbolic and material boundaries in school districts like TCSD reflect the racist geographic boundaries, that are also both symbolic and material, in the wider city. The function of schools then is not to serve as an equalizing mechanism that evens out the consequences of unfair boundaries around resources, development, and human value in wider society. The function of school districts like TCSD is to create a set of ideological justifications and unquestioned practices for these boundaries to sustain and reproduce.[32] Consequently, Black students' overrepresentation in discipline and underrepresentation in gifted courses seems commonsense; they are the "undeserving."

Further, poor Black students never have to prove they are undeserving. Black students' existence as residents of the "bad" neighborhood, members of the Black race, and inhabitants of the working-class signal to white students and school leaders that they are at the bottom of the hierarchy. The last bus, the punishments, and tracking were just some of the symbolic boundaries

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that underpinned the hierarchy in school and society. If schools were where Heights students learned that their Blackness was viewed as "bad," then it also was where white people learned that white supremacy was fair, and even ideal. The interplay between interactional and institutional racism follows Heights students regardless of their academic achievement. At the same, the in-school racism also leads to spaces of resistance that reveal how Black students make and disrupt place in schools.

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No matter how clearly they understand their lives, no matter what cultural innovations they produce, no matter how diligently they devote themselves to school, they cannot escape the constraints of social class. Conformists accept the ideology and act within the system but come up against the barriers of class; only a few break through. Nonconformists balk and do no better; in effect, they withdraw from the system, never test its limits, and generally find themselves in worse shape. [1]

—Jay McLeod

[L]ower-achieving peers often are offended by what they perceive to be high achievers' arrogance and haughtiness. Some academically able youth may attempt to avoid such criticisms by figuring out how to cultivate and maintain relationships with their same-race and -class peers, even if doing so may mean jeopardizing their own achievement. By leaving racialized tracking unchallenged, we require some students to negotiate and devise strategies to minimize the fallout from a system that they neither created nor consented to, a system that demonstrably determines winners and losers based on their race and class.[2]

—Karolyn Tyson

Chapter 4 - Understanding Student Achievement

Heights residents' academic achievement can be organized into three categories of performance: low, average, and high. The academic experiences discussed in this chapter include those of parents, young adults, and high school students—all of whom enrolled in TCSD between 1980 and 2017. Each resident was enrolled in TCSD for at least 8th grade through high school. Together, Heights residents' choices and experiences show that achievement is a relational performance based on power dynamics between students, the school structure, and school leaders.

The Heights residents with low academic performance often mentioned "failing two or three classes," and "taking credit recovery" in middle school and/or high school. For most students, they identified 7th and 8th grade as the grades in which their grades declined. High school was often a continuation. Many Heights residents explained that their level of academic engagement depended upon their relationships with school leaders. For many low performing students, it was critical for them to feel that a teacher was invested in them before they were open to their teaching. For example, Jon, a high school junior, said: "I felt like teachers didn't

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give a fuck about me, so I said fuck their work. I know it hurt me the most." Jessica, a high school junior, described only "failing classes where she did not like the teachers." Vindel said "none of the teachers cared how I was being bullied so I ain't care about their class. I was a rebel, smoking weed in school, and skipping class." Often low-performing residents described a type of agency in not performing well in a teacher's class that they did not like.

School sports also were a factor in how students discussed low academic achievement, especially among Black males. Notably, Black males often described being engaged in school until 7th and 8th grade, which was the first time one can try out for a Twinsburg school athletic team. Many of these students, who had played sports on recreational teams prior to middle school, did not make the school sports teams. They described being cut from the teams during tryouts as the driving force behind their academic disengagement. Aaron was a case in point:

> I was playing basketball, travel basketball, for Twinsburg from fourth grade all the way up to seventh grade. Seventh grade is where it's no more travel. You play for the school and my whole travel team made it. I had my grades together. I was playing good. My grades, I'm going to say it again, my grades were great. I made the first cut on the basketball team, and then the second cut, they put a guy over me that wasn't supposed to make the team at all and he made the team because his people worked for the school. Basically, I went sour to everything else because I continued to see people every year gradually that were from up here [the Heights] that ain't make the team. I basically said, "Fuck school" after this had happened.

The argument that Heights students were cut while white students with well-connected parents made the school sports teams is a repeated theme. Residents shared their experiences with sports discrimination in the oral history documentary and in interviews. Discrimination in school sports had serious consequences for many of the Black males, who defined their identity through sports because they believed it was not only their talent but also their pathway to college and out of poverty. In turn, when they believed they were cut due to anti-Blackness, their investment in academic achievement also was cut. Billy Hawkins, in his work on Black males

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and sports, argues that society values the student group primarily on its athletic ability, assumed to be athlete-students always before student-athletes. Similarly, the way that Aaron along with others discussed their exclusion suggests that they were lied to about school sports and, therefore, other aspects of school were not worth their trust.

For all low-performing Heights students, they believed that the ultimate responsibility for their academic performance fell on their shoulders. At the same time, they were conscious of the mistreatment they faced in school. Low-performing Heights students reported not feeling affirmed in school because of their identity and grades. I asked them if there were other ways that they found value in themselves if people viewed them, as Tyler said, "as a failure because of grades." The students named how disengaging from school caused them to find affirmation in other ways.

For example, Vindel said, "I was cut off by everyone because I was gay. My parents, teachers, principals, and friends. But I made it through because I was forced to own who I am because nobody else was gonna claim me. So yeah, I don't feel bad about not doing well in school because it kind of helped me find who I was and everybody can't say that." Aaron said he turned to "rapping." He wanted to focus on how to become a better rapper and embraced that "[he] had to have tough skin because everyone was going to think [he] just another nigga tryin' to rap." Bryan focused on working: "I got my first couple jobs in high school and had my own money for the first time. That is what I cared about—how to make money—and being in school was not doing that. I took this class in high school with all these Black people and we got to leave early to go to work." Twinsburg high school offered a class that mostly Black students enrolled in where they were able to be released from graduation requirements such as foreign language to leave school early and go to work. The work was not career focused, but often low-

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wage fast food, grocery store, and restaurant jobs. For students who were low-income, low wages were better than no wages.

While still debatable, most low-performing students viewed their disengagement as a choice or an intentional action. They were able to name other investments—be it a job, social relationship, or non-school activity—that were their priorities. The research question of why some Black students are academically disengaged may be unrivaled in the large body of work, competing theoretical lenses, and conflicting findings surrounding it.[3] For this study, resistance theory offered the most useful lens to examine low-performing Heights students' mean-making. Resistance theory argues that students' disengagement can be an act of refusal to resist the ideology of achievement in schools.[4] The refusal can (un)knowingly challenge the institutional operation and culture of a schooling environment. Along these lines, Tyson's research on Black student achievement found:

> Students who have had more negative educational experiences which they judge to be in some way unfair are more likely to reject the meritocracy ideal…the internal contradictions that poor, low-income, and minority youth often contend with as they try to make sense of their circumstances. Those who have experienced school failure and other negative outcomes often have strong critiques of the opportunity structure and its tendency to reproduce itself. Yet, these same youth also tend to blame themselves for their failures and for what they did or did not do that undermined their chances for success.[5]

In other words, low-performing Heights students are not against learning and earning an education. Many of the low-performing students verbalized regret around not "doing better" in TCSD. They, instead, stood against false promises that all students were equal as they experienced mistreatment as Black students from the Heights. They were refusing the idea that their hard work would result in social mobility when the school district, the supposed engine of mobility, was perceived to be unfair.

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Next, the students in the average academic performance group often described "just doing enough to get by." Most Heights students were in this group. Often Black student athletes with average performance claimed that they only cared about school to the extent that it allowed them to be eligible for their respective sports. The Black male students on school sports teams shared comments like Michael, 41 years old, who said "I was good and knew I just needed to do well for eligibility." Ron, 25 years old, shared how his coach talked to teachers who were trying to fail him and convinced them to let him retake a test. Moe said, "my guidance counselor who was also one of my basketball coaches straight up changed my grade in front of me, so I could be eligible." Imani, a parent of multiple sons who were star athletes, said "my children got special treatment. It was clear favoritism because they good at sports so they ain't have to do much in school to get decent grades." Heights athletes often described the benefits of having sports coaches who were also teachers and intentionally taking those coaches' classes. Again, sports become the primary way that Black students were valued in the school.

Non-athletes in this academic category described being distracted with what Melody, a high school sophomore, called "teenage stuff." Many students were focused on dating, socializing with friends, and just graduating. These Heights students often did not report getting in trouble or failing classes. Multiple students in this group described their grades similarly to Maurice who was a junior in high school: "I get mainly B's and C's. Never no F's, not many A's. I am an okay student." While average-performing Black students who were in high school or graduated in the 2000s did not report any stories of teenage pregnancy, many of the students in the 1990s did. Brandy, Cindy, and Moe all described becoming a parent in high school or right after. In addition, they said that they had other high school friends who were pregnant at the same time as them. These early pregnancies, however, did not deter them from graduating high

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school. All three said that they earned all the credits they needed to graduate by their senior year when they (or, in Moe's case, their girlfriend) became pregnant. For students in the average performing group, they were not worried about adult life or consequences. They were being kids. In interviews, residents did not feel strongly or negatively about academics. Justin, a junior in high school, said "I'm just trying to keep my head low, have fun, and hang with friends. I guess I will worry about college and stuff like that in my senior year."

For the high-performance group, there were only 6 high academically performing students in this study and they all were Black women on the gifted track. Serena and the twins, Brittani and Brandi, were the only three to be tracked in elementary school through high school. In contrast, Shannon, Tamera, and Shauntel all were placed in gifted classes in 7th and 8th grade once their parents advocated for it. The latter three girls were high achieving with GPAs above 3.5 and took many but not all honors and AP classes offered. They all described the dynamics of the gifted classes as "super white" and a place where they kept to themselves. Shannon reported, "I have no friends in there. Every year these classes get whiter. The same kids been in these classes together forever. I am always the only one from the Heights." Shauntel described the social barrier in the class "as I have nothing to talk to them [white middle-class students] about. Their topics of conversation just be different. I can't talk to them about being broke and being Black." I asked Shannon why she believes there are not more Black students in the class and she focused on the teachers. Her example was that most of "these students been in advanced math for years so when somebody like me tries to take honors from the regular classes I am a little behind. The teachers just make you feel stupid because you do not know stuff. But it is not my fault. I was not put in the advanced classes until now." The honors classes presented no social or academic comfort for most Heights students. The Black students in the gifted courses remained

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in them to prove they were as good as the white students; not because of school support and encouragement. Their affirmation came from defying anti-Black stereotypes.

Serena and the twins, Brittani and Brandi, were the highest performing students in this study. Serena, who graduated in 1998, was ranked 17th in her class and attended summer programs at a local college for academically gifted youth. She remembered being pulled out of class for advanced instruction as early as 6th grade. Likewise, the twins tied as salutatorians of their graduating high school class in 2006. There were two plaques in the high school that displayed their pictures with the inscription: national merit scholars. Brittani and Brandi were tracked the earliest, but again because their parents advocated. The gifted classes became the primary classroom environment that the three women knew and, over time, they became somewhat of insiders. Brittani said that teachers told the gifted students they were the "intellectual elite in the school and… the ones going to college."

This early tracking, however, caused Brittani, Brandi, and Serena to struggle with being Black and high academic achievers. Like my story shared in the introduction, white students made it clear that they were the thing to be, but that Black gifted students could never be one of them. Although graduating a decade a part, the twins and Serena both learned early to be ashamed of their Blackness and of being from the Heights. Serena was more reluctant to speak about what she described as existing in a rock and a hard place: "I hung with mostly white people because they were in all my classes and stayed away from the Black students because I felt like they were judging me for the way I looked and talked. The problem was the white students were doing the same thing. So, I mostly stayed to myself. I honestly hated Twinsburg." Brittani went more in-depth about the double shame of race and place. For her, both types of shame were "deeply tied together." She went on to say:

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> I was worried people would judge me like the other people from the Heights. I think it was a fixation I got to be different. 'Oh, I'm not like them. I'm better than that because I'm in AP classes, and talk this way. I have both of my parents,' and really not thinking about all of the things I had digested. I was not that deep of a thinker. I was not that critical minded, I was not thinking about all of that. I just knew I was accepted. I'd fit in with white people in the school, people in AP classes, but also at the same time feel a separation in a lot of ways from people in the Heights and the white students.

Brittani was expressing the multiple ways that Black high achieving students must suffer for their achievement. The gifted Black students experienced the Heights' stigma too. They were Black, girls, and from "the bad part of town." They were, therefore, never assumed to be equal to nor academically capable as their white peers. The twins had to do double the work. They had to out-achieve their white peers just to be considered a part of their elite circle. In addition, they had to prove that they were willing to sabotage or divest from their Blackness and their neighborhood, and to hold white meritocracy on a pedestal. This balance between shame of their Blackness and the Heights and striving to white standards was what Brittani called a "fixation." Achieving this balance as the token or exceptional Black person created a type of buffer; they were not the primary target of anti-Blackness in Twinsburg schools. The "gifted" Heights residents were aware, from watching other Heights students be targets, that anti-Blackness meant being looked down upon, tracked into remedial classes, and enduring school leaders' hyper-discipline. The gifted students provide key insights not only into their achievement but the lower achievement of their neighborhood peers. While Tamera, Shannon, and Shauntel described strong connections with other Heights students as their primary friend group, the twins and Serena felt like outsiders among Heights students. The first three girls, for example, consciously chose to remain in some non-advanced classes to be close to their friends from the Heights. The latter three girls were in all gifted courses but felt splintered from their Black identity.

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There is a dominant theory in education and in public discourse that Black students perceive high academic achievement as synonymous with whiteness. The argument is that gifted Black students are "accused of acting white" and "education itself is seen as a white thing." In turn, Black students choose to disengage from academics to not be perceived as white. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu's work is most associated with the "acting white" theory. [6] Ogbu offers a clarifying explanation of the theory: "Black students in Shaker Heights and probably elsewhere did not reject making good grades per se because it entailed acting White… These students seemed to reject certain attitudes and behaviors that they perceived or interpreted as White, but that were *conducive* to making good grades."[7]

This argument has been highly contested within scholarly work; many say that it is the way schools are structured rather than Black students' culture that is the problem.[8] In fact, when Black students lodge critiques—even in the form of "acting white" comments—about their top-performing peers, it is often, as Michael Dumas argues, "a critique of power. A testimony of their own collective suffering in school, and less an accusation than an inquiry: which side are you on?"[9]

In the case of the Heights, the Black students did not take issue with the fact that the twins, the other four Black women on the gifted track, or myself were in AP class or "buried in our work." In fact, the Heights students in this study did not experience the "acting white" criticism from Black students. They described instead that their Black peers viewed them with "respect," "looked up to them," and "celebrated them." The twins reported hearing the criticism, however, from white students. Brittani remembered "white students telling me that I am not really Black. Really, they were saying my high grades meant I was white. Black people having good grades was not a possibility in their mind."

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Likewise, Brandi's experience makes clear that Black students' low and average academic achievement was a result of school structure:

> I absolutely think the gifted classes created power dynamics. I always think of the Stanford prison experiment. People literally taking a group of people, they just say, 'You guys are the guards, you guys are the prisoners.' They don't do anything else. I know that simply naming something, and calling something, and making it an exception, setting it apart from a larger group, that has power. We've seen it again and again. I felt that. Even in high school, even when I was younger, I was conscious of that. I'm being embedded with some kind of extra power that makes me different from a Black kid from the Heights who may need to have an IEP or needs special education. They treat me different. The teachers smiled at me when I walk in the room, when I have ideas they listened to me. They praised me, they give me awards. I was uncomfortable. I hope I'm always uncomfortable with that power, because it's part of the forces that keep other Black people from being recognized.

The "power dynamics" that Brandi outlined were designed and implemented through interactional and institutional anti-Blackness in Twinsburg schools. Further, these forms of power played a significant role in achievement for students across performance groups. The gifted students felt empowered and the low or average performing students were disempowered. This role of power is understudied in scholarly debates on Black students' academic engagement (or lack thereof).[10]

The uneven power dynamics of student achievement caused Black students in advanced courses to develop various coping strategies. Based on my own experiences and interviews with gifted students, the following anti-Black coping mechanisms were salient: (1) setting white people's values and beliefs as our own, (2) relying heavily on "I don't speak white - I speak right," (3) romanticizing our spaces of academic achievement as inclusive and equal opportunity, and (4) distancing ourselves from anything too explicitly Black (e.g. the Heights neighborhood). These coping mechanisms came to exist because high achieving Black students felt tokenized, asked to balance their Blackness and achievement, and used to mask school inequality.

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On the outside of the academic elite, other Black students questioned how the only time Black students are acknowledged is when they can be marked high achieving. Further, they saw firsthand how tokenized examples of Black academic achievement became tools for glossing over the ways that Twinsburg schools (re)produced anti-Blackness. As Brandi explained, her tokenization was "part of the forces that keep other Black people from being recognized." In my high school experience, it went like "If Jalil is doing well, then the other Black students are just lazy or unmotivated." This logic suggested that my success meant there was no racism or Heights stigma. Again, I was rewarded if I adopted and testified to these logics as truth.

It is evident that race and place shape Heights students' academic engagement across performance groups. For the low-performing students, they refused to invest or put trust in schools that did not treat them as valuable. The average-performing students simply took advantage of the low expectations placed on them and did enough to pass courses and stay out of trouble. The high-performing students expended great energy to disprove stereotypes, often leaving little mental and emotional energy to define who they are as both students and people. Yet, across all groups students explicitly took responsibility for their own achievement. While the students were able to articulate institutional practices and cultures within TCSD that were racist, they believed racism was not more powerful than their choices. In the end, students fell back on meritocracy as real even when their actions and perspectives often rejected it. For Heights students, institutional and structural constraints could not completely determine their outcomes because, to accept that as fact, they would have to relinquish their agency. As Bryan said, "I know racism and shit exist, but I can't let that shit stop me. Like if it can't be beat then I'm fucked. I'm poor and Black, my momma poor and Black. Shit most everybody on this hill

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[in the Heights] is." It was critical for residents' sense of self to believe that they had the power to change their circumstances and those of their families.

To understand Black students' academic achievement, like those in TCSD, requires a focus on the interplay between agency and structure—how the two forces shape but do not predetermine each other. In a study on how lower-class white and Black teenagers perceive education and life opportunity, Jay McLeod found that life pathways exist at the intersection of structures and young people's agency: "Structure and agency are inseparable. Individual agents…are always structurally situated, and thus human agency is itself socially structured. Social structures reach into the minds and even the hearts of individuals to shape their attitudes, motivations, and worldviews. Structural determination is thus inscribed in the very core of human agency."[11]

In other words, structures not only determine one's range of choices and options but also one's thoughts and values. At the same time, structures do not have complete determination. Students can still respond to restraints in a range of ways; however, their responses will still be meditated through structural forces like race, class, place, sexuality and gender. While McLeod primarily focuses on the structural force of class, it is critical to understand structures at the intersection of multiple power dynamics. Further, the average- and high-performing students demonstrate the range of responses that Heights students employ beyond, as this chapter's epigraph suggests, "withdrawing from the system." Students' agency exists in their structured choices to conform and/or withdraw in a variety of ways. While Heights residents were so easily able to take personal responsibility for their academic achievement or lack thereof, there is still little evidence that Twinsburg or wider society are willing to do the same: that is, take social responsibility for the persistent disparities in achievement for Black students. Without holistic

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support, Heights students navigated TCSD often through creating places with different measures of value.

Finding Affirmation in White Schools

In sites of schooling, Heights residents' place-making continued. Place-making is a process that reveals how students created affirmation and contested power in Twinsburg schools. Anti-Blackness in TCSD did not keep Black students from valuing themselves. Already coming from the Heights, residents had a sense of place and Black humanity. As students, they described in detail how affirmation and joy manifested in their place-making in TCSD. I refer to Heights residents' place-making in schools as spatial acts. Katherine McKittrick argues that spatial acts are the strategies and knowledges that Black people employ to contest, create, and occupy spaces within sites of domination.[12] In other words, if Twinsburg schools are sites of domination, then a central concern is how Black students form and negotiate place in the district. Spatial acts focus place-making on the process and lived experience rather than the place or site itself, which often are temporal and fleeting. The students from the Heights engaged in spatial acts to contest white normativity in school, to create outlets for their interests, and to occupy environments that valued them.

As the first example, many students from the Heights participated in the high school's Gospel Choir and Black History Club. The clubs help to contest white normativity in the school. The school clubs were intertwined, as the same Heights students often participated in both. The few Black teachers and staff in the high school served as directors for both groups. From the documentary to my interviews, residents described the lack of Black culture, teachers, and history in TCSD. These two clubs were a chance to participate in and learn about ideas and expressions that Melody said, "weren't all white." The choir put on showcases and traveled

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around to local churches such as the Sanctuary of Praise, the largest church in the Heights. The Black History Club organized and hosted an event every February that celebrated Black culture and history through reenactments of speeches, songs, dances, and theater. Carina described the multiple benefits of Black history club:

> Black history was fun. It was an excuse for everybody to stay after school and hang with your friends, too, but with that, I think it was fun because we got to show Twinsburg, a lot of white people didn't know a lot about black culture. They just thought it was just gangster rap. It showed we're more than that. We gave a history of it. Yeah, we danced to some of the songs that were hot at the time, but we also brought back the old school, and longer history. It was a timeline.

Black students in these clubs were contesting the schooling environment, a spatial act where Blackness went from a non-thought to a central one. The clubs were a space to "hang," as well as a challenge to their white peers and school leaders to understand the abundance in Black culture. These clubs were the few times in the school environment where whiteness was not the standard or in control. Here, Black students were not excluded because of "their attitude." In addition, the Black directors, also school leaders, were not described as punitive.

A similar spatial act was the Twinsburg High School Step Team. A step team performs a coordinated performance through stomping, clapping, spoken word and singing often with music in the background. Nicole, Carina, Toni, Nia, Heaven, Lauren, and Shae were all on the step team representing graduating classes from 2006 to 2018. The step team was comprised of predominately Black girls, many from the Heights. In fact, Lauren and Heaven said that most team captains for the step team were had been from the Heights. The team was a Black sense of place for Black girls in the school. With their signature outfits of t-shirts, khakis, and Timberland boots, the step team performed at school basketball games, local competitions, and wider Twinsburg community events. The team became a network. The girls in high school went to Chamberlin, which housed 7th and 8th grade, to train young Black girls for a step team there.

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Those same middle school students often were the ones who tried out for the step team in high school. Like the Heights community, the step team came to represent a generational network where older residents recruited younger ones, and team members who graduated came back to serve as volunteer coaches.

Nicole originally made the school's cheerleading team at Chamberlin and high school, but quickly quit to try out for the step team. She said, "I never felt comfortable on the cheerleading team. They did not understand my background. Like I hated sleepovers at their houses. Their moms all knew each other, my mom didn't. But the step team was like a part of us, a part of Black people." Nia discussed the generational experience of the team: "Step team, it was more fun, because I knew everybody. My sister was one of the coaches, and step team ran in my family." She also reported having two cousins who were previously on the team.

Carina discussed first joining the drill team before the step team: "I thought [the drill team] would be like down South where they have rhythm and dance moves." She described her attempt to change the drill team's music choice and culture through recruiting more Black students to try out: "When I saw they still picked the whole team of just white girls, that's when I knew, 'Yeah, I'm done with drill team.'" She quit, joined the step team, became captain, and served as a volunteer coach after graduating.

The step team was a site of affirmation for Black girls whose self-expression—be it the way they talked, danced, or just were in the world—was often devalued in the school. Black girls from the Heights did not let exclusion completely define them; they created their own forms of inclusion. In her scholarship on the criminalization of Black girls in school, Monique Morris argues:

> For Black girls, to be "ghetto" represents a certain resilience to how poverty has shaped racial and gender oppression. To be "loud" is a demand to be heard. To have an "attitude"

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> is to reject a doctrine of invisibility and mistreatment. To be flamboyant—or "fabulous"—is to revise the idea that socioeconomic isolation is equated with not having access to materially desirable things. To be a ghetto Black girl, then, is to reinvent what it means to be Black, poor, and female…The "attitude" often attributed to Black girls casts as undesirable the skills of being astute at reading their location—where they sit along the social hierarchy—and overcoming the attendant obstacles. These were lessons learned through generations of struggle, and these lessons sit at the apex of what provides Black women and girls the audacity to demand being treated with dignity. However, when the way of the world includes a general lack of cultural competence and an aversion to valuing the unique considerations of gender, these survival characteristics are degraded and punished rather than recognized as tools of resilience.[13]

Morris is quoted at length because her nuanced analysis shows how Black girls resist and rework negative stereotypes and map power in schools. Through their place-making, Black girls are "reading their location" and the ways it is policed and devalued. However, Black places are not just safe spaces for relief and comfort; they also enrich academics or make education opportunity accessible.

For example, several Heights students cited the step team as their source of college knowledge. One of the directors for the step team was a Black science teacher who was a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO). Through the connection, the science teacher invited local BGLO college students to come train the step team in their organization's long tradition of stepping. The training happened both at the high school and on the local college campuses where the BGLO members were located. Carina, Lauren, and Nichole all said this was their first time "really" learning about college and "being on a campus." Nichole, a first-generation college student, said "all I knew was that I wanted to be a member of the Divine 9 [BGLO]." Similarly, Lauren discussed that the "school needed to have a step team" in her college search. The Heights students' spatial acts reworked who and what is centered in their educational spaces and, as a result, created school and college knowledge networks. Similarly, the 2017 documentary *Step* about a step team that Black girls started in their Baltimore school

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shows how the team became a site for affirmation, academic achievement, and pathways to college. Together, the step teams, hundreds of miles apart, show that Black place-making does not happen in isolation; it often manifests in patterned ways across the country.

Another primary spatial act that Heights students described was participating in the Cuyahoga Valley Career Center (CVCC). Heights residents occupied the CVCC space as an escape from Twinsburg's middle-class, white culture and an opportunity to learn employable skills. The career center is a vocational school that enrolls students for free from a consortium of eight school districts, including TCSD. Heights students enrolled in career prep programs such as health, mechanics, cosmetology, business, office management, and culinary arts. CVCC students split their school day between their home school district and the vocational school. Many students graduate with certificates, transferrable credits to local colleges, work experience, and job placement. In this study, there were nine residents who attended CVCC representing graduating classes from 1994 to 2017. They described it as different from Twinsburg. Shauntel said it "was more of a community;" Devin said, "I feel more comfortable there than Twinsburg;" and Eryn remembered "all the Black people from the other schools that were similar to [her]." The Heights residents described finding community and comfort through more CVCC students sharing their working-class backgrounds and/or race. In CVCC, Devin said "we created a supportive Black family but in Twinsburg it is all competitive."

In addition, Heights students said that they learned about CVCC from older Heights students who loved the vocational school and encouraged them to enroll. Toni commented on how she liked the ability to learn knowledge and skills that she could directly apply to "make money." The students were not always confident that college would work out for them due to the cost, work level, or return on their degree but they were confident that CVCC was providing

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them with an employable skill set to rely upon. The Heights students occupied a space, learned about from older residents, that allowed them to be on a post-high school pathway to college and/or the labor market.

While these spatial acts contribute to Black students' sense of place in TCSD, they are not without contestation. Again, a Black sense of place forms in contestation with sites of domination. A case in point is the "harassment" Lauren said that the Twinsburg High School Step Team faced from school leaders, particularly from the high school principal. The step team served as a formative experience for Black girls from 7th to 12th grade, so much so that many returned to be volunteer coaches. In the high school, however, Heights students reported that the step team was constantly reprimanded for the girls' dance moves, outfits, and the lyrics from their performance music. Despite the step team being an official school activity, the team was rarely provided support such as space to practice, funding for uniforms, and competition travel. Toni said, "we always had to practice in random spaces in the hallways while the cheerleaders were allowed to practice in the gym. And when the basketball players took over the gym, the cheerleaders' coaches kicked us out the hallways." Heaven said, "the school basketball coaches often interrupted our half-time performances and the school did nothing for us. Just nothing." The reports of feeling harassed in the high school came from Heights residents across graduating classes ranging from 2006 to current students.

Carina who was volunteering as a coach in the 2016-2017 school year explained that the mistreatment of the step team reached a breaking point: "They treated the girls so wrong. After a while, enough was enough. We worked with the rec [local fitness center] to switch to them." The step team is no longer a school program and now is under the Twinsburg Fitness Center. Carina explained that the switch to the fitness center "made sense" because the director offered to

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provide them a place to practice, buy them uniforms, and support their performances locally and regionally. Again, Black girls were forced to engage in spatial acts to find a space where they were affirmed, and their joy was not policed.

While CVCC afforded Black students the ability to define their post-high school pathways and connect with other working-class Black students—two possibilities not fully supported in TCSD—Heights students' representation in a vocational school is suspect. Historically, vocational curriculums have been used to track Black people into low-wage jobs, based on the racist belief that the group did not have the cognitive capacity to attend college.[14] Devin and Porsha both expressed discomfort with their counselors presenting CVCC to them as an alternative to college. Devin said, "CVCC makes sense. But I can do that and go to college. So, I looked at him [the counselor] like what?" Toni explained that her goals to be a nurse led her to attend CVCC to earn credits and gain experiences towards certificates like the state tested nursing assistant (STNA) certificate. She described her counselor's advice as discouragement: "They told me don't go into the health field, it isn't going to be easy. I listened to them and did medical administration assistant instead." Toni regretted following her counselor's advice because she believes she was more than capable of pursuing a practitioner career in the health field. Heights students reported the same low expectations they faced in school also shaped the advice that Twinsburg school leaders provided around CVCC.

Together, Heights students' spatial acts in school reveal both how the students value themselves and the power dynamics they experience. Across the spaces that Black students contest, create, and occupy, there was a strong sense that their Blackness is valuable. In the clubs, Blackness was valuable to learn about. On the step team, Black girls' expression and networks were valuable. At CVCC, an education environment that catered to Heights students'

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employment needs and facilitated interaction with students from their similar background was valuable. The Heights students centered their racial experiences in their schooling and, in turn, formed knowledge networks and communities that helped them navigate TCSD. In a way, TCSD also centered Heights students' race—but as a problem. Heights students felt that their forms of engagement were treated as second-tier in the school. Unlike other extracurricular activities, Black students' clubs and teams were always in a state of uncertainty. Students did not know if the activity would be there next year for later Black students. For their clubs and teams, Black students had to find and retain directors, raise funds, and resist the high school's neglect and/or interference. It is the students' place-making that reveals both Heights students' agency and how anti-Blackness functioned.

Placing Achievement

Academic achievement has been discussed through Heights students' choices and experiences within a racialized school context. The students explicitly connect their achievement to personal responsibility. In addition, they connect achievement (un)knowingly to anti-Blackness and the school district's irresponsibility in addressing it. Black student achievement requires a dual focus on personal and social responsibility. The former dominates education debates on Black children and the latter remains a marginal idea. Simply put, it remains easier to discuss Black students' choices, motivations, and grit than to discuss society's lack of structural support to remedy and counter racism. As a result, Black students are always framed through the achievement gap, a reference to the persistent disparities in academic outcomes between white and Black students.[15]

As Gloria Ladson-Billings argues, stakeholders in education along with mass media have focused largely on Black students' achievement gap rather than the education debt owed to the

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student group. The gap is another ideological geography in education; it symbolizes a large, gaping hole that cannot not be closed and that is naturally formed. The gap has been naturalized through deficit frames that blame Black people's cognitive ability, culture, family structure, or bad choices for education disparities.[16] Through the frame of education debt, Ladson-Billings de-naturalizes the gap and shows how the refusal to invest in Black people has led to an education gap that will persist until past debt is paid. Education debt is defined in four ways: (1) historical debt for exclusion from formal public education; (2) economic debt for creating policies that (re)produce racial inequities in school funding, income, wealth, and resources; (3) sociopolitical debt for barring full and equal participation in legal and political systems; and (4) moral debt for refusing to do what is needed to address racial oppression and transform life opportunity.[17] The same Black children who endure unequal schools become adults in the labor market with uneven credentials, then parents supporting families with inequitable incomes, and community members in neighborhoods with unbalanced resources. The debt is generational.

In Twinsburg, if education debt had been used as the dominant frame, then the school district would have operated differently. TCSD would acknowledge its racial history, then anticipate the consequences of that history for Heights students. Based on the historic and ongoing role of racism, the school district would have provided proactive and relevant support for the residents and active unlearning for school leaders. Black students' academic achievement on education pathways would be structured by personal but also social responsibility. As a result, conversations and interventions around academic achievement would shift from a focus solely on classroom interactions to include what happens or happened in the Heights neighborhood. In the end, Heights students' schooling is not primarily about deficits that must be overcome or gaps that cannot be closed, but rather about the education debt that is owed and unpaid. Imagining a

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race-conscious TCSD is not abstraction. Heights students, themselves, provide models on how TCSD could operate differently.

As place-makers, Heights students created places in the school district that have lessons for understanding achievement disparities as well as addressing them. First, it is telling that residents did not report or describe any of their Black place where high achievement was criteria for inclusion. The places that they occupied—clubs, teams, and alternative schools—centered Blackness as the defining feature. Across performance groups, residents called into question meritocracy and how it functioned in rigged and racialized ways. TCSD's meritocracy worked for a few Black students, but the Black places created and inhabited by Heights residents worked for many more.

Heights students' places serve as models for valuing Black people, fostering connections to achievement, highlighting student knowledge, acknowledging student advocacy, and structuring education pathways. It was the step team that modeled how to shift campus visits and college networks from an individual family effort to a school activity. The Black history club and gospel choir demonstrated the diversity of representation that Heights students sought to see in the school. The two clubs presented Black history, put on cultural productions, and invited Black professionals as career lecturers. Through CVCC, Heights students found a space to connect their working-class background and financial stressors to their education pathways. They wanted education opportunity that was explicitly about and structured towards more economic opportunity. Toni, who occupied all three sites, said "so many students from the Heights join these groups or go to CVCC because they can just be Black." Heights students seemed to want a schooling experience where their Blackness was uncompromised. They could be a student who was proud of their identity with diverse interests and experiences along with high aspirations for

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life after high school. TCSD's academic structure did not always create this racial synergy, and too often required students to splinter themselves. Each Black place in the school served as an alternative example on how to support Heights students' self-expression, identity-based experiences, and lived realities.

In sum, the Heights students were engaged in multiple forms of labor to navigate the TCSD. They created places that re-made and disrupted spaces in the school district. Yet, the Heights stigma continued and impacted students' relationships with school leaders, academics, and sense of place in the district. The next chapter discusses how the power dynamics of TCSD influenced Heights students' post-high school choices. To be sure, TCSD along with the Heights' segregation from wider Twinsburg City did not completely determine Heights students' post-high school pathways. However, the unequal treatment in school and uneven development in the neighborhood together help set the context of opportunity once the students graduated.

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She has no idea what she's doing in college

That major that she majored in don't make no money
But she won't drop out, her parents will look at her funny
Now, tell me that ain't insecure
The concept of school seems so secure

Sophomore three years aint picked a career[1]

—Kanye West

Chapter 5 — "Just Go to College" – The Promised Land

Applying to college is often discussed and framed in national policy discussions, media outlets, and schools as the natural next step after high school.[2] There is a master narrative of college as "always a benefit." My conversations with Heights residents show that going to college is everything but natural, and that the benefits are experienced unevenly or not at all. Current high school residents and older residents, reflecting on their thinking around college, offer a range of perspectives on how they understood pathways to higher education. The dominant perspective, however, on post-high school pathways among residents was that one must "just go to college." To help organize the discussion of residents' college application and on-campus experiences, the year they graduated or will graduate high school is provided.

From the college application and decision-making process to on-campus experiences, residents navigate college pathways that are built through race, class, and struggle. Nicole, class of 2006, explained the importance of attending college with, "nobody ever talked about graduating college. They just said you had to go. So, I went." She went on to say that she was close to graduating high school when her step team coach sat her down and "made me apply to [the University of] Akron. So that was my application process." Cindy, class of 1999, reflected on her senior year of high school and said, "I think I was just living in the moment. And just like

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ok, I'm just trying to get out of high school right now. I knew I had to just go to college, so I applied right after I graduated [high school]."

For most Heights residents, from the 1980s to today, college was the next step after high school. In contrast, elderly residents did not view college as the expected next step; for them it was factory or domestic work. The younger residents reflect a generation in which college not only was accessible due to anti-discrimination laws and financial aid but also positioned as the primary way to experience mobility in a knowledge, rather than industrial, economy.[3] However, students meeting the expectation to attend college does not mean that they understood how to apply.

The Heights residents often applied to college at the end of or after high school, with little prior planning. Guidance counselors are key school leaders in the college application process, but Heights residents had little interaction with them in Twinsburg High School. Research documents how guidance counselors operate as gatekeepers. The school leaders can track Black students away from college-prep high school classes and neglect their college application processes.[4] Twinsburg High School's four counselors—all white—were described as racial gatekeepers for the school's student body of about 1,300 students. Melody, class of 2018, said "I do not think a guidance counselor has ever reached out to me to talk about college. They have some college fairs and stuff, but definitely not reaching out for one-on-one help." Alivia, class of 1986, described herself as shy and said, "I was from the Heights and kept to myself, so my guidance counselor did not really ever check on me. But I do remember when I worked up the nerve to talk to him about college, he responded back to me that 'I was not college material.' That comment hurt me to my core." Likewise, Lauren, class of 2008, shared how Heights students were treated in the college process:

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> I feel like all the teachers in the school system looked at kids from the Heights negatively or like we're not gonna make it far. In high school, the guidance counselors, they weren't really helpful at all. It's just like, well if you're not that helpful, we gotta depend on ourselves to make it out. I needed a guidance counselor to be like, 'Lauren, these are your next steps, this is what you need to do to get there.' I feel like I always just got a blanket explanation. There was no one really keeping tabs on me, wanting me to stay on the right path.

Heights residents did not find their guidance counselors to be a resource for college knowledge or support. A study on student-counselor relationships found, "students make decisions about counselor efficacy and support; they make decisions about who to trust for college guidance and where to get information. Many times, students perceive counseling as a negative experience and seek guidance from other resources."[5] Heights residents sought alternative ways to learn about college; for them their college knowledge was often relationship-driven. They relied primarily on their personal networks.

Parents provided a critical relationship for Heights residents' pathways to college. Residents often shared that they were going or went to "college to make their parents proud" or "to graduate, find a job, and help my mom out." Almost all residents reported high college aspirations due to their parents' messaging around college. Overwhelmingly, Heights parents believed that college was something their "children should do." Many parents did not graduate themselves but wanted their children to complete a degree. Some parents believed college was non-negotiable, their child must go. Other parents believed college was the most lucrative path, but maybe not the path for their child. Eryn, a parent with a bachelor's and master's, said "I want my children to be happy before all else. I live in expensive Twinsburg, so they can have the education that gives them the option to go to college, but college ain't for everyone. I have four kids. Two of them are college bound but the other two want to go straight into working. I support different paths." Serena, who was also a parent with the same level of degree completion, said

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"college may not be for my son. I know enough to help him learn a trade, a skill, or a job outside of college, because it is better he does a path that fits him rather than a path that is a wrong fit. Then he drops out and has to pay back debt with no degree. That is hurting too many poor Black kids." Parents viewed college as the most beneficial option but believed that the potential benefits depended on their child as a student.

Another critical relationship was residents' peer networks. Devin, class of 2017, said, "I found my colleges on my own and applied on my own. I requested to have a meeting with her [guidance counselor] seven times and still haven't had it yet. She be dodging me." Devin went on to apply to a community college in Southern Ohio that he found with a group of friends. He told me, "we filled out the application together at the same time at my house. Now we are looking for an apartment that is nearby the school before we start classes." For Devin it was important to be with his friend network. He emphasized that his peers in the Heights were not just friends, but family: "They are my brothers. We been having each other's backs our whole lives. [When] they ain't have no food, they came over here; and same for me, I went to their houses." Devin and his friends, who came by during the interview, could not tell me much about this college or any detailed explanations on its fit for their goals. One of them just had "a friend already there." During a visit home a few months after our interview, I ran into Devin on the sidewalk. He told me that neither he nor his friends enrolled because it was too expensive to find an apartment and ultimately too far away. Nonetheless, the motivating force for him to search and apply to a college was his neighborhood peer network.

Similarly, several residents described applying to colleges that family members were attending at the time. Shae said, "Kent [State University] was the only school I applied to because my cousin was there, and she told me to apply. If I went there, she already would have

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my back." Residents found it easier to imagine their transition into college if they had family members or friends already there. Relationships were a reoccurring theme for Heights residents; when no relationship existed, it seemed difficult for them to trust the information or intent of a person, especially a school leader. When a family member or close friend provided information on the application process or campus life of an institution, residents believed them. My conversation with Toni, class of 2017, who had already applied and placed a deposit with her college, shows the importance of relationships:

> Jalil: How did you decide to apply to [your] college?
>
> Toni: My sister went there and my friend from [the neighboring town] Bedford went there. She told me about it. So, then I just looked them up and I called them. And then I went to a little meeting and they showed me around and stuff. Now I have a person there to call who is helping me with my financial aid and application.
>
> Jalil: Do you think you would have called and visited the college if someone at the high school like your counselor told you about it?
>
> Toni: No, I need to see people that's like me, who actually been through what I been through and still did it [graduated]. So, if they can do it, I know I can do it.

For Heights residents, relationships matter in the college process. Heights residents enter the application process at a disadvantage because they do not trust their school leaders. For them, it made no sense to turn to teachers or guidance counselors who viewed them through the Heights stigma. Heights residents instead applied to institutions where they already had support systems that educated them about the application process. They saw themselves in college through seeing and learning from others "like them" already enrolled. Residents have reported that relationships were critical to their upbringing in the Heights neighborhood and finding a sense of place in the TCSD. Relationships, again, through peers and family were significant factors in residents' college knowledge and application processes.

Place-Based Choices

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While most residents' college application processes focused on local options, the Heights residents who were high achievers often searched beyond. They described Ohio similar to Tamera, class of 2018, who said, "Ohio is not the place to go to college. It just does not have good schools." Four of the six high performing residents—Brittani, Brandi, Shannon, and Tamera—did not or were not considering local colleges as their top choices. Two residents were exceptions. Serena, class of 1994, enrolled in Kent and Shauntel, class of 2017, planned to enroll in Akron. Both were in pre-college programs that were feeders into the two institutions; Serena received a full scholarship and Shauntel was able to begin college as a sophomore with her high school credits if she attended a local college. In contrast, Brittani and Brandi, class of 2006, went to Cornell University. Shannon, class of 2017, and Tamera were considering primarily out-of-state colleges. They viewed out-of-state schools as real options due to their high achievement in academics and/or their individual sports. These students all reported frequent interactions with their counselors but based on their own persistence. They set up the meetings, found counselors in the hallways, and stayed on top of deadlines. Shauntel and Shannon explained how they worked with guidance counselors who they said rarely reached out to them first. Shauntel reported, "I had a plan for college and I did not really need their help but needed them to get my recommendations and paperwork in." Similarly, Shannon said "the counselors did nothing but what I told them to do. I had good grades and a lot of coaches coming to the school to recruit me. But they did not do much to help. It is like I had to help them through the process."

The twins reported receiving backlash for applying to Cornell. Like other residents, they picked the school based on relationships. It was the only school they applied to out of state because it was close to family members. Brittani remembered that one of her white classmates who also applied was a legacy applicant, but still was not accepted. The white classmate

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responded to Brittani's acceptance: "What, you got in? Well, it did help that you were Black." In reflection, Brittani said, "I resent the fuck out of the fact that made me insecure at the time. Because our application was stronger than hers. We outscored her on the SAT. We had more activities and leadership roles. Our grades were better, we tied for second in the class. Now I know white people are a trip. They'll do anything to explain away their mediocrity."

Similarly, Brandi described teachers, counselors, and peers who were formerly supportive saying little about her college application process once they knew about Cornell. She said, "I now look back on it and I am mad. Why didn't anyone encourage us [her and Brittani] to apply to Cornell or apply to more colleges, to more Ivy Leagues? Everyone just started to act different when we applied to Cornell. I guess it was 'who do these two little Black girls from the Heights think they are?'"

Like the twins, when my guidance counselor found out I was applying to Ivy League institutions, he called me into his office to discourage it. I had high grades and test scores—therefore he could not question my academic ability—but he told me, 'you will get home sick. I had a student a few years ago who went to Georgia Tech and they dropped out.' This guidance counselor supported me throughout high school and previously had recommended me for awards and leadership positions. However, when I asked him to write my letter of recommendation for Dartmouth, he wrote only three sentences that I *accidently* was able to read: "Jalil has been president of his class for four years. He is a top student. He is a leading African-American student." After reading the three basic sentences, I went into a rage in the office and demanded my counselor be switched and the institutions I applied to be sent another letter. They met my demands.

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These stories demonstrate that high-performing Heights students still faced anti-Blackness in the college process. Academic success may have offered a buffer in TCSD for high performers to escape some mistreatment, but it did not guarantee relief. Narrow ideas about what Heights students were capable of still impacted those who had the highest level of achievements.

On the other end of academic performance, there were four adult residents who never applied to college and one high school student who reported no plans to apply. For them, to be in a system of schooling was to be out of place. Darren, Tyler, Vindel, and Shawn never applied to any higher education institutions despite graduating from high school four to six years ago. The high school junior, Jon, said "I have no plans to apply to college. I gotta find a path that is for me." The common theme in their decisions not to apply was that they struggled in high school and, therefore, did not see the point in continuing to more schooling. Tyler said:

> The reason I didn't go to college after high school is because of what I had going on in life and I couldn't take it. And if college is bigger than high school, I know I wasn't going to be able to do that. So, I didn't want to make anyone upset with me, my granny [who raised him] or anybody period. 'Oh, he went to college, but he dropped out' — I didn't want anybody saying that about me, so I just didn't go. I didn't want anybody to make a fool of me.

Similarly, Shawn highlighted past schooling experiences as the evidence that college was not for him: "All I knew is, damn I struggled this long in school I do not want to go to fucking college and fucking struggle at the next level. I'm not about to do that. I'm like damn I can't do that. Every time I said I was not going to college, people was like go to the military, and I'm like I'm not going to go to the military." These residents who never applied or planned to attend college help to reveal how unnatural college is as a pathway. It is not a path that a poor Black student just finds themselves on. For these four residents, they did not feel connected to education and, as Jon said, "it was better to cut my losses now." There were older residents who also did not enroll in college right after high school, but all identified the inability to find "high

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paying jobs" or "the economy" as why they eventually applied in their late twenties and thirties. These delayed enrollees, like so many residents, learned that accessing college was no guarantee for completing college or finding employment. Based on the unequal campus experiences reported in the next section, these young Heights residents bucking college pathways early can be seen as a calculated decision in a context of limited opportunity.

Most Heights residents, however, were not high or low performing students; they described and reported their achievement as average. For this group, their college search and decision-making process focused on the local options. The main colleges that Heights residents enrolled in were the University of Akron and Kent State University. Akron and Kent are among the closest institutions to the Heights neighborhood; both are less than 25 miles away. Lauren commented on how common these enrollment patterns were for Heights residents: "My senior year, I knew everybody in the Heights was applying to Akron or Kent, that it was just going to be Twinsburg High School all over again. I really wasn't on that, I was ready to move on from high school." There were nine high school students who indicated plans to enroll in one of the two institutions and fifteen older residents who did enroll. In my own family, all my aunts and uncles enrolled in one of the institutions at some point, along with three of my siblings. The colleges were the common choice for Heights residents.

Akron and Kent are open access institutions, with acceptance rates of 96 and 85 percent, respectively.[6] While not affordable, these two institutions were financially accessible for working-class Heights residents who were often eligible for federal loans and grants and state aid to partly cover the cost of attendance. In other words, residents perceived the institutions as nearby, easy to be accepted into, and providing the most financial aid.

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There was not one resident in my study who applied to a public college in Cleveland, despite Cleveland State University and Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) also being less than 25 miles away. Heights residents held a negative view of going to college in Cleveland. Ron, class of 2010, said: "Nothing against people in Tri-C but I just don't feel like that college is a real college. First, it is in Cleveland so that's one thing. Then, it is not like a four-year college. So even if I go there, I still have to transfer to a four-year." Carina, class of 2017, said "going to college in Cleveland is going backwards. My family moved from there so I ain't going to college there." Ashley, class of 2014, said, "I did not want to go to a school in Cleveland. It is too hood." These negative comments and lack of desire to apply to Cleveland colleges reveal how residents viewed college as a symbol of place. The action of "just going to college" was a symbol that residents were in a place of mobility. They perceived living in Twinsburg already as a symbol of their mobility, as many of their families "moved up" from Cleveland or at least the all-encompassing poverty associated with it.

Thus, to enroll in a Cleveland college was "going backwards." While residents were correct in the perception that Cleveland colleges offered limited opportunity, they were wrong in the assumption that a college like Akron offered more. As discussed later, Akron graduation rates and surrounding settings are like Cleveland State; that is, it also exists in "the hood," a product of organized abandonment.[7] Nonetheless, Heights residents' college decision-making processes were shaped by what the locations around the institutions symbolized. The good and bad views on these locations impacted how residents, from high to average performers, understood their college options.

Geography of College Opportunity

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While place played a key role in residents' college application and decision-making processes, the geography of college opportunity also structures college pathways. The geography of college opportunity is an extension of the geography of opportunity, which refers to how where one lives predicts what institutions, networks, resources, and life chances are available. Through a focus on college, Heights residents' geography of opportunity can be examined as they enroll in the institutional system believed to be an engine of mobility. Here, the focus shifts only to Heights residents—young adults and parents—who enrolled as undergraduates in college. Among these two groups, 25 out of 31 residents enrolled in higher education between 1980 and 2017.[1] Before discussing their on-campus experiences, documenting how their local geography of college opportunity was structured is critical. It suggests not just what is likely to happen once residents are on campus, but what is designed to happen. For Heights residents, their geography of college opportunity is structured in the geographic domination of the Heights and proximity to low-performing colleges.

The Heights neighborhood's geographic history has present day consequences for college opportunity. As the reader will recall, the development of the Heights neighborhood and Twinsburg City created a bifurcated local geography where homeownership in valuable markets and access to high wage or salaried jobs existed in the city but not in the neighborhood. The generational impact of the uneven development meant that Heights residents grew up in lower income households with homes valued at less than nearby market prices. The same was true for their parents' childhood households. In the city, households had higher incomes, home values, and rates of ownership.[8] Yet, in society both the city and Heights residents are expected to have

[1] There were 6 adults who did not ever enroll in higher education. This group was comprised of four young adults already mentioned and two parents both of whom were in their mid-sixties therefore from the generation when college was not the expected pathway after high school.

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equal success in the same local geography of college opportunity despite the unequal advantages for city residents.

In their work on financial aid, Sara Goldrick-Rab and Nancy Kendall find colleges' "sticker price is often understated, while the availability of financial aid to create a lower net price is often overstated. We find that many institutions underestimate the costs of living while in college, the ancillary costs of academic programs (books, supplies), and the expenses that students face related to health care and family emergencies."[9] The annual average cost of enrollment for Akron is $27,002 and Kent is $25,586. The cost of attendance includes tuition and fees, but also estimates room & board, books and supplies, transportation, and personal expenses.[10] Both Kent and Akron estimated less than $2,000 being needed for personal expenses, however Heights residents often shared needing thousands to cover car repairs, send money home, and take care of themselves. Bryan shared a common experience among residents: "My mom helped pay for my stuff to get me moved into my dorm and buy books. But later I had to help her pay the light bill and fix her car. Like she helped me first so she ain't have the money later to do what she needed to do." For Heights residents, familial obligations were also an expense in the total cost of attendance. The historic extraction of and exclusion from income and wealth in the Heights created generational precarity for parents and their children. As a result, the constant decision for many residents was between paying the cost of attendance or paying their bills. Residents' college pathways were structured around precarity, often sacrificing immediate living expenses to afford college costs.

Even with financial aid, residents still described attending college like Ron "who said tuition is just too damn high. It makes no sense." All the young adults and parents who enrolled

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qualified for the federal need-based grant: the Pell Grant.[2] A common talking point in higher education policy is: The Pell Grant today only covers about 30 percent of the cost of enrollment at a public four-year institution compared to 50 percent forty years ago.[11] All Heights students who enrolled in college reported having federal student loans in their financial aid packages. Extra income or liquid wealth to pay for college was not an option for Heights residents; most shared that they sent more money home than they ever received from parents for college. In his work on Black students at predominately white colleges, Douglas Guiffrida found that the financial precarity creates tension between Black students and their families—do they break ties to invest money into college costs or provide relief to family struggling back home?[12] To be clear, as Bryan shared, Heights parents often provided small financial support along with encouraging college messages for their children. But the parents at times needed help with unexpected and sometimes consistent financial crises. Across generations, the Heights' historic and ongoing racist development designed life pathways for residents that led to less income and wealth, which in turn structured their college pathways to nearly require student loans and precarity.

Moreover, local college opportunity did not remedy or counter the geographic history of the Heights; it too was uneven and racialized. Simply put, the higher education institutions near and accessible to Heights residents all had low graduation rates (See Table 5.1). Heights residents disproportionately attended Akron and Kent for reasons that made sense for their circumstances. But Table 5.1 shows that even if residents expanded their geographic choices to apply to more colleges they would have limited options. Residents were asked to not only name the colleges that they enrolled in but also the Ohio colleges that they considered, heard about

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[2] For high school students, I used their enrollment in free or reduced lunch and/or residency in Pinewood Gardens, public housing, as proxies for their likely eligibility for the Pell grant.

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other residents attending, and wish they had attended. There is not a single institution that Heights residents enrolled in or named that graduates the majority of its Black students.

As the top two institutions for Heights residents' enrollment, Akron graduates 16 percent of its Black students and Kent State graduates only 37 percent. When examining institutions outside of the 25-mile radius around the Heights such as the University of Toledo, Youngstown State University, and Bowling Green State University, they, too, had abysmal graduation rates. In 2016, Youngstown only graduated 9 percent of its Black students while Bowling Green managed to graduate just 38 percent of the student group. These are 6-year graduation rates, not four.

Although no resident named Case Western Reserve University in their application process, I examined its graduation rate as the only selective institution within 25-mile of the Heights. Case Western does graduate most of its Black students, 69 percent, but that is 15 percentage points less than white students, who have an 84 percent graduation rate. Case Western's racial graduation gap is like other institutions that Heights students enrolled in or named. The racial graduation gap across all institutions ranged from Case Western at 15 percentage points to the University of Toledo at 33 percentage points. Every institution that Heights residents enrolled in or named had a 20 or higher percentage point gap in their Black-white graduation rate, except for Tri-C, which graduates Black students at 6 percent and white students at 19 percent. In contrast, white people in Twinsburg City have geographic and quality access to every institution mentioned above, and each one graduates 45 percent or more of their white student body, with a few exceptions. In Ohio, the same local geography is structured with different college opportunity based on race.

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As noted earlier, proximity to colleges impacts students' college choice. In a study on Ohio colleges, Eric Bettinger and Bridget Long found that "over 87 percent of students at the nonselective public, four-year colleges in Ohio lived within 100 miles when submitting their application with a median of only 10.6 miles."[13] Similarly, Amalia Dache-Gerbino and Nicholas Hillman argue that the designed arrangements of local geographies shape the hierarchy of choices students have around college. Both scholars describe rural and urban areas where students have no higher education institutions nearby as college deserts.[14] In other words, geographic proximity matters for college access, and not all people have institutions within their local geography of college choice. However, the Heights residents' high proximity to higher education institutions suggests that the definition of college deserts must be expanded.

Geography of opportunity is not solely about proximity to resources (e.g., being near colleges); it also includes the ideology that determines who can be in place and who is marked always out of place. While a desert is a natural land formation, college deserts reflect how colleges often are not built specifically in places where low-income people and/or people of color live. [15] The attention to class- and race-based power helps to denaturalize lack of opportunity as naturally occurring. The ways that institutions are distributed within a place based on race, class, and other markers of difference is critical.

The Heights neighborhood is surrounded by institutions, and residents express interest in institutions as far away as Toledo (140 miles) and Bowling Green (134 miles). By current definitions, they are not in a college desert. However, when every institution fails to graduate Black students at even close to the typical rate for white students, there is uneven opportunity. In the same local geography as white students, Heights residents' college pathways to a degree are structured as a gamble. Before they ever step on campus, they are less likely to finish. It is

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critical to remember that college deserts come from the work on food deserts, where low-income communities do not have access to high quality food.[16] The operative phrase is "high quality." Heights students do not have access to a high quality higher education institution and, therefore, are in a designed college desert. College pathways are structured through the local geographic history and the geography of college opportunity before students ever make a choice. The next section on residents' experiences once they enrolled shows how residents navigated already racialized college pathways.

Table 5.1 2016 6-Year Graduation Rates

Institution	Percent of Black Students	Percent of White Students	B/W Graduation Gap
Kent State University	37	58	21 ±
University of Akron	16	45	29 ±
Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) *	6	19	12 ±
Cleveland State University	17	45	28 ±
University of Toledo	19	52	33 ±
Youngstown State University	9	38	29 ±
Bowling Green State University	38	58	20 ±
Case Western Reserve University	69	84	15 ±
Wright State University	18	41	23 ±

*3-year graduation rate
Source: IPEDS Data, https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/InstitutionByName.aspx.

Residents' College Experiences

In this uneven geography of college opportunity, Heights residents experience college in non-traditional ways. Their experiences do not reflect the popular and scholarly narratives on college students who enroll in classes of interest, are hyper-involved in campus activities, and navigate the social life of campus.[17] An example of a popular narrative on college experiences is

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the movie *Dear White People*, which received critical acclaim for centering Black college students' racial experiences on campus.[18] However, the movie and discussion around it did little to include Black students who are not on an elite white campus and whose primary issue is not a hostile campus climate. In addition, there is a research gap on Black students who are more likely to be in an open access, two-year, or for-profit institution than a selective elite college.[19] Heights residents described college experiences that did not reflect the dominant narrative. They instead described themselves as workers before students, having little campus engagement outside the classroom, and re-enrolling in multiple institutions.

Nicole and Lauren's college pathways embody the worker-before-student experience, along with the constant precarity that Heights residents endure to be college students. When I asked Nicole to describe her three-year college experience at Akron, she began her narrative with: "Nobody even educated me on classes or like schools using you for money, or like situations that come with you going to school. Nobody. It was more like if you're going to college, you made it." Nicole still lived with a cousin in the Heights during her first semester of college. She kept her job from high school at a local fast food restaurant and commuted to campus on the bus.

There is only one bus route that runs through the Heights neighborhood, and it travels to a transit center near the University of Akron. The bus ride is scheduled to take about an hour and half; but Nicole mentioned that the "the bus did not come often, never on time, and was like two hours." Dache-Gerbino argues for public transit to be included as a college access issue. In her work, students' college opportunity is expanded and limited based on their ability to take public transit to local campuses. Further, Dache-Gerbino shows how public transit is one factor that reveals how racism is functioning in a local geography to deny college opportunity. The places

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where low-income people of color live often are the places with limited public transportation to not only higher education institutions but also local job markets.[20] Public transit may have been another reason why Heights students did not consider institutions in Cleveland; there were no direct bus routes. A bus trip from the Heights to Cleveland State University or Tri-C would take nearly three hours, although the campuses are almost the same distance from the neighborhood as Akron and Kent.

Nicole, like other Heights residents, struggled with relying on one inconsistent bus route to Akron. Consequently, she used money, saved from high school to the beginning of college, to buy a car. After commuting for a semester, she decided it made sense to live on campus. Next, she moved into an off-campus apartment with three roommates, found a job at a local gas station then a call center, and attended classes. Nicole remembered, "my grades were good, A's and B's. I just worked. I was on a schedule." Reflecting on her campus involvement and social life, she responded: "I didn't hang out with nobody my freshman year. All I did was work, go to school, and stop at Arby's." We both laughed at her mentioning Arby's like it was the local grocery store, and she said "it was for me. I was broke."

Eventually Nicole ran into problems with her roommates. She believed that her roommates thought she was "standoffish" because she never hung out. They often threw parties and Nicole said "I was just too tired and busy. I had to sleep or do my homework." After a few confrontations with her roommates, she moved out of her apartment halfway through the semester and into another place with three people who she had met in a class. To prevent the same problems, she said "I actually hung out with them and went out with them to party and stuff." However, she added "my grades dropped. I just could not hang out, do homework, and work on top of all that." Still, Nicole passed all her classes that first year. She did the same her

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second year but said it "was hard to do it all. I was so broke. I barely could afford rent, and never had any gas money for my car to get to campus from my apartment."

Nicole marked her third year in college "as the roughest time." This was the year when she met her boyfriend: "I thought he was the one. My future. I traded school for him." Around finals, she said, "she found out some terrible things about him" and they broke up. Nicole described herself in a depressed-like state and never went to take the finals in any of her classes. She failed all her classes; this was the first time she ever failed a class in her life. The drama with her boyfriend continued throughout the academic year; she failed her classes again second semester. Nicole said, "I just dropped out plus I had a child with my boyfriend and decided to focus on raising [her child]. I asked Nicole if any administrators from Akron ever reached out when she was failing classes, and she said "nope." She went on to say, "Akron has only ever sent me letters saying that I could petition to re-enroll and re-take my classes. They just want my money."

Another Heights resident, Lauren, described herself as a worker-student as well. She was the only non-high performing student who enrolled more than 30 miles from the neighborhood. Still in Ohio, Lauren enrolled in a university, almost 200 miles from the Heights, for five years. While Lauren's college pathway resembled Nicole's, she had a different outcome. Lauren said, "The first year was fun, it was a great experience. My roommate, she was from Cleveland, so we had that kind of in common. And the other roommate was white, and she moved out right away, so we had a whole big room to ourselves." While Nicole mentioned no campus engagement beyond classes, Lauren reported: "the first year, I joined the dance team… because I was going from the step team [in high school] and I loved dance. I figured, why not, let me get to know some people, and find friends." She added that "my first year, my grades were excellent."

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Her grades started to slip in her second year. She explained, "I just remember sleeping all the time in my sophomore year. I was so sleepy, like all the time. I feel like I was just a big procrastinator…At the end of the day I got enough done to pass the class. It was a struggle." She said, "I pretty much was the same in my junior year, just doing enough to pass." Lauren took responsibility for her grades slipping and attributed it solely to her own choices. However, when I asked her why she was so tired, she shared nonchalantly, "I worked a lot." Lauren elaborated on her work schedule: "I was like a student worker on campus and then I was working a call center job. I was doing 20 hours at one and then I could do up to 38 or 39 hours in third shift at the other." For two years, Lauren worked about 60 hours a week, across two jobs, as a full-time student.

The workload finally became too much. Lauren described her senior year: "I was cramming down on my books and classes. I was determined to get out." During the first semester, however, she was hospitalized; she described it as "a full mental breakdown." She was forced to leave school for over a year and move back to the Heights. Lauren explained the source of her breakdown, saying: "I think it was probably my whole life experience, it all just built up and then school was the tip of the iceberg and it all exploded. I couldn't take no more." She described her life experience as growing up low-income, living with multiple family members other than her parents, and being a worker-student from high school to college. College enrollment did not relieve the stressors of poverty; it compounded them.

Lauren did return to her university a year and a half later. She said, "I would have returned after only three months of being out, but my family was like 'you need to rest.'" Upon return, Lauren had to fight with the university to move her loan out of default into forbearance, allowing her to be eligible for financial aid and enroll in classes. She said that the "lady in the

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financial aid office was acting like a bill collector, not somebody trying to help me." She re-enrolled and switched her major from accounting to finance. The switch was due to a problem with a professor:

> I switched my major because the chair of accounting was a dick. He had this one credit class that we had to take for accounting; accountants just came in and gave speeches. If you missed one day, he failed you. I failed that class just because I missed a day. I legit had an excuse, I had a doctor's note. Since I didn't give him the doctor's note, before, or like I didn't tell him I was going to the doctor, he failed me. I just like cussed his ass out one day in his office, told him he was an asshole and that kind of stuff. I figured he wasn't gonna ever pass me, so I just switched my major.

Lauren completed the rest of her finance courses and graduated college. She remembered, "The day that I graduated my shit [loans] was delinquent again. I was like, 'Damn, I get no time.' Legit damn near the day I graduated, it was delinquent. I'm like, 'Okay, whatever.'"

Lauren and Nicole's stories show the multiple responsibilities that Heights residents were juggling beyond their academics. They were working full time, attending classes, maintaining somewhat of social lives, and attempting to balance their mental health. A slip-up in any one area derailed their fragile balance in the other areas. For Nicole, it was relationship problems with her boyfriend. For Lauren, it was her body giving out under extreme stress and work. Heights residents did not have the capacity to be engaged in non-classroom activities on campus. This did not exclude them from just social life on campus but also the possibility of seeking tutoring, meeting with advisors, or planning for post-college careers. Residents often lived off campus because it was cheaper than living on campus, which meant they had to work to cover rent and utilities. Residents were debt conscious; they explained the decision to live off campus as a tactic to avoid more student loans. Off-campus housing, although cheaper, was not easier to afford. Residents described constant uncertainty around how they would cover rent and food along with

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other expenses. On their college pathways, they were workers first to sustain their livelihoods, and then they allocated leftover time to their academics.

It is telling that both residents did not share their stories as excuses; they both described their experiences as solely a product of their choices. These choices, however, were made in the context of precarity in which a common mistake can become life-changing. Lauren connected how her "whole life experience" coupled with the stress of college led to her hospitalization. The connection reveals how growing up in a dominated geography impacted residents beyond the neighborhood's boundaries. Nicole's story about only being able to afford "Arby's" reflects growing research that documents low-income students' food insecurity on college campuses.[21] The context of precarity both in the neighborhood and residents' time on campus were interconnected. While Nicole and Lauren both left college only once, it was more common for residents to enter and exit higher education repeatedly due to life circumstances.

The next residents discussed also were worker-students and driven by the belief of "just go to college;" but they too had little direction on what to do once enrolled. These residents—Marcus, Cindy, and Ron—reflect the continuous experience of enrolling, then exiting, only to re-enroll again in college. Re-enrolling was a major occurrence in Heights residents' college pathways, which often were not linear but cyclical.

Marcus, class of 1996, spent three years at Akron without a major declared, enrolling in classes and borrowing student loans with no structured pathway to complete a degree. He described his college application process: "I don't think I selected anything. I think my parents selected it. You know what I mean, 'you need to go here because its closer to home, it ain't gonna cost that much money, it's affordable, your grades coincide with what they say you can do. So, this is probably the best option for you.'" Marcus described his perspective on higher

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education, “I thought college was college. I thought all colleges was just you go to school and you learn. So, I didn't think one college was no better than the other college because I didn't really research it like that. Like I know now, Duke is way better than Akron. So, I probably should've had my butt at Duke.” When I asked him to describe his college experience, he said bluntly: “Let's see, I came down there, I studied a little bit, I met [my girlfriend], I had [my son], I pledged, and that was that.” He went on to describe enrolling in college as “cultural shock” and said, “my first year was a whirlwind, and if you ain’t got it together in that first year, nigga you done.”

He acknowledged that college academics were challenging for him; he passed some classes with Cs and Ds and failed others. Also, he was focused on pledging a historically Black fraternity and raising a newborn child. I asked why and how he was able to keep re-enrolling after failing classes each semester. First, he said his re-enrolled because “everybody said go to college…the guidance counselors were saying that, that's what my friends were saying, my parents were saying it, they were saying ‘well just get the core curriculum done so you can get that out the way and then you move on to what you're doing.” Although they had not decided on a major, residents often explained continuously re-enrolling to “get their core courses out the way.” These core courses often were remedial classes that residents realized upon completion did not count towards a major. Marcus then explained how he was able to re-enroll: “But like you know college is different, like making it through can be like yeah you got an F but you just gon' take that class next semester...Like I made it through like that. It was rough, man.” After three years, multiple academic probations, and re-enrollments, Marcus said he finally received a letter telling him that he was no longer eligible for financial aid. He said, “they told me I was cut off.”

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Another resident, Ron, despite enrolling in Akron over a decade after Marcus, had a similar college experience. He first enrolled at Akron from 2010 to 2013. He remembered, “Akron was probably like the easiest one to get into. For the first year, it was just like a no-brainer to go to Akron and be a little closer to home.” He reported feeling overwhelmed by all that “professors expected of [him].” He went on to describe his circumstances: “I just really wasn't focused on my school. I remember it was just like a struggle. I didn't live out there. I had to catch a bus every day back and forth to school early in the morning, so I was finding it a hassle. Say you're on campus at night like around nine, then you have to catch a bus back.”

In response to challenging courses combined with a burdensome commute, he said, “I withdrew from all my classes my first semester and I didn't really understand the withdrawal process like how that went, so I withdrew and it kind of sent me to academic probation.” He thought living on campus in his spring semester of his freshman year would change his results. Ron reported again: “I withdrew from all my classes in the spring too. So, when I came back my second year I was already on probation. I failed my classes again in my second year.” He attributed his academic failures to “hanging out and feeling unprepared for the work.” But he also said “I came in majoring in criminal justice. In my classes, I just was starting to really realize how the police and justice system was, like how they were growing up, and I couldn’t be conflicted with myself and be stressed out and not as happy about what I would be doing so I took a step back from classes to figure out what I really want to do.” During academic probation, Ron described signing a contract with Akron in which he agreed to maintain academic eligibility or lose eligibility for financial aid. He said, “I signed that shit at the beginning of the year and then towards the end of the year, I was called back in the office and they brought it back up, my

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contract, signature, everything. I'm like damn. He told me, 'I can't get no more financial aid', that's what they said, 'you can't get no more aid money.'"

Ron left Akron, had a child, and rotated through low-wage jobs. Three years after leaving Akron, Ron decided to enroll in Kent. He had no financial aid because he had a student loan in default. Still he enrolled and paid out of pocket. Ron described his approach to Kent: "I was more mature now. I was working a good ass job, getting paid weekly so I was probably getting $600 a week. I used the money, I saved for a car, and I was paying for school." Ron described his time at Kent differently, "It was much better, and I was actually finding success in my classes." Unfortunately, Ron, around finals, was rushed into an emergency surgery for appendicitis. He said "I never had health insurance since high school, for real…I had to quit my job. I was down for a month for real. I couldn't go to work because they had cut my stomach open on three sides and shit, so I couldn't really go to work so that shit was fucking up my money." Ron also had to miss finals at Kent. After several years of enrollment in higher education, he decided to call it quits. He told me, "I've got to work and shit. I've got to make sure my child taken care of." The loan in default, lack of healthcare, and lost job led to him exiting higher education with no plan to return.

With a different outcome, Cindy, class of 1999, re-enrolled four times at three different higher education institutions before earning a degree. As mentioned, she had a child at the end of high school but for college she enrolled in Akron with her child's father. Living in Pinewood Gardens, Cindy was able to enroll her daughter in the Head Start program while she commuted to campus. Like other residents, Cindy reported, "I was trying to get general stuff done and I really hadn't decided on a major. I was just taking credits and racking up student loans."

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After her first year, her boyfriend proposed to her before enlisting in the military; together, they moved down South where he was stationed. Cindy enrolled in a community college there. I asked what her plan was in the new institution and Cindy said with laughter, "still just getting credits. Just getting credits Jalil, just getting credits." As a follow up, I asked why she continued to enroll in school without a plan. She said "I felt like I just needed to be in school…because I knew it was going to benefit me some kind of way. I just knew it was."

Separated from her husband, Cindy moved back to Ohio and enrolled again in Akron. She quickly realized that traditional college pathways would never work for her. She remembered: "When I first came back up here, I started back at Akron. But, mind you, I still have [my daughter]. This is also hindering me too because I must take care of my kid, I have my own apartment, I'm not the traditional student. When I came back for like a semester… I was like, this shit is not going to work, like I'm never going to be done. I was literally taking a class a day and then drive back to work and it was just going to take too long."

Cindy described talking with her aunts, most of whom enrolled in a local college but never graduated, and one of them told her about a program at a nearby college (17 miles from the Heights). Cindy said, "[my aunt] actually told me about [the college] and she handed me this newspaper article. She was like 'hey Cindy, look at this, I thought about you.' It was like a weekend program, so I was able to take all of my classes just on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. That was literally a lifesaver, or I would have never finished college. They didn't have online courses or a lot of evening and weekend programs at this time, so for [the college] to have that, that was like a savior." When speaking to enrollment counselors, she remembered saying, "I don't care; give me any damn degree that I can get on the weekend. I'm going to get the degree and worry about what I'm going to do with it later." After three institutions, Cindy did graduate

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with a bachelor's degree in social sciences. In the next chapter, I return to how Cindy continued to earn her master's.

These three stories of Heights residents' continuous re-enrollment highlight how students may aspire to earn a degree but may not be able to balance course loads with other responsibilities in their lives. Residents were driven by the belief that they need to "just be in college" and re-enrolled as much as possible until financial aid expired or, more rarely, when a degree was completed. At the same time, Heights students' re-enrollment patterns raise questions about institutional accountability. As already reported, Akron and Kent both are institutions that fail to graduate the majority of Black students who enroll.

Yet for decades, both institutions have an accepted operation and business model where Black students pay the institution repeatedly with their financial aid packages but exit after two or three years without a degree. Moreover, the local colleges showed little responsibility in structuring pathways to degree completion. Heights residents reported that the only guidance from college staff came when they were placed on academic probation or ineligible for financial aid. In addition, residents said they never received support on how to select a major, the classes required to complete a degree, and where to find support services on campus. While Heights residents often took full blame for their struggles in higher education, institutions, too, share responsibility for not designing college pathways structured with relevant support for non-traditional students, like the Height students. From the 1980s to 2017, Heights residents listened to the mantra "just go to college" and enrolled in higher education institutions; a few earned a degree, but many more succumbed to the normalized practices of institutions that accept but fail to graduate Black students. Research finds that institutions are able to graduate low-income Black students when they create inclusive campuses, holistic student support, and focus on racial

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inequity.[22] In other words, low Black student graduation rates may be common, but they are not insurmountable.

For-profits

The analysis of Heights students' college pathways, thus far, excludes a unique set of colleges: for-profit institutions. These institutions are defined by their corporate and shareholder structure, profit-driven behavior, and career-focused curricula.[23] Nonetheless, residents who attended these institutions never used the term "for-profit." They understood that for-profit institutions were different but described them as colleges that were "flexible alternatives" and "better fits" for their circumstances than traditional higher education institutions. When initially enrolling in a for-profit, residents reported the goal to complete a certificate that would provide a skill set and lead quickly to employment. Across the eight residents that enrolled in the sector, some never attempted a traditional higher education institution, others viewed for-profits as better bridges to employment than the bachelor's, and many enrolled in for-profit institutions after attempting a traditional college pathway. Heights residents' pathways through for-profit colleges too were connected to place. Through these institutions, residents both expanded and reproduced their local geography of college opportunity.

For-profit colleges' "quick pathways" or shorter credential programs to employment caused Heights residents to expand their geography of college options. Aaron and Eryn, who both enrolled when they were 24, said that their focus was finding a job quickly. A quick pathway to a job was not common through institutions like Akron and Kent and therefore, residents were attracted to ITT Tech, Brown Mackie College, or the University of Phoenix. The main campuses for these institutions were in Cleveland or Bedford. Residents were willing to

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expand their college search into "bad" places for quick employment, but not for the delayed employment offered by traditional higher education.

At the same time, for-profit colleges were actively recruiting in the locations where residents were. Michael, class of 1993, enrolled in a barber school after meeting a college recruiter in an uncommon place: "me and my friend were getting our hair cut one day and this guy came in [the barber shop] passing out materials about a local barber college. He explained what the school had to offer and promised to help us apply, so we did it and I enrolled." Aaron said a commercial attracted him and friends to apply to ITT tech: "we were for real just watching T.V. and it was this Black man talking about how ITT tech helped him and how it was different from other colleges. Like you ain't have to do all the pointless stuff…just the classes that mattered for you to get a job." Similarly, Carina applied to the Ohio Center for Broadcasting after hearing about it on "the radio, pretty sure it was on 107.9," which is the local hip-hop station. The ways that Heights residents were drawn to for-profit trade schools follows the pattern identified by Megan Holland and Stefanie DeLuca, who found that these schools use marketing strategies like commercials that become low-income Black students' primary source for college knowledge and plays off their urgency to secure better wages and employment.[24]

The expanded college options offered by for-profit institutions led to success for some Heights residents. Four residents completed certificates in the sector and one resident completed up to their bachelor's. Michael and Eryn both had tried traditional institutions but decided they were not for them. Michael completed two years at Kent, struggled through classes and had no major. He exited the institution, worked in a factory for about six years until the work started to break his body down. He said, "I was too young to already be having my back hurting." He made his next move: "I decided to enroll in Barber College. I decided to go ahead and go on to the

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college. I graduated from there in 2003 and was able to find a job immediately." Michael has remained employed as a barber.

Eryn, class of 1993, used for-profit institutions as a bridge from certificates to earn her bachelor's. She described her college trajectory: "I have my culinary arts, STNA, LPN, then the bachelor's in healthcare administration." Eryn earned her culinary arts certificate from the Cuyahoga Valley Career Center (CVCC), then her state tested nursing assistant (STNA) and licensed practical nurse (LPN) certificates from a for-profit that is now closed, and her bachelor's from the University of Phoenix. Eryn described her college experience as relationship-driven. A local chef hired and mentored her early in high school, so she went to culinary arts school. Her sister was in the field of nursing, so she pursued similar certificates. Eryn worked for years with her certificates in the health field but decided that the jobs allowed little room for upward mobility. She re-enrolled in college to pursue her bachelor's while in her 30s, recently divorced, with three kids. In her senior year, she got into a terrible car accident that left her confined to her home for months. She said, "I had good grades. So, my instructor worked with me to finish my bachelor's. She refused to let me quit. Thank god I was able to finish. That one instructor changed my life." Eryn works in healthcare administration.

While some residents experienced quick pathways to employment, others found less success. Their experiences in for-profit colleges reproduced the limited geography of opportunity in which they already found themselves. Carina first enrolled at Akron and struggled academically, so she too exited the institution. Her next move was to enroll in the Ohio Center for Broadcasting. She explained, "You get hands-on training, and at the end of it you did get a certificate. I learned how to work a soundboard, I learned about commercials, I learned how you can get fined if you say a certain thing on the radio. I found out why they always play the same

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song, like you have to play the list that they give you. I learned how to run a newscast, how to produce one, how to direct one." She went on to intern at one of the top radio stations in Northeast Ohio but afterwards could not find employment.

Carina remembered, "I even asked a person at CBS radio, I was like, 'I just want to know why I didn't get picked for the job.' She just told me the truth. She was like, 'Honestly, they always pick people with degrees.' She's like, 'if you don't have your degree, you can be the best person, but they will not pick you.'" In response, Carina decided to re-enroll at Akron but exited after one semester. She said, "I just felt like they were just putting me in pointless classes just to get my money for the semester. If I could do it all again, I probably wouldn't have went to Akron…I felt like the more I would have gone, I'd have been in debt. Akron just would keep eating up my money with loans."

Moe, on the other hand, never enrolled in a traditional college. He had a child in high school and went straight into the workforce at a factory. He worked there for 12 years until it closed in the 2007-2009 recession. As a next step, he decided to enroll in a trade school to study heating and air conditioning. After six months, he earned his certificate. Moe said, "I submitted hundreds of resumes and never got hired anywhere in the field. Some white guys who did the same program as me who found jobs right way told me 'you either have to be white or start your own business to find work.' Consequently, Moe found another factory job; for him, "the certificate was a waste of money."

When I went to interview Aaron, another resident, he was sitting with his friends. He asked me if it was cool for them to be there while we interviewed. I agreed, and his friends remained silent until Aaron shared his student experience at ITT Tech. His friends were all Black

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males from the Heights. Some of them, too, enrolled in ITT Tech (about 13 miles from the Heights). Aaron explained his application process:

> It was hell to get in there. They wouldn't even let me sign up for any loans. They kind of set it up to where it's all on my mom like the student loans. They told me I would get some of the money back like a refund, but I was not seeing anything. It's unfortunate. It's kind of like they just sat a bunch of papers in our faces, didn't really sit down with us and explain everything to us as far as what we're signing. ITT Tech is also shut down though, so they must have been doing some things that weren't right for a while. But I do not even know what to do about my loans that we owe.

He continued to explain that without his refund check, "I was not really able to take care of myself or pay for transportation." He reported that he was only enrolled for a semester before exiting the institution. His friends' experiences were similar. Tramon shared that he exited the institution because "they were not teaching. They clearly just wanted my money but would not let me choose classes I wanted and offered none, zero, support." The residents reported enrolling because it was nearby, advertised on the television, and "was supposed to be a way to get a quick job." Neither Aaron nor his friends reported plans to enroll anywhere else.

These residents' ITT Tech experiences align with the predatory practices that have come to be associated with for-profits. For-profits have been sued, closed, and fined for intentionally targeting vulnerable student populations: poor students of color, veterans, and parent-students.[25] ITT Tech became the face of scandal in the sector. Former Secretary of Education John King wrote a public letter revealing that the institution decided to permanently close rather than meet federal oversight for fraudulent practices.[26] Likewise, a 2017 lawsuit from former students detailed ITT Tech's fraud:

> The debtors' failed business model was predicated on deceiving and indebting students to generate revenue for shareholders… Student debt, underwritten by taxpayers in the form of federal loans, and by ITT's investors, associates, and alter egos in the form of private loans, accounted for nearly all of ITT's pre-filing revenue and continues to account for a significant portion of ITT's assets. ITT lied to students to about receiving a high-quality education that employers and other schools recognized and respected, being trained and placed in jobs in their field of study and increasing their earning potential with ITT's

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> education and job placement services. Student claimants lost the significant investments they made in pursuit of educational advancement.[27]

For-profits are often true to their name, placing profit before students.[28] As a result, residents like Aaron felt rushed through enrollment and found little support at the institution to complete a certificate or degree. For most residents in for-profits, the shorter pathway to a job was falsely advertised and reproduced their limited opportunity. Even when completing certificates, residents could not find employment due to discrimination, lack of job openings, or need for a degree. However, the Heights residents' different experiences show that the sector also can expand opportunity. For residents like Michael and Eryn, the short-term certificates, flexible classes, and career-focused programs aligned best with their life circumstances. In addition, for-profits were able to foster more expansive college search processes for residents, beyond Akron and Kent, through culturally-relevant advertisements and recruitment. Nonetheless, while for-profit colleges proved to be innovative in enrolling low-income Black students, they still joined traditional colleges in failing to connect the student group to campus support and promised mobility.

Prayers or Pathways to Graduation?

Residents' stories from the application process to on-campus experiences reflect how college pathways are structured, happen in local contexts, and reflect lived realities. Residents' college decision-making and campus success were largely dependent on geographic arrangements—the institutions that were nearby or the reliability of public transportation. In addition, students believed they were on the "right" pathway —they went to college. Messaging from the media, the school district, family, peers, and colleges, told residents "just go to college." As Nicole commented, residents were told just to enroll but rarely provided information and relevant support on how to graduate. The residents became victims to a

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normalized cycle and operation model, in which it is acceptable to enroll Black students, accept their money, but rarely graduate them. When students re-enrolled, they were aware of the lose-lose situation between enrolling in college or living without a degree. Enrollment added stress as residents had to balance being workers, parents, and Black students on campuses not structured to support them. Residents prayed, rather than planned, to graduate.

If one did not enroll, they knew their lives would be a struggle to find livable wages, a struggle they grew up watching their parents experience. Yet, both choices often led to the same results for most Heights residents: no degree in labor markets that require them. For the residents who did graduate, they explicitly praised "God" because they knew their success was the result of a delicate balance between work, school, and parenthood. One misstep—a broken down car, surgery, unemployment, or bad relationships—could easily turn into a downward spiral. They believed that only God, rather than a high quality and supportive higher education institution, facilitated their graduation. Still, college graduates' stories had common themes such as reliable family support, flexible degree programs, car transportation, strong mental health, and second chances. These forms of support were critical for residents' pathways to graduation.

Together, the racialized structure in the geography of college opportunity and residents' college experiences call the assumed benefits of higher education into question. While college is presented as the place where students can learn to labor, working-class Heights students had to labor to learn.[29] They did not find themselves on college pathways that equalized their opportunity due to the racial inequality residents experienced prior. Enrolling in college became another place where low-income Black people had to beat the odds designed to exclude and limit them.

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And Congress and the courts have conspired to deprive distressed student-loan debtors access to the bankruptcy courts. Under the "undue hardship" standard nestled in 11 U.S.C. sec. 523(a)(8), debtors cannot discharge their student loans unless they can show undue hardship, which the courts have interpreted harshly. [1]

—Richard Fossey

While the overall [racial] wealth gap remains stunning, as Whites have a median net worth over 15 times that of Blacks ($111,740 vs. $7,113), and over 13 times that of Latinos ($111,740 vs. $8,113), when it comes to liquid wealth [asserts readily turned to cash], the disparity is even starker. The median liquid wealth of Whites is over 100 times that of Blacks and more than 65 times that held by Latinos. [2]

—"Beyond Broke"

Chapter 6 - Leaving College

Education pathways did not lead many Heights residents to move away from the neighborhood. When they left college, either after exiting or graduating from an undergraduate institution, they often returned to the Heights. The ways that formerly enrolled low-income Black students, like Heights residents, navigate their local geography of opportunity, with or without a degree, remains understudied. If college is the great social equalizer, then it is critical to understand to what extent Black people experience equal opportunity due to their higher education enrollment. As already noted, a college degree for the last twenty years has been considered an imperative for employment and social mobility. There is, however, emerging evidence that this scholarly and popular narrative on the benefits of a college degree cannot be assumed for (poor) Black students.[3] As such, this chapter documents the interplay between degree status, anti-Blackness, and local labor markets, focusing on parents and young adults (31 total) in my study. Across this group, 12 people completed an associate's or bachelor's degree, 4 completed a certificate, and 15 people left without a degree nor certificate.[1]

[1] The residents with certificates often did not consider themselves college graduates and reported that the certificate made little change to their working-class status. It is important to note that certificate holders are placed into the

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Beginning with residents who have lived years as adults without a degree, their stories show experiences of non-college graduates. Some residents in the following stories did eventually earn a degree as older adult students, but their years without a degree provide key insights. Nonetheless, in a society that values people with degrees, non-degree holding residents shared how they find self-value beyond higher education credentials.

For most residents, they mentioned family. Bryan, who left a community college, said, "the one thing about being poor, and I don't know if this true but this how I feel, is that you don't get no second chances. You mess up and shit just go crazy. Little shit, I mean, can hit your life like a bomb. But my family, my mom and them, they really always here for me." Many residents described the delicate balance they had in their lives and how one unexpected expense or mistake could have significant consequences. Yet, their family served as a form of support that helped to restore balance and affirmation as they struggled. Brandy, a parent of three who exited from Kent, said "I am not a graduate. I dropped out, I got pregnant. But my kids will be graduates; they are in college now and they know I'm here 100 percent for them however they need me. That is more valuable than any degree they could give me." Brandy did not perceive college as a pathway to mobility for herself, but she found value in supporting and ensuring her own children's degree attainment. Often parents described sacrificing their degree attainment goals to invest full support into their children's college pathways. For them, college pathways were too risky for their delicate life balance; residents wanted to be sure they could support their children before, through, and after college. Residents without degrees often described a turn away from systems of education to systems of support found in family.

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non-degree category; therefore, reference to graduates means those residents who earned an associate's degree or higher.

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In addition, multiple young adults like Aaron and Vindel focused on their aspirations to be hip-hop artists. They did not see college as the pathway to accomplish that goal. Vindel said, “rapping is what I value. That is what I want to be my career.” Aaron, by far, was the only aspiring rapper who had both a detailed workday and some results. First, he showed me his upcoming concerts throughout Ohio, Michigan, and Georgia that often paid a few hundred dollars. He said, “I wake up, roll my blunt, work on or write at least two songs, and contact my independent labels I work with. I’m grinding.” He then walked me through his mixtapes on Soundcloud where he had about 20,000 plays on multiple songs. He told me, “I’m starting to get a lot of attention out of state. My songs are getting 600, 700 plays a day online.” He also described his support in the Heights neighborhood: “If I get big headed or anything like that, then the support system will go. These are the people that I grew up with. These are people who seen me grow and a couple people done heard me rap when I wasn't shit. The support here is more genuine I would say than anywhere else.” While he is still far from being a success story, Aaron felt like his efforts so far prove that he has a chance to make it in the hip-hop industry. His self-value, outside a degree, came from following his aspirations to be a rapper. Scholars like Tommie Shelby and Bettina Love have argued that hip-hop offers a space of dissent for marginalized Black people to speak to their lived experiences.[4] For multiple residents, hip-hop provided a pathway to share their lived experience and pursue a career.

In addition, the neighborhood was a point of pride for residents without a degree. They acknowledged their life struggles; but residents emphasized how fortunate or comfortable they are compared to others. Shawn who said the Heights can feel like a curse—a place without choices—also said “I do get to come home to a place that is safe and surrounded by people who I know got my back. I will say that.” Another resident, Imani, said “yeah, I wish I earned a degree

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or went to college. But I also got to be a leader in my community. We have barbeques, churches, get-togethers, and reunions up here all the time. My neighbors helped me know I was somebody. I ain't need a degree for that. I had the Heights." Living in the Heights was a symbol for residents that they were from a place based on family, community, and Blackness. The neighborhood along with family and life aspirations were how non-degree holders defined their value.

At the same time, residents without degrees explained their struggles to provide for themselves and families as far as employment and housing. Many lived or were living with their parents on and off after high school. They simply could not afford to live on their own. The residents who attempted to rent apartments often shared similar experiences. As an example, Marcus and Darren both tried to move into apartments after they exited college. Marcus said "I actually got my shit together and was moving along. I had a job and paying bills. My car broke down and I could not fix that shit and I was right back at my mom's because I lost my job." Darren shared that "really a damn police ticket made me lose my apartment for real. This cop pulled me over for no reason, on some bullshit. He tried to find stuff in the car. He wanted to search it, but we would not let him. So, then he gave me a ticket because we wouldn't let him search it. The ticket was because my friend ain't have a seatbelt on. I could not pay the ticket and that shit just turned into me owing more money…a suspended license." In post-high school years, residents explained how they would move out, but loss of a job, exit from college, car repair, or unexpected court fees or fines (usually a result of tickets from police) derailed their already precarious finances. As a result, they moved back in with their parents or family members in the Heights.

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In addition to the issue of inconsistent housing, Heights residents without college degrees also reported struggles in the job or labor market. This pattern was particularly true for Black males in the study. Some residents I interviewed were older men reflecting on their younger years and others were young adults. A common theme, across both groups, was unstable employment. From parents like Michael and Moe, who graduated high school in the 1980s and 1990s, to young adults like Ron and Shawn who graduated in the 2010s—they all relied heavily on temp agency and factory jobs. There were two main temp agencies, both less than six miles from the neighborhood. The agencies' proximity to the industrial parks, which surrounded the neighborhood, supplied local factories with a cheap labor reserve: Heights residents. While Michael and Moe were able to transition from temp agencies to permanent factory jobs in the 1990s, young adults, after the 2007 recession, did not report the same success.

As already mentioned, the Heights political network protested and sued companies in the surrounding industrial parks for hiring discrimination. Black trustees have sanctioned companies that received a tax abatement with the expectation they would hire township residents, but they failed to hire any residents from the Heights. The hiring discrimination within the nearby factories led Black males without a degree to turn to the temp agencies. Darren said it was their only way "to get a foot in the door," in a sector that Shawn described as "hella racist. racist as fuck." Ron described the hiring process and issues with temp agencies:

> Basically, I been with the different temp agencies around here. They're basically a waste of your time at the end because they fire you every three months and you're just back to square one. Ain't nobody going to get rich off working these little jobs so basically, at that point in time, you're living paycheck to paycheck until they cut your paycheck off. I think that's what a lot of people up here are going through right now. That's why I still temp but I only do it as a second form of income. I can't do it as no first form of income because then they fuck you up.

Shawn explained working in the factories:

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> First, they pay you day to day and it ain't much. I would never wish this on somebody to go to a factory. That's not where you want to be, because you're going to be treated like shit, especially if you're Black. I work, and I watch white people do whatever the fuck they want to do every single day. If I come in five minutes late to work, I'm getting told 'oh you're going to have to find a new employer. You're going to have to get a new job.' I watch white people leave early from work and they don't get told shit and this is multiple days out of the week. I always ask my supervisors, 'what's the difference between me and them?' I would never wish that [factory jobs] on nobody. You don't want that life.

When Black male residents were not employed in temp factory jobs, they were often working minimum wage jobs throughout Twinsburg. The minimum wage in Ohio is only $8.30 per hour and most residents reported only being permitted to work 25 to 30 hours in these jobs.[5] Even if they worked full-time, they would earn only $17,264 annually before taxes. These were not livable wages and, therefore, many Black male residents turned to factory work, despite the racism and repeated firings. Shawn said, "they pay anywhere from…$12 to $15."

I asked a few Black males how many jobs they have throughout the year. Darren told me, "I often work multiple jobs at once but if something goes wrong like my car break down and I get fired for not making it to work, I lose both of those jobs. Then it may be a minute before I find something else. This happens like a few times a year." Ron's answer was similar: "It depends on how hard a nigga grinding. Myself, I've had 8 maybe 10 jobs this year alone. But I know some of these dudes who only had 1 or 2 jobs, then just be sitting around broke, ain't working, and ain't got no money." For Black males without a degree, employment was rarely stable. They perceived their local labor market to be racist and low-paying.

For Black women in the neighborhood, their experiences were somewhat different. Many did not report these inconsistent job patterns; instead, they were employed full time with few unemployment periods. Before she had a degree, Cindy worked steadily in customer service for a company. Brandy, who never earned a degree, worked as an administrative assistant since

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graduating high school. Carina, Olivia, and Tessa all worked at call centers. While Black women too lived with their parents for some time after high school, many were able to find stable housing for years (the Black men without a degree who reported renting apartments often did so for less than a year before returning home). The main source of housing for many women was Pinewood Gardens, which provided subsidized housing. Qualifying for residency in Pinewood Gardens, however, shows that even with full-time and steady employment, many Black women without degrees were not earning livable wages. They were still below the poverty line. For Tessa and Cindy, they were able to utilize subsidized housing as an advantage to re-enroll in college and complete their degrees in their late twenties. Tessa said, "Pinewood helped me, but I never planned to stay there long. I had my mom, so I was able to finish school and move out." Still many Black women shared financial struggle and stress as single mothers with limited job opportunity.

While residents offered a range of perspectives on living without a degree, the common theme among them was that "it is hard." They understand their job prospects were extremely limited. Among the residents who did earn a certificate, they found it meant little when they entered the labor market. Russ, Eryn, and Carina believed that the certificate did not change their employment opportunity. [6] They went into other fields or back to school. Darren, who never enrolled in college, said "I fear that I may end up in the same place as my parents. They work hard every day but they still broke." The residents who tried college for multiple years often reached the same conclusion as Marcus, who said "school is not for me." Across these experiences, residents without a degree believed they had few options to experience class mobility.

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In a 2016 report, Policy Matters Ohio found that the Black unemployment rate in the state was 11 percent, compared to the white unemployment rate at 4 percent. Further, the policy organization reported that Ohio Black workers earned only 76 cents for every dollar white workers earned. Both the unemployment rate and earning disparities have persisted in Ohio for at least the last 40 years.[7] This racialized labor market provides the context for Heights residents' common experiences with financial hardship from their childhood households to their adult lives. Uneven employment opportunity was a multi-generational experience for residents in the neighborhood that some college, but no degree did not disrupt.

There is a tendency for higher education scholarship to ignore people who never enrolled or exited the postsecondary system without a degree. In the early 2000s, James Rosenbaum and others referred to this group of ignored people as the original "forgotten half"—young people who are not on college pathways and experiencing limited employment options in the degree-driven labor market. Almost two decades later, Rosenbaum has updated his term to the "new forgotten half"—students who have some college but no credential. These students earn no more in the labor market than people who never attended college, and they often carry the added burden of student loan debt.[8] While some did not enroll in college, most Heights residents did enroll and left with no credential; they joined the new forgotten half. For Black students, however, this forgotten-ness is not new; it is the norm in higher education and wider society. If the higher education as a system normalizes the idea that people have economic and societal value once they earn a credential, then it also normalizes the notion that those without a degree do not have these forms of value.[9] For residents in the Heights, being degree-less becomes another proxy for normalizing the domination of their neighborhood and their life prospects.

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Still, residents with no degree were able to provide examples of what they think is successful in their life. Their relationships with their family and living in the neighborhood was a type of success. They felt good about being surrounded by a support system and living somewhere where they felt connected to their neighbors. For residents, the Black family was not the problem; it was their haven. In addition, there were milestones beyond degree completion such as having a child, moving from Pinewood Gardens to a house in the Heights, and securing employment above minimum wage and with benefits that residents shared. These milestones all were indicators for residents that their lives were moving forward; and if they had children, forward movement meant that their children may start out ahead of them. Marcus said that "struggle always has been my life. Yes, it is hard not having a degree, but I'm blessed. I have my family, my job cutting hair, and my kids live in a safe neighborhood. I also built a house on the land my parents lived on. That land will still be in my family." They were not broken nor in need of fixing; they were struggling in the need of opportunity. Higher education often was not the promised pathway for many Heights residents; but they found other paths to build self-value and livelihoods.

Leaving with a Degree

There were residents who did complete an associate's, bachelor's, or graduate degree (12 total). Chanel, a parent, completed her doctorate and her daughter graduated with a bachelor's from Kent. Both the twins completed their medical degrees (M.D.); Brittani is a family physician and Brandi is a psychiatrist. Cindy, who had a child her senior of high school, exited multiple institutions, completed a bachelor's, and then went on to earn a master's in school administration. She taught as an elementary school teacher for several years before becoming an assistant principal in Cleveland Public Schools. Serena, who earned her master's in education,

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also worked in Cleveland public schools as a teacher. Heaven and Eryn both earned certificates in the nursing field before earning degrees. Heaven earned an associate's in licensed practical nursing (LPN) while Eryn earned a bachelor's and master's in healthcare administration. Further, Eryn was hired as a director of social services. She described her role with pride: "I love my job because it allows me to explore my leadership and management skills. I had to learn that I could be a leader and that people cared enough about my knowledge to let me lead them."

Residents reflected on how their class status was affected by their earning a degree. Some degree earners—Serena, Calvin, Chanel, Cindy, and Eryn—described themselves as middle class. The shared credential among "middle-class" residents was a graduate degree and the shared characteristic was their older age between 38 - 52 years old. They, however, often qualified their middle-class status. Calvin said, "I still have debt," and Serena claimed, "I'm not balling at all, but yeah I'm not worried about how my mortgage getting paid." For these residents, they often felt like they created a better life for themselves than they had growing up low-income. While I did not collect income data to confirm class status, residents' perceptions of their class status matter. Graduate degree earners were not feeling the same precarity they felt growing up, living without a degree, or while enrolled in college. At the same time, the residents were aware that their class status was not secure. Calvin described how he understands his middle-class status in the neighborhood:

> It is all relative. Yes, I have a degree and own a home. Yes, I have enough money to take care of myself and family. But I know this ain't the same as somebody across the highway in Ethan's Green [an affluent neighborhood]. Their parents probably knew my parents growing up in Twinsburg. But my parents were Black and from the Heights. Their parents left them a house in Ethan's Green and my parents, well, I guess…they left me work ethic. Their parents were able to give them something and my parents told me as Black people, we ain't never going to be given nothing. We have to work for it. That is what I do: work for it and hopefully break the cycle…hopefully pass something down to my three children.

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Heights residents described their middle-class status not as an abundance but "just enough." They had just enough to cover expenses but made it clear they do not have deep savings or wealth. Similarly, it is well documented in research that the Black middle class is not the same as the (white) middle class, which dominates national discussions. Members of the Black middle class often have less income, wealth, and class stability. For example, Mary Pattillo-McCory found that the Black middle class often does not leave their former low-income communities but live within or adjacent to these communities. This means that members of the Black middle-class still experience the impact of underdevelopment and limited labor markets normalized in low-income Black places. In *Black Wealth/ White Wealth*, Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro argue that the continued impact of racism for the Black middle class is not best measured in income, but in wealth. Black middle-class families' class status is often insecure due to less wealth in their homes, assets, and inheritance coupled with high debt.[10]

Graduate degree earners in the Heights, who self-described as middle class, chose to remain in the Heights community due to affordability and racial comfort. Some were second- or third-generation residents. Yet, Serena and Calvin had only recently purchased their first home, at 37 and 50 years old, respectively. Chanel moved to a community adjacent to the Heights, but still in the township. Cindy found her home affordable, but she said, "I do not know if my house will increase in value at all. I have lived in it now for 10 years and it's worth less than what I bought it for despite my renovations." The middle-class status claimed by residents cannot be confused as protection. These residents still endure the racial consequences of the Heights existing as a marginalized community. Education pathways not designed to address racism may provide some relief, but still lead residents back to Twinsburg, a city built on racial disparities.

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Moreover, for Heights residents who earned graduate degrees, their experiences within graduate school were also shaped by race. For example, the twins Brittani and Brandi described their graduate school process as extremely racialized. It is important to mention that the twins were described many times in formal interviews and informal conversations with residents. They were models and, as one elder resident said, "they made it. We are so proud of them." Yet, neither one of the twins believed their path should be a model. Brittani said, "I barely made it out intact." Both twins felt that their education achievements often meant enduring anti-Blackness that picked them apart mentally. They were not alone. Chanel refused to even speak to me about her Ph.D. journey—she only said, "it was just a rough time being in a place where people think Black women do not belong." For the twins, the cumulative toll of racism came to a head when they enrolled in graduate school as medical students, the first time they were in separate schooling institutions.

For Brandi, she failed all her early tests in medical school. She had never failed a test in her life. Brandi explained, "I studied all night, all day. I prepared. I asked for help. And still I would fail the test because I would just get so nervous." Reluctantly, she followed advice to schedule an appointment with a counselor about test anxiety. The university had no Black counselors; therefore, she said, "I went and found me a Black woman psychologist." Brandi explained her experience with therapy:

> I went to her for four sessions. She talked about everything except my test anxiety and studying. She asked me about my family and upbringing. I told her about how hard I worked to get to medical school based on where I am from in the Heights. I cried so much that after the fourth session I said that if she makes me cry again I am not coming back. In the fifth session, she told me 'You do not think you deserve to be here.' And it clicked.

From counseling, Brandi realized, "I spent my whole education journey trying to prove that I was not an imposter. I had every advantage, I had my foot all the way in the door, and still these

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powerful ideas threatened to take me down. That's a powerful thing." After her fifth session, Brandi reported never failing another test again and exceling in her courses.

For Brittani, she dropped out in her first year of medical school. She described the decision to exit with no certainty if she would ever return:

> I think a lot of that honestly was my depression, just feeling not worth anything. I felt like I'm not going to make it through this. I never was supposed to be here. When just so many people from the Heights, or your family think so highly of you, and it's like you carry that weight. It's like I'm representing the Heights, and somewhere along the line that weight felt burdensome. I was also carrying a lot of shame too, and it was crushing, shame that I was not good enough.

Her eyes filled with tears and, with her voice breaking, she went on to explain:

> There was a local community program. It was like a community arm of the hospital. It was run by two Black women…Those women built me back up…They believed in me and reminded me how important it is for Black people to have Black doctors. The overwhelming love that Black people have for each other, everybody always said we're crabs in a barrel, but honestly being with Black people, we love each other. They didn't have any reason to build me up. I didn't have anything to give them. I left med school my first year. I didn't know shit about medicine. I could barely take a blood pressure after my first year. I had nothing to offer them. But they were so positive and so encouraging…I was like you know what? Fuck this, I'm doing this for them.

Brittani re-enrolled and graduated medical school; by choice, she selected a physician position that allows her to work primarily with low-income people of color whom she described as "mostly on Medicare and Medicaid."

I interviewed the twins weeks apart and separately. Their similar experiences reflect that they have been both in school together from K-12 through undergraduate and achieved academically at the same level. Brandi believed "medical school started out so rough for us both, because we did not have each other there anymore. For the first time, we had to deal with the fact that we spent our whole lives trying to prove we were not white people's Black stereotypes and we just never got to define ourselves. We never got to heal or just define our paths as two Black women." The twins' ability to be self-critical and mindful of the racial power dynamics they

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experienced show that hard work was not enough. They had to also pay the price of their mental health because their Blackness was always treated as evidence that they were out of place. It raises the question that graduate school may allow residents to enter the middle class, but at what cost?

In contrast, the residents with only an associate's or bachelor's degree still described themselves as low-income. Heaven felt her degree allowed her to work at a level to provide for herself, but she self-identified as "still broke and poor." Likewise, Lauren, who had a bachelor's, did not know if her degree was worth it after experiencing consistent underemployment:

> I feel like college kind of is a waste of time because a lot of people can get jobs that's not even in the field of their degree. I just wasted my time and my money because these motherfuckers don't hire me anyways. The jobs that pay say I need more experience so my degree I feel like is just a piece of paper, that's clearly not telling jobs nothing. Like people with no degree be having the same jobs as me and I paid all this money, all these loans for a piece of damn paper. If I had to go back I would not do it again. Having to work full time and be a student is just too much for what I am getting out here with these jobs.

Lauren believed that her degree, based on the energy and money she invested into it, should have high returns in the labor market. She experienced, instead, job offers from positions that required no degree and was turned down by companies that repeatedly stated that she needed more experience. Similarly, Heaven asked a pointed question on the topic of college as a social equalizer: "How is a degree going to make me equal to white people if they ain't had to struggle like me? I am 21 years old and I had to overcome stuff my whole life they never dealt with." Her question highlights the extra forms of labor and struggle low-income Black students are asked to perform to earn a degree and experience mobility. Yet, even when they did manage to achieve, residents did not find an undergraduate degree to be enough in the local labor market.

Overall, residents were proud of their degree achievements, but they also expressed the mental and physical fatigue that came with their college and labor market pathways. Dr. William

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Smith coined the term "racial battle fatigue" to describe the ways that racial micro- and macro-aggressions cumulate into a type of fatigue that affects Black people's mental health.[11] Brittani and Brandi's racial battle fatigue aligns with Black students' experiences with interactional racism on elite college campuses, documented in the large body of work on microaggressions and traditional college students. These two Black women achieved at the highest levels but faced almost derailing barriers due to the toll of subtle and explicit messages that they were "undeserving" or "incapable" due to their race. The seeds of doubt planted in them did not disappear after completing a bachelor's degree; they continued to grow into hindering mental health issues in graduate school.

In addition to microaggressions at the level of interactional racism, residents also faced macroaggressions that worked to degrade their Blackness on an institutional level. Lauren's story above along with the experiences of other residents who were non-traditional degree earners highlight the ways that macroaggressions impact many poor Black students. For most Heights residents, macroaggressions manifested in institutions that accepted working-class Black students but invested little to no support for their pathways as worker-students, parent-students, and low-income students. In other words, Heights residents experienced first-hand how higher education institutions benefit from enrolling Black students while not attempting to acknowledge and accommodate their racial and class experiences. Without this support or consideration, Heights residents were forced to push themselves to mental exhaustion to complete a degree, a cost rarely asked of their affluent, white peers.

Moreover, the fatigue of racism is not just a campus experience but transfers into the labor market as well. For example, residents' experiences around underemployment may be caused in part by the lack of time they had to explore career opportunities in college through

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career services, internships, and job fairs. The on-campus experience limits their ability to be best prepared for the labor market once they leave college even with a bachelor's degree. Consequently, many Heights degree earners were unable to defeat the outcomes of an already-discriminatory labor market that treats Blackness as out of place—not hirable for careers—and regulates it into place—employable for low-wage jobs. Those with an undergraduate degree felt particularly frustrated with limited job opportunities. A graduate degree seemed key for residents to find stable employment that led to class mobility. For graduate degree earners, they had just "enough" money for expected bills and living costs, but still worried about future costs like their children's college tuition. Across these post-college experiences, Heights residents show that higher education credentials are not equal. The type of credential matters for class mobility.

Subprime Loans

Regardless of degree completion, the commonality among residents who enrolled in higher education was student loan debt. Like most non-wealthy students, they had to finance their higher education degrees in a time when it is not a public good but considered a personal one.[12] Residents had a range of student loan balances that reflected the amount they borrowed, interest accrued, and penalty fees. Aaron, Carina, and Bryan, who exited their institutions in their second semesters, described their student loan debt as less than $20,000. Those who enrolled for two or three years in Akron or Kent, but left with no degree, said their debt was between $60,000 and $75,000. Heaven borrowed around $30,000 to earn her certificate and associate's degree at for-profit colleges, and Lauren who graduated from a public four-year college reported a loan balance of $80,000. Eryn and Cindy, who both graduated with master's from for-profit institutions, had over $100,000 in student loans. As a comparison, the median home value in the

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Heights was about $109,200. Heights residents' student loan balances were often more than half of what a home mortgage in the neighborhood would cost.

Heights residents' student debt experiences reflect both the emerging findings from recent work based on new Department of Education data and prior findings from the growing research on race and student loans. Overall, the research on Black students' student loan debt is limited. Only in 2017, the U.S. Department of Education released data that allowed student loan borrowers to be disaggregated by race and tracked longer than five years. The new data has allowed for research on Black students and student loan debt up to 20 years after they initially enrolled in higher education.[13] Heights residents reflect emerging findings on race and student loans in four ways: multi-generational impact, interlocking debt, role of institution type, and the geography of student debt.

For Heights residents, the impact of student loans was not individual, but instead had multi-generational consequences for their Black families. Marcus and Heaven discussed how their parents took out student loans for them. Marcus said, "when I dropped out, I did feel stupid because I know my mom took out some loans for me. Still till this day she struggling to make payments on just a couple thousand dollars." Heaven, who was currently enrolled in a for-profit nursing school for her bachelor's, mentioned "my mom has loans out for me and it has been hard because she has not been able to pay them back on time. So, like now she won't be able to take out loans for my younger sister." Marcus and Heaven borrowed student loans themselves, but their parents did too.

Here, the financial investment in higher education touches two generations. Parents are paying or failing to repay student loan debt. At the same time, their children are entering their adult life already in debt. Other residents also shared that their parents borrowing and defaulting

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on student loans for an older sibling made their parent unable to help them or younger siblings. If student loans are the primary tool to access higher education, then Heights parents were struggling to provide that access tool for all their children. Parent-level student loan default also means that the parent and their household is subject to financial consequences.[14] The National Consumer Law Center provided an example of what student loan default means for a low-income parent:

> Borrowers in default are often required to pay more per month than similarly situated borrowers in good standing. For example, a single borrower making $25,000 per year with two children would have a $0 payment each month if in good standing on an income-driven repayment plan. That same borrower in default would likely have approximately $250 garnished from her wages. Additionally, that borrower would likely have her tax refund intercepted, losing approximately $4000 in Earned Income Tax credits.[15]

Based on this example, the parent loses not only access to their tax refund that many low-income families rely on to stay afloat but also access to income to provide for their family. For Heights residents, student loans were often a family-wide, multi-generational experience and consequence. Student loan debt's generational impact aligns with other cycles of debt in low-income Black communities like mortgages, property taxes, funeral costs, and medical expenses.[16] To handle these expenses, Black families as a whole—grandparents, parents, and children—have to treat this debt as their own.

Further, parents who borrowed student loans then struggle to finance their children's education. Cindy said, "I send in my minimum payment to make sure I am not in default and I plan to do that for the rest of my life. I will never pay those loans off. Plus, my daughter will be in college next year, so I have to help her pay so she ain't like me with a whole bunch of loan debt." Cindy expressed worry about keeping her debt "under control" so she can finance her daughter's education. Similarly, Nicole, who had an elementary school-aged child and some

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college but no degree, said “I am in so much trouble with my loans that I will never be able to borrow for my daughter’s college. Honestly, I do not even want her to go to college if it’s going to put her in the same debt as me.” Student debt was the primary concern parents shared about their children attending college. In a study on how student loan debt racial disparities are created, researchers found Black parents’ debt and lack of wealth predicted the high levels of debt and low levels of wealth their children will have as young adults.[17] Likewise, Heights parents’ experiences with student loan debt shaped their (in)ability to assist the next generation of residents: their children.

Most residents described the student loans as interlocked with other forms of debt such as credit cards, court fees and fines, or past due bills—all common debt sources in marginalized Black communities.[18] Many residents saw their student loans as just more expenses among other debt they could not pay. Marcus said “my credit is shit. From student loans to bills, all my shit is in collections.” Bryan, who provided an exact loan balance of $15,535, said he knew his loan balance because “the government takes my income tax return every year to pay up my student loans. I think this might finally be the last year they take it.” In contrast, most residents could only provide a ball park figure on their student loan balance. For example, Carina told me, “I just do not look at it [her student loan balance]. If I ain’t got the money to pay, then I’m just not dealing with it right now.” Residents often suggested they did not know, send money, or “pay attention to” their student loan balances. They likely were delinquent or in default. Ron told me “I must be behind because I ain’t sent them no money. All my money been dealing with me not paying a ticket from a cop.” These residents were low-income and lived under multiple systems of debt in which student loans became another.

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Student loan debt interlocking with other debt systems has wide ranging consequences. Heights residents shared how their delinquent loans have cost them employment, housing, lines of credit, livable wages, and financial aid eligibility. A young resident may be denied a job due to a low credit score from student loan debt in default; without the job they cannot even attempt to pay the loan up to date. The jobs they do manage to find do not pay enough for them to afford living expenses and payments on their loans. At the same time, they cannot re-enroll in school because they are now ineligible or barred from financial aid. Without a degree, they cannot find a better paying job. Student loans were a debt trap rather than an opportunity for many Heights residents. The debt trap that many residents found themselves in functioned as follows:

> [A] defaulted student loan can put a borrower in a "Catch-22" where the default prevents the borrower from obtaining a job that could help pay the student loan, as defaulting on a federal loan will also be reported to the three major credit bureaus. Nearly half of all employers perform credit checks on some or all of their employees when hiring. A study by Demos found that credit checks impact not only management positions, but also 'jobs as diverse as doing maintenance work, offering telephone tech support, assisting in an office, working as a delivery driver, selling insurance, laboring as a home care aide, supervising a stockroom and serving frozen yogurt.'[19]

The debt trap does not diminish based on Black students' higher education outcomes. Heights residents, with or without a degree, perceived their student loans to be a lifetime sentence of debt. A study that examined the new Department of Education data found that Black people have the worst student loan outcomes 12 years after they enroll in higher education. Almost half of Black college enrollees (49 percent) have defaulted on their student loans. While Black college enrollees who exit with no degree have a 65 percent default rate, those who earn a credential still struggle with repayment. From the certificate to the bachelor's, Black graduates are likely to experience a 100 percent or more increase in their student loan balance 12 years after they graduate. [20] These disparities are masked when college experiences focus on the typical student instead of the racialized experiences of Black students.

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Some of the racial disparities in Black student loans is driven by graduate school and for-profit college enrollment. In the Heights, eight residents enrolled in for-profit undergraduate and certificate programs and two of them enrolled in for-profit graduate schools resulting in six figure loan balances. Judith Scott-Clayton found that Black bachelor's degree earners are more likely to enroll (47 percent) in graduate school and in a graduate school that is for profit. As a result, Black graduates on average have $43,372 more in student loan debt than white graduates 12 years after graduation.[21] However, most Heights residents never attended a for-profit institution and/or graduate program and they still struggled with repayment. The college experience and credential did not transfer into higher earnings to address their student loan debt. In the same study, Scott-Clayton removed Black students who attended a for-profit and found that Black students still defaulted at a rate 3 times higher than white students in the 12-year time. For-profits are arguably the worst institutional actors for Black students, but they are not the only bad ones. Heights residents found themselves in a student loan debt trap after enrolling in a range of institutional types but primarily nonselective public four-year institutions.

In the Heights, there was a geography of student loan debt. That is to say, student loan debt and self-reported delinquencies are concentrated within the neighborhood due to the social, political, and economic arrangements that dominate the Heights. College pathways do not lead to mobility for the neighborhood but more often another layer of racialized debt. Residents first access a geography of college choice comprised of low-performing institutions. Due to the geographic history of the Heights that structurally cuts off households from income and wealth, residents must finance their access to these low-performing institutions with student loans. The residents return from college, with or without a degree, with student debt that combines with debt traps already in their community—subprime mortgages, racist policing, and high interest

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credit lines. When residents fall behind on their loan repayment plans, their income and potential wealth is extracted. This extraction occurs (in)directly through late payment penalty fees, lawsuits, income and asset garnishments, low credit scores, and exclusion from additional financial aid.[22] This cycle repeating across generations means the extraction is not just personal but also occurs at the neighborhood level.

To study the geography of student loan debt, Marshal Steinbaum and Kavya Vagul utilized credit report data to map which zip codes in the country have the highest student loan delinquency rates. Throughout the nation, the researchers found that zip codes with high African-American and Latino populations are most likely to have high student loan delinquency rates (3 or more months behind).[23] Using their online mapping tool, one can search any zip code. The Heights, however, is not searchable because its neighborhood data is not disaggregated from the zip code data that represents all of Twinsburg City.

Still, the data tool shows that surrounding areas with majority African-American populations, such as Bedford and Maple Heights, have high delinquency rates. In Figure 6.1, most purple to dark purple areas are majority Black residential zip codes with high to very high student loan delinquency rates. Each part of Cleveland with majority African-American populations also has high delinquency rates.[24] The student debt trap in Ohio moves Black people, who are disproportionally low-income, from K-12 schools to low-quality higher education institutions, where they borrow student loans, and then move back into Black communities, often without a postsecondary credential, where they are delinquent on their loan debt. Student loan debt maps onto Black communities that already are left abandoned without investment and value in wider society.

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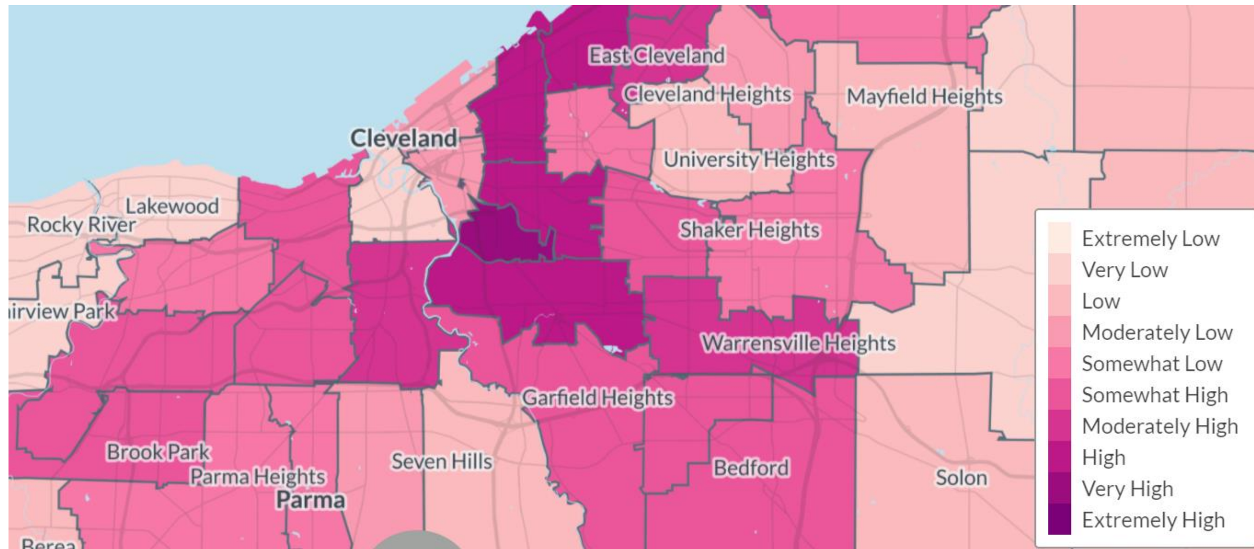

Figure 6.1. Map of Northeast Ohio Student Loan Delinquencies for Black Students (picture taken by author). The darker purple on the map, the higher the rate of student loan delinquencies for that city. Most of the cities with darker shades of purple are majority Black. Source: Pim Linders, Kavya Vaghul, and Marshall Steinbaum, "Mapping Student Loan Debt," *Washington Center for Equitable Growth* (2015).

In addition, Policy Matters Ohio issued a report on predatory student loan debt collection practices by both the Ohio Attorney General and collection agencies. In reviewing court cases, the report found that Ohio residents were subject to "the attorney general and its contracted law firms…adding collection fees to student loans, which can cause the debt to balloon. State law allows the Office to charge an 11 percent fee for itself on debts it is collecting and an unlimited fee for collectors and law firms that collect debt on behalf of the attorney general. Delinquent debt can also accumulate late fees charged by public colleges."[25] While student loans serve as a debt trap for Black communities in Ohio and throughout the country, they have effectively become a profitable industry for states, the federal government and collection agencies. For-profit institutions are not the only actors placing profits before students.

There has been an unwillingness in the U.S., which includes the higher education system, to anticipate and address the impact of racism on Black people. Consequently, low-income Black people, like Heights residents, find that education pathways fail to be an engine of mobility and

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instead operate as an engine of debt. Without a higher education credential, residents face limited opportunity in labor markets which reinforces precarity in other parts of their lives such as housing. Also, the type of credential matters. Residents only reported class mobility when they had a graduate degree; those with certificates, associate's, or bachelor's degrees were still in a cycle of low-paying employment opportunities. A major hinderance for residents, with or without a degree, was student loan debt that they could not afford to pay. Most residents were never expected to pay off their debt—ranging from balances of $15,000 to $100,000.

Further, Heights residents' experiences with student debt reflect emerging findings that highlight a Black student loan debt crisis. The student group relies on student loans to access higher education more than any other group except Native Americans; across student loan types, 90 percent of Black students will borrow loans.[26] In the current federal financial aid system, the federal government provides $153.9 billion in aid to undergraduate and graduate students—student loans comprise 62 percent of federal aid.[27] To be clear, grants, instead of loans, could be the primary form of student aid—in fact, in the early 1970s the majority of federal student aid was comprised of federal grants, not loans. There was the Basic Education Opportunity Grant, later renamed the Pell Grant, the Supplementary Education Opportunity Grant (SEOG), and the State Student Incentive grant, that allocated funds to states to create their own state grant programs. From the 1980s until today, the federal loan program has expanded, and forms of grant aid have not increased to keep pace with the increasing costs of higher education.[28] For Black students, already living within the racial wealth gap, student loans became the primary financial tool to access higher education.

With no promised pathway to mobility, it is the Heights neighborhood that served as a safety net and a form of debt relief for residents. When education pathways failed to lead to

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opportunity, residents were able to return to their family homes. Many residents felt gratitude that their parents were able to provide them some support. Through family support, Heights residents, especially those without a degree, were pulled back from a downward spiral once they exited higher education and often experienced un(der)employment. As a result, residents were not reporting homelessness or a turn to illegal activities even when they were jobless and, as Lauren said, "sometimes hopeless." While higher education proved to be a faulty pathway for generations of Heights residents, the neighborhood remained a generational sense of place for residents to regroup and rework their life plans. For those who earned a graduate degree and found stable employment, the Heights served as a type of debt relief in that it provided an affordable and desirable community for them to become homeowners. Their debt was not reduced nor forgiven, but the neighborhood allowed them to transition from renters to homeowners rather than have debt completely dictate their wealth-generating decisions and opportunities. Residents' education pathways often end where they begin in the Heights—their Black sense of place.

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Any attempt to address the problems faced by African-American college students without considering the broader context of issues confronting Blacks as a discriminated minority in America is doomed to fail, for the experiences of Black students in higher education are in part products of larger systemic problems.[1]

—Walter Allen

Some see the realization of [a Black] future in the form of acts and actions. They see it in political movements and acts of resistance like those that have produced fundamental shifts in the status of subordinated, subaltern, and marginalized groups. But I believe we must not only look but also listen for it in other, less likely places. I locate it in the everyday imagin[in]g practices of Black communities past, present and future.[2]

—Tina Campt

Chapter 7 - Black Futurity

Across the neighborhood, K-12 schools, and colleges—this study traced education and life pathways for Heights residents. Each site was a place deeply connected not only to one another but also to history and the present. I began the story of the Heights community in the past to foreshadow how the development of the neighborhood matters for residents' education opportunity today. The production of education opportunity as a geographic process was explored through archival research, oral histories, and interviews. As a guiding theory and analytical lens, Katherine McKittrick's Black sense of place allowed for a critical analysis of anti-Blackness and Black place-making across education and life pathways. The study sits at the intersection of Black Studies, Geography, and Education to interrogate the role of race, place, and schooling in the development of the Heights neighborhood and its residents' life possibilities.

My main argument and hopeful contribution is that place determines both the people who have proximity to educational resources and the anti-Black ideology that normalizes uneven opportunity. In this way, Black people can be in proximity to well-resourced K-12 schools and higher education institutions and still not experience opportunity. The Heights' story of development and the residents' life narratives provide evidence that inclusion into systems of

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schooling does not translate to equal opportunity if these sites were and are racist. As such, education opportunity discussions and research must situate pathways within the history, places, and power dynamics in which they are built. Further, racial justice cannot be defined narrowly within systems of schooling, as they too often add to, rather than alleviate, anti-Blackness.

In the Heights, the historic geographic arrangements structurally segregated residents into a space—by a hill and a highway—where underdevelopment and dehumanization were normalized. The dual presence of anti-Blackness on Black places and Black people facilitated the Heights' exclusion from investment, local labor markets, and wealth across generations. Twinsburg attempted to solve the crisis of underdevelopment that it created in the neighborhood through economic approaches like annexation, abandonment, and now gentrification. As a result, the Heights has remained suspended in crisis because the problem—racial capitalism—was also the solution.

Similarly, the systems of schooling that Heights residents accessed were unable or uncommitted to addressing this built geography of anti-Blackness and, consequently, (re)produced education arrangements that resembled the local geography. Heights residents' lived experiences in the Twinsburg City School District (TCSD) and local colleges showed that education pathways were built and structured through a power imbalance. Heights residents faced K-12 schools that stigmatized them as the "bad" people from a "bad place." Rather than being a system of learning, the Twinsburg school district became a normalizing system for residents' uneven opportunity in the schools and uneven development in their neighborhood. The presence of Black people as students and residents within a white school district and suburb was treated as out of place—a type of disorder in a white suburb. The response was targeted marginalization and uneven opportunity. Further, enrolling in higher education offered little

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relief for residents and often contributed to more precarity rather than mobility. Systems of schooling proved to produce and reproduce hierarchical social arrangements of places and people.

Together, the history and current reality of the Heights constantly inform each other and construct the context in which education pathways exist. In a time when education opportunity is presented as the primary policy solution for Black people in poverty, the Heights neighborhood's 91-year experience proves otherwise.[3] Residents' stories and pathways exist as a contradiction to the notion that systems of schooling are social equalizers. These systems instead contribute to the interlocked issues of poverty and racism because they treat the injustices as aberrations from meritocracy rather than cornerstones. Still the question remains, what then can be done for Black residents in the Heights whose local geography is, but whose experiences reflect general patterns of anti-Blackness?

This chapter synthesizes the findings from the study and offers recommendations as answers to this question, a question that can be generalized to ask: what possibilities are there for Black lives and futures? The recommendations focus first on the three places studied in this dissertation: K-12 schools, higher education, and the neighborhood. Then recommendations are made for ensuring that Black people matter regardless of their education achievement. The goal is to imagine how to challenge the anti-Blackness that structures Black people's pathways in each place while building towards possibility-filled futures. Even with their limitations, systems of schooling must be transformed. For this reason, Black people cannot just survive schools and colleges, but they need to experience them as social institutions that contribute to their livelihoods. At the same time, recommendations for schooling must challenge geographic arrangements that exclude Black communities from full livelihoods. Education pathways are

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built within and connected to Black communities, their transformation interdependent. Like many works before this one, the struggle is to imagine Black freedom that does not skip over the reality of lived circumstances or let reality limit radical possibilities.[4] This tension undergirds the concluding recommendations put forth.

K-12 Schools

The Heights residents placed education and schooling at the center of their political activism in Twinsburg. Combined with other demands, the Heights political network worked to transform TCSD into a space where education for Black students could be possible. Most parents cited "good schools" as a primary reason they today live in the Heights, despite cheaper costs of living elsewhere in Northeast Ohio. Yet, residents' historic struggles against neighborhood displacement coupled with racist experiences in TCSD show that a "good" school is not enough. The geography of education opportunity is about both proximity to educational resources and the power dynamics that decide students' ability to access resources.[5] Heights residents were integrated in TCSD with proximity to its resources and high-quality education, but in reality, they experienced segregated and uneven opportunity compared to their white and/or middle-class peers. Documenting residents' K-12 education pathways reveals the importance of community-connected education, disrupting interactional and institutional racism, and uplifting students' Black senses of place.

K-12 education must be connected to the community in which its students come from. While this connection was clear for white and/or affluent students from Twinsburg City, Heights residents often described being outsiders within the school district. Heights students and their parents, however, knew that the school district was not the only model of education. Their education began with the neighborhood-based Head Start program. Residents celebrated the

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program for having Black teachers from the neighborhood, who taught with a culturally-relevant curriculum, and engaged in community outreach. Further, the program served as a bridge for parents when their children transitioned from Head Start to TCSD. Heights parents relied on the Head Start teachers to help them navigate special education, disciplinary issues, and other racial issues in the school district. The Head Start program provides a model for what it means for education to be community-connected even if it is not community-based.

A community-connected school district has targeted outreach efforts and partnerships with community members and organizations. Through community-connected approaches, the school district can learn about the lived experiences of the students whom it serves and, in turn, provide informed support. Support can include creating communication channels with parents on what knowledge and skills their children should know across grade levels, providing school supplies to low-income families, hosting neighborhood-based meetings, or bringing school leaders to the community.[6] Also, residents should be granted decision-making power and provided with platforms to materialize their needs and concerns so that they can direct how the district provides support. Dr. Gary Anderson argues, however, that authentic community participation, especially from marginal groups, will be contested because it requires a redistribution of power. Anderson warns, "we must also not assume that educational institutions and systems will tolerate authentic spaces once they are created."[7]

Simply put, community members, perhaps in coalition with some school leaders, will have to subvert the status quo in schools that often ignore the agency and consent of Black communities in the educational process. Ultimately, community-connected support should result in traditionally-excluded residents having a shared voice in the operation and culture of the school district. This is how schools already function for affluent, white parents. They are

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empowered to participate in decisions around which teachers and classes their children are assigned, which extracurricular activities are offered, and which built education pathways exist.[8] Black communities need school districts that acknowledge and treat them as partners whose ideas translate into policy and practice.

Fostering community connection will also require interactional and institutional racism to be disrupted. In TCSD, interactional racism functioned through the Heights stigma—a place, race, and class stigma that marked a community of Black people "bad" without having to explicitly use racial terms. The Heights stigma reflected the subtle ideology of anti-Blackness in the school that provided a system of ideas for students and school leaders to view Heights students. In the school, the Heights community was a symbolic place that was considered out of place in majority-white Twinsburg. The symbol of the neighborhood informed the constant messaging in the school that the Heights students' home was unsafe and that the "people up there are dangerous." The school became the formative site where Heights students, and their peers, learned that anti-Blackness was a norm. At the interactional level, Heights students received messages that they were not expected, even allowed, to have a high academic performance. Those who did achieve at high levels were told "you're not really Black" by other gifted students who were white. Regardless of achievement levels, Heights students reported a culture of low expectations in the school district that often used where they come from to determine who they are.

In addition, TCSD created a network of institutional racism through policies that aided in the regulation and punishment of Heights students across generations. First, tracking ensured that Heights students remained excluded from gifted and college prep courses. Further, tracking also encouraged Heights students to take non-academic courses like work study where they left

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school early to work low-wage jobs. Residents who were never in the gifted courses often did not know what tracking meant in Twinsburg. However, they could explain the reality that Black students were rarely in the gifted classes with their peers known as the "smart kids." The Heights residents who were in the gifted courses were critical of their proximity to the "smart" or "elite" students; they felt that many of their Black peers could be in the courses too, but that the enrollment process was hidden and the cultures in these classrooms were racially hostile. Across generations, residents understood that a sorting process, based on race, existed that determined who received education opportunities in TCSD. In addition to tracking, disciplinary actions targeted Black students, resulting in the student group comprising the majority of suspensions and expulsions across every school in the district. This study showed that Heights residents have had to challenge racism in the school district's disciplinary actions since the 1960s. Together, disciplinary actions and tracking were two forms of institutional racism that permeated TCSD. Residents also reported struggles against institutional racism in curricular decisions, extra-curricular activities, teacher and staff hiring, and counseling.

The Heights residents' experiences in TCSD are not unique; they align with national patterns documented in education research.[9] Schools often are not just sites of learning and engagement for Black students. Among the earliest social institutions Black children experience, schools become the sites where racist mistreatment becomes normal. Damien Sojoyner argues that schools are educational enclosures that normalize anti-Blackness in schooling to normalize it in society. Sojoyner describes the process:

> [T]here is nothing normal about a prison; there is nothing normal about the destruction of Black communities via means of surveillance, warehousing, and killing of Black people; there is nothing normal about massive government expenditures that are granted to ensure Black oppression… This had to be made normal, and though getting [white people] to buy into this new system was of concern, the major focus was instituting this new

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> ideological enclosure upon Black communities—and here is where the schools became a central agent.[10]

All of the violence mentioned impacts Black communities like the Heights; and it is schools, the primary social institutions children experience, that justify and reproduce the violence. White communities buy into systems of control through ideological justifications like place- and race-based stigmas and policies like tracking and hyper-punitive discipline.[11] In the era of school reform, in which what is valued is what is measured, challenging racism is almost never a measured outcome. Yet, Black students' experiences in society and their schools show that racism should and must be accounted for.

To challenge racism Dr. Tyrone Howard argues that schools must be "ever-mindful in assessing hiring practices, promotion opportunities, learning environments, admission criteria, counseling tactics, and leadership approaches."[12] The goal of these assessments should not be to determine if racism exists, but to understand how it exists and how it intersects with other power dynamics such as sexuality, class, gender, and place. In practice, however, such assessments often lead school leaders to focus on limited "diversity" and "inclusion" measures—hiring Black teachers and staff, utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy and course content, or facilitating "race" talks. All of these diversity-based approaches only matter if they are coupled with a redistribution of power. [13] If not, schools—no matter how diverse and inclusionary they are—keep intact current power structures; the new diverse school leaders, like their white predecessors, still track, discipline, and limit Black students.[14]

Racism and anti-racism are matters of power. If tracking is accepted as a tool of racism, then schools must be de-tracked to equalize course offerings, access to teachers, and comprehensive learning.[15] If schools' hyper-punitive discipline is understood as a tool of racism, then the power to address students' behavior must be shifted to the community. Research shows

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that when schools focus on building family and community involvement in school cultures and apply restorative justice practices jointly with students, the need for disciplinary action decreases.[16] Neither approach requires punishment, but both require schools that are connected and accountable to Black people.

Lastly, lessons for how to counter racism in schools must begin with Black students' spatial acts.[17] While schools like those in TCSD perpetuate interactional and institutional racism, Black students do not just endure it. In racist school environments, Black students place-making centers on their value.[18] These sites of Black place-making should be uplifted as models and lessons for how to support Black students and challenge racism. Heights students created sites in the school that affirmed their humanity, challenged racism, and strengthened their education pathways. These sites—Black History Club, Gospel Choir, the Step Team, and CVCC—represent Black students' spatial acts to repurpose the place that is TCSD. The Black History club contested the erasure of Black students' culture, history, and lived experiences from the curriculum of the school. The Step Team contested the over-policing of Black girls in the school district. The Step team extended from high school to 7th grade and created special performances for Black girls, even younger, to participate. Through stepping, team uniforms, and music selections, Black girls on the team refused to appease the principal and school culture that aimed to control them. The vocational school, CVCC, was a place that Heights students celebrated; it was an education space that allowed their Black working-class background and "need to find a job" to be centered. All three spatial acts were contested by school leaders that did not support or value Black students' place-making on education pathways.

While not necessary, Black students connected their affirming places to post-high school plans. Students in the history club invited Black professionals to speak about career paths,

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members of the step team sought out college knowledge during their campus visits to meet Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) members, and many reported that learning a trade at CVCC was a building block to accessing higher education. Heights students provided clear models on how to value them as learners and how to support their transitions into adulthood.

Moreover, the Black students often marked at "troublemakers" engaged in spatial acts that also have lessons on refusing anti-Blackness as normal in schools. While the above spatial acts show that Black students organized collective efforts to create places of their own in a school district, Black students' disobedience and insubordination disrupts dominating places too. These acts are unorganized but collectively and directly challenge punitive policies and racism in school districts like TCSD. Many Heights students believed that they were being treated unfairly because of the stigmas surrounding their race and neighborhood. As a response, they intentionally challenged school leaders' authority. As the high school junior Jon said, "I felt like teachers didn't give a fuck about me, so I said fuck their work. I know it hurt me the most." Jon was not alone in his campaign to refuse to do academic work or obey the rules. It is too simplistic to treat Heights students, who were labeled as "always in trouble" or "always in the office," as if they had no agency or were not in the same racist school environment as more obedient students. Some students achieved at high levels to defy mistreatment, most just "kept their heads down," and others chose to directly confront their racist treatment. The latter students knew that the consequences were suspension or expulsion and sometimes physical violence. In my time in TCSD, I saw Black students, for insubordination, be handcuffed, slammed against lockers and into lunch tables, and put into headlocks all by school resource officers.

This contestation between Black students and school leaders, often leading to the deployment of police officers on Black children, occurs across the country. Black students'

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agency is treated as a threat in need of a violent response. This threat assessment of Black students occurs as early as preschool, a marking that continues to normalize surveillance and policing throughout their adulthood.[19] Students like Jon, as they should, are saying "fuck" that. As children being mistreated by adults, they act out, speak up, and refuse.[20] Each time, they disrupt what is normal in places like TCSD, each time highlighting the contradiction of facing consequences for the same behaviors that their white peers display. Schools' hyper-discipline inflicted on Black students, to be sure, exposes domination in educational spaces, but it also reveals the collective and daily refusal Black students perform to show how un-normal anti-Blackness should be.[21]

From place-making to disruption, the answer to how to challenge racism in schools already exists in Black students' efforts and senses of place. In some schools, that space may just be the "Black lunch table," in some it may be clubs and teams, and in others it may be organized anti-racist student-led campaigns.[22] Black students' spatial acts demonstrate that they are not enduring domination, they are contesting it. They know their efforts are regulated and policed, effectively criminalized as "breaking the school rules."[23] Yet, they still creatively connect their education pathways to affirming pedagogies, representations, and expressive mediums. On the vanguard, Black students live the reality of their schools and, therefore, their meaning-making and place-making should be centered both to understand and disrupt racism.

Higher Education

For most Heights residents, enrolling in higher education also meant leaving their Black sense of place embedded in the neighborhood, which provided both a safety net and affirming space. As college students, they were not deeply connected to campus. The college experience was a type of liminal space that they felt forced into in order to earn a credential that made them

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employable. Their college attendance was another factor to balance in their already precarious circumstances. They understood the "gamble" or risky investment of college, but still they enrolled in order to invest in an education that claimed to provide pathways to higher learning and careers. It was a "damned if you don't, damned if you do" situation. Like most college students, their pathways to, through, and away from higher education were constructed within the local geography of opportunity—a geography designed through local, state, and federal policymaking. Higher education institutions and the school districts that filter students into them are extensions of these government policies. The connection between government policymaking and higher education cannot be missed in the discussion of how to better support Black students' college pathways.

To review, the Heights residents' experiences showed that the local geography was racialized and that local colleges reflected the uneven opportunity already present in the neighborhood and school district. Residents mainly enrolled in the University of Akron and Kent State University but named six other institutions that they considered or knew residents had attended in the past. Seven of these institutions were nonselective, public, four-year colleges and one was a community college. When it came to graduating Black students, all of these institutions failed. Moreover, they have been failing Heights residents for generations along with Black students across Northeast Ohio who have been filtered into these low-performing institutions. There was not one institution that graduated the majority of its Black students, while white cohorts of students could attend most of these institutions with the likelihood that a near majority of them will graduate. While there are a number of institutional practices and policies that researchers have identified as contributing to low graduation rates across the country (discussed later), there are state and federal policies that are complicit too. Higher education

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institutions do not fail Black students on their own; it takes a local, state, and federal effort or lack thereof.[24]

For example, Ohio made cuts to higher education funding during the recession at the same time enrollment in colleges spiked, a trend across the country.[25] While spending less per student on higher education, Ohio also eliminated need-based financial aid grant programs. In 2017, the Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG) was the singular need-based state grant program, which has had $302 million in cuts and is no longer available to community college students.[26] Higher education budget cuts at the state level are combined with federal policymaking that, since the 1970s, has utilized student loans, rather than grants, as the primary way to fund the cost of attendance.[27] Many argue that it is not a coincidence that the cuts in higher education and the over-reliance on student loans occurred in the same periods when low-income students and students of color drastically increased their enrollment.[28] In times when higher education enrollment expanded for the two groups, like in the 1980s or in the recent 2007 recession, restrictive budget cuts were introduced that reduced higher education funding. Higher education went from a public good to a personal good. The Heights students' experiences in this multi-layered context of the higher education system reflect not a social engine of mobility but a racial engine of stagnation.

There is a need for state and federal higher education policy solutions that provide debt forgiveness, fully funds costs of attendance, create comprehensive need-based aid, mandate flexible credential pathways, and implement race-conscious accountability. On the national level, despite documented racial inequality in higher education, such solutions have only begun to be considered due to the rising costs and high debt now affecting white students.[29] In a presentation from former Domestic Policy Directors in the administrations of both George Bush Jr. and

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Barack Obama, one director said: "Since the 1960s Black students have faced low graduation rates and higher costs in higher education but now those issues are true for white students too. We now have a crisis in higher education."[30] White people's outcomes as the measure of crisis is a trend in policymaking, which often leads to policy solutions that perpetuate racial inequality rather than solve it.[31]

A case in point are policy proposals around debt forgiveness and free college. In a study on debt forgiveness, researchers found that if policies provided universal student loan debt forgiveness, then the racial wealth gap would increase. White people, who already have higher wealth and education levels, would have their debt forgiven the same as people of color who have more difficult financial and education circumstances. The former group's wealth and advantages would only continue to accumulate. The findings show that policies that seem fair or equal in theory will not be so when implemented in the reality of a racialized society.[32] Just as debt forgiveness must be preferential to provide equity, the same is true for free college policies. Universal free college policies will disproportionally benefit wealthy students, who are more likely to attend elite and expensive colleges.[33] Further, free college policies often are designed to be tuition-only and "last dollar" funding programs, meaning that the state or federal government only provides aid for the cost of a student's tuition not already covered by other forms of aid. As a result, these new policies provide no significant source of financial aid for students whose tuition is already covered with Pell Grants and need-based financial aid. These students still have to figure out how to pay for fees, room & board, books, and living expenses while wealthier students, less likely to struggle with or borrow for these college costs, have their overall costs lowered.[34]

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In order to effectively counter and remedy inequality in higher education, policies like debt forgiveness and free college should be targeted primarily at students from marginalized racial groups and students with less financial resources. The policies must be comprehensive. Debt forgiveness must eliminate student loan balances and associated penalties. Free college policies must cover the full cost of attendance, which includes need-based aid that supports living expenses. Targeted debt forgiveness programs can remedy the consequences of racist college opportunity offered to Black students like those from the Heights for generations; and more robust free college policies can provide a countermeasure to ensure that debt is no longer used as a trap for traditionally excluded student groups.

Next, there is a need for innovative policies that encourage flexible pathways and "credentialing as you go." The demographics of Black students have changed and the majority of the student group is a non-traditional student. Black students are often workers, parents, independent, and low-income. They also have high college aspirations, which is why low-income Black students continuously invest in higher education pathways that fail to provide a return.[35] For all the racist predatory behavior of the for-profit sector, it has provided an important lesson: that if institutions market to Black students' demographics, provide flexible programs, and enrollment support, the student group will enroll in higher education. For Heights students, they were more likely to return to higher education and expand their local search for colleges due to for-profit recruitment and marketing.

Flexible pathways policies should strengthen dual enrollment, which allows high school students to earn college and high school credit simultaneously for free, and mandate credit transfer agreements across state and peer institutions to ensure that when students re-enroll at multiple institutions their previous coursework counts. In addition, these policies should expand

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financial aid to cover short-term skill programs, allowing students who primarily want workforce training rather than a traditional degree to have financial support. Lastly, flexible pathways policies must allow students to earn credentials as they complete coursework. Similar to the Heights residents' experiences, many students drop out with multiple years of coursework completed.[36] A "credentialing as you go" policy would award them for completing incremental and set amounts of coursework. For example, a student who completes two-semesters could earn a general studies certificate or, after two to three years, an associate's degree. Students who pay and complete coursework should receive some credential to reflect their investment and completed coursework.

Further, since job markets are heavily shaped by the same power dynamics that shape the higher education system, innovation must also mean regulating local labor markets where college students' job and career opportunities exist. There is a need to form policies that counter discrimination, un(der)employment, and dead-end jobs in labor markets for Black people. For the last 20 years innovation has meant preparing college students for the workforce. Simply put, higher education is carrying the burden of job training rather than corporations. Private industry increasingly shapes higher education policy and the most recent 2017 Higher Education Act bill requires industry leaders to be on higher education accreditation boards.[37] Regardless of where one falls on this shift, it is here.

Black students are enrolling in a stratified higher education system that filters them into certificate and associate's degree programs geared towards specific job pathways. If they graduate, Black students still struggle to find employment in racialized labor markets or leave their job pathways because wages and career mobility are limited.[38] Targeted hiring of students of color can be enforced as a requirement for companies to receive tax credits and/or government

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funding. Local companies would be required to hire local students graduating from the degree programs that industry leaders claim will lead to in-demand career paths.[39] This is a requirement that local, state, and/or the federal government would be able to implement. Private industry already receives direct tax subsidies, and now indirect subsidies as well, through higher education institutions conducting their job training—they, too, should be responsible for students' career outcomes.

In addition, there must be race-conscious accountability for higher education institutions and states. Accountability must hold states and institutions accountable first for unequal opportunity then for unequal outcomes. Currently, most higher education accountability policies—from performance funding to gainful employment funding—punish institutions for unequal outcomes. However, there is no accountability for how states' policymaking designs the unequal opportunity that leads to these outcomes. States should invest in higher education through race-conscious policies that disaggregate student outcomes by race, provide equitable funding for institutions that primarily serve traditionally-excluded student groups, incentivize the creation of equal opportunity, and design punitive measures to correct bad institutional actors. The federal government can foster a state-level higher education accountability system through tying it to funding. The state policies can provide a more equitable starting point for institutions to then be held accountable.[40] In the end, accountability only can be race-conscious if it allows for oversight entities (e.g. agencies, boards, or departments) that explicitly focus on providing remedies and countermeasures for racial disparities in higher education and society.

While state and federal policymaking and partnerships are necessary to address racial inequity, there still are institutional policies and practices that local school districts and colleges can implement to foster equity as well. In Twinsburg, there was not a responsive, supportive

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college-going culture for Black students.[41] They were expected to "just go to college" and figure it out. As a result, this study found that generations of Black Twinsburg Heights graduates who enrolled in local colleges often took longer to graduate, if they did at all. From the school district to the college, the education pathway normalized a cycle in which cohorts of Black students enrolled in higher education, borrowed student loans for the institutions' profit, and earned no return on their investment. Yet, these cohorts provided lessons repeatedly missed or ignored.

If cohorts of Black students enroll each year in the same nearby institutions, then that is a pattern that allows school districts and colleges to proactively plan interventions and support systems. Cohort-based models are documented interventions whereby institutions provide a holistic support system to a group of students and, at the same time, build community among the students so that they can support each other.[42] School districts can start the cohort model through creating programs or initiatives that support Black students' college and career knowledge and decision-making processes. Throughout high school, Black students not only can receive college knowledge about the application process and nearby institutions, but also have opportunities to meet local college students, faculty, and student affairs staff. Connecting high school Black students to local colleges allows them to have student models, faculty connections, and student affairs supports before arriving on campus. Then local colleges can continue the process through connecting with these Black student cohorts prior to their enrollment through multi-year summer bridge programs, mentoring, and college fairs. Once on campus, local colleges can ensure that incoming Black students have robust support such as Black student organizations, culturally-relevant programming, and holistic student affairs services. The school district and college partnerships must include public four-years, community colleges, and for-profit colleges.

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Further, since many Black students are workers as much as (if not more than) students, local colleges can be intentional about meeting Black students' financial employment needs through jobs in work study or career pathways. More importantly, these financial needs should be met through need-based aid and support services that help with accessing housing, social programs, legal aid, childcare, food, and transportation.[43] Local colleges have decades of data and bodies of scholarship that allow them to anticipate where Black students are struggling in their higher education pathways and what factors contribute to their exit before degree completion. They should utilize the evidence to target interventions at those pivotal points in Black students' education pathways, including before they arrive on campus up to their transition into careers. Higher education institutions cannot change Black students' pathways on their own, but they are key partners in re-designing a higher education system that can be complicit in equity rather than racism.

Neighborhood

When education pathways are decontextualized, there can be a master narrative that positions them as the ultimate social policy without questioning how they (re)produce racist policies and outcomes. In other words, where people live is the context for where their education, career, and life pathways take place. The Heights neighborhood's geographic history, which includes the political, social, and economic arrangements that constructed the neighborhood, is deeply intertwined with the anti-Blackness residents experienced in their education pathways. The neighborhood is now 91 years old. Only 38 years ago, access to water and sewage lines was provided. Only 28 years ago, modernized and safe housing became commonplace. Only 18 years ago, streets were paved with concrete and the covering of ditches with sidewalks began, although still largely unfinished. The local school district did not just inherit the uneven development of

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the Heights but played a key role in shaping tax policies and investments of resources that often left the Heights abandoned. The uneven development has occurred in the lifetimes of residents interviewed in this study; it is the context in which their education opportunity was built.

Still today, the Heights is a site for racial capitalism as gentrification spreads across the neighborhood via white homeowners, re-zoning policies, and all white elected trustees. For example, the Twinsburg Township government has purchased the majority of foreclosed land and homes in the neighborhood and sold them to outside non-profit housing organizations. They also have changed zoning laws to allow private corporations to purchase a whole side of the Heights neighborhood. There have been two failed attempts to build a shopping mall on the re-zoned land. If the Heights becomes too expensive of a place for working-class Black residents, then Black children also are excluded from living within the school district. The displacement of Black families is always the displacement of Black students.

Situating residents' experiences in systems of schooling within the neighborhood context helps to show the similar ways that race, class, and place simultaneously impact Black communities and education opportunity. From the Heights stigma in TCSD, the lack of income and wealth for college costs, to the limited local labor market, the Heights residents' education and life outcomes are continuously shaped, though not completely determined, by where they live.

At the same time, it is critical to center Black communities' senses of place. The Heights geography is not just a result of white power structures and their social institutions. The Black sense of place constructed in the neighborhood relied on a community network, self-defined humanity, and organized struggle. Through their political network, the residents were able to contest and direct the development of the neighborhood and the school district's policies. As a

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result, the Heights served as a support system and safety net for residents as they moved along education pathways. When their investments in higher education did not have a return, students were able to return to their families' homes and support rather than face more precarious conditions. When residents did earn a degree, the neighborhood still served as an affordable and affirming place for them to buy a home, live in a Black community, and be in proximity to a "good" school district. It is the community's persistence that the Heights be a Black sense of place, rather than serve solely as a site for racial capitalism, that generates constant contestation.

Due to their ongoing struggles, Black communities must be centered in education policy and practice discussions. Education pathways are not experienced by individuals; they are pathways constructed across generations and experienced by communities. As mentioned, white, affluent communities are already deeply connected to their systems of schooling. In contrast, Black communities are viewed as out of place in sites of schooling, a perspective that marginalizes Black students. To counter this anti-Blackness, Black communities must be invested in by and given power in the institutions—local schools, government, and industry—that impact them. The Heights residents shared many recommendations summarized best by Imani, a Heights parent, who said "we need these resources to protect and fund our community."

One resource that is critical to protecting Black communities are organizing spaces that can serve as hubs for residents to connect and reflect on their lived experiences. In the Heights, that space was the Twinsburg Heights Community Center, which historically served as a social and political gathering site for the neighborhood. Heights residents shared repeatedly the need for another community center, which was closed and purchased by the township government in the 2007-2009 recession. Dr. Stephen Haymes argues that economic crisis and gentrification often prioritize the needs of capitalism to justify the elimination of sites that are key to Black

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people's resistance.[44] Community spaces often are where Black communities struggle for education opportunity, healthcare, low-income housing, and to control the local government.[45] Without them, uneven development and displacement are able to continue in Black communities with impunity.

In addition, poor Black communities are in need of an influx of resources and policies that remedy historic racism and counter its future consequences. Black communities often are isolated or excluded from local labor markets, which local governments can disrupt through challenging businesses' discriminatory practices and providing job placement programs. A job placement program must resemble the federal job corps program that provides room and board, stipends, and support services all while training local residents for in-demand jobs.[46] These efforts should be targeted at Black people and people of color without a higher education credential along with those who have one. Again, many businesses exist within local labor markets that are subsidized by the local government—Black communities as local taxpayers should have access to these jobs.

Further, there are examples across the country of local governments helping to foster foreclosure prevention programs that help homeowners. These programs provide financial assistance for late mortgage payments or mediation services between the homeowner and the mortgage-controlling entity.[47] As local governments often contribute to the housing crisis in Black communities due to their policies of uneven development, they now must be held accountable to support the income, housing, and sustainability needs of Black residents.

Investing in and protecting Black communities should be education policy. Black students' education opportunity is limited when their communities are deprived of resources and value and ultimately displaced. It is Black communities who challenge education policies and

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schools' implementation of them to be equitable. They are the watchdogs for Black children and the safety nets for Black young adults. A Black community, within racial capitalism, epitomizes collective agency and struggle.

Still Worth More Than a Degree

I returned to my neighborhood with this study to provide an example of a Black community that has lessons for strengthening education and life pathways. I counted. Over 30 of my family members—aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and parents—live or have lived in the Heights neighborhood. It has been our home since my grandmother first drove up the hill on a dirt road and chose to move into a Farmers Home. She migrated from Alabama, to Cleveland, then to the Heights. For a better life, she relied on mobility—moving where opportunity presented itself—and Black communities—support systems to help her raise and protect her family. Her story, which is my beginning, is similar to the journey of so many Black families in the Heights and the United States. We come from people who were willing to move into a place that was swampy and undeveloped so that their children and children's children could have a better life. Together, residents transformed the land no one wanted into a community that is nearing its 100th year anniversary. The Heights provides a sense of place that shows both how to value Black humanity and struggle for justice that connects education to development.

With this history and value in mind, I know that all recommendations to improve education pathways are inherently limited. While they can help Black people navigate a racialized society, they do not declare our worth outside a degree. The Heights—from its history to its residents—has taught me repeatedly that Black people have value even if they never do well in high school or earn a college degree. My family and my neighbors deserve possibility-

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filled futures that are not determined by the extent to which they can become credentialed in racist systems of schooling.

In other words, no one's livelihood, especially Black people, should be dependent upon the degrees they earn. Black people do not need to learn how or be positioned better to work harder in systems of schooling or in jobs; they already outwork their counterparts to live in an anti-Black society. Simply put, there is an imperative to imagine what Black futures can be despite racist education opportunity.

Racial justice requires advocates to not romanticize schooling and to consider that, as Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom argues, there is a such thing as "bad education."[48] Black futures cannot reproduce the process in systems of schooling where some of us are sorted into categories of tokenized value and the majority of us into capitalist modes of disposability. Schools and their intersecting racial inequities are often thought of, learned, and researched as a matter of better preparing people for meritocracy when it is these societal ideologies and policies around merit that perform the violent sorting process. The sorting process and the ways that K-12 schools and colleges normalize it is what I refer to as education violence.[49]

Pathways to possibility-filled futures must challenge U.S. society to move beyond meritocracy and to a point where not competition but one's humanity determines their entitlement to needs like healthcare, food, shelter, water, and non-polluted environments. These pathways are shaped by what Black people need rather than what we can get. In other words, there is strategy in utilizing what we can get but there is freedom in demanding what we need. Pathways through schools to careers is not what we need; it is what we can get. Education credentials, employment, income, and wealth are tools or means towards racial justice, but they

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are not justice themselves. Having our human needs met are the possibilities that will determine our future and our racial justice.

Black freedom movements have long arrived to the conclusion that structural policies are needed that view human needs as entitlements or rights in the United States.[50] Examples include universal income and healthcare policies, livable wages, guaranteed housing, food and water programs, and race-conscious reparations funding. Each policy requires both the redistribution of power and wealth, two almost untenable ideas in this country. However, economists like William Darity and Darrick Hamilton provide multiple creative pathways on how racial justice as redistributive economics could be possible. They focus on how the government already spends nearly $400 billion on just tax subsidies for assets and wealth development policies, largely for the top 1 percent. They state, "the bulk of this allocation comes from items like mortgage interest deductions, exclusion of investment income on life insurance and annuity contracts, reduced rates of tax on dividends and long-term capital gains, and exclusion of capital gains at death. The total allocation, which is about 15 times higher than what is spent by the department of education, does not include subsidies or tax breaks given to corporations nor funds from state and local level policies."[51] Darity and Hamilton argue for tax subsidies and wealth-generating policies to shift and target people based on their race and lack of wealth. Redistributive justice is not a question of "where will the money come from?" but more a question of where will the political will come from?

As with any struggle for racial justice, the political will has come from Black people who collectively imagined and created places based on valuing Black humanity.[52] For me, the model has been my first home, the Heights neighborhood. Still today, residents organize food pantries, summer camps, afterschool homework sessions, free Wi-Fi hotspots, and neighborhood

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cookouts. They are organizing to create political spaces in the community and to challenge displacement policies always at work. Their continued work for Black people is a belief in an alternative future as possible. For all the domination that white power structures produce, Black communities like the Heights provide structures of their own: structures of Blackness that coalesce around our human value, acknowledge our within-group differences, and imagine life beyond anti-Blackness. Situated within these structures, I hope this study testifies not to the power of schooling but to the possibilities of Blackness. In us, the future is already born.

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Notes

I designed a research project that explored the life and education opportunities for working class Black people in their neighborhood, K-12 schools, colleges, and labor market contexts. For the last 10 years, I have helped low-income students prepare and navigate education pathways through high school to college. Through working with diverse group of students, I realized quickly that poor Black students, especially, had a unique experience in navigating pathways that were structured and policed to exclude them. In my own experience, there were pivotal moments when my education pathway could have looked different because of the mistreatment I experienced as a poor Black student. My commitment to education work is rotted in my upbringing in the Heights community where education opportunity seemed abundant but still elusive for my Black neighbors.

I grew up in the Twinsburg Heights neighborhood in a low-income family, living in the same house all my life until I left for college. Despite not living in the neighborhood for the last eight years, I remained engage through yearly college knowledge workshops, presentations at the local schools, attending church services, the Twinsburg Heights Oral History Project, and returning to interact with family members and neighbors who still reside there. I consider myself an insider within the community, referring to my understanding of the local context and culture. At the same time, I am an outsider referring to my privileged educational pathways from undergraduate at an Ivy League institution straight into an elite public university for a Ph.D. program.

My insider-outsider positionality led me to design and conduct a research process with a prior understanding of the neighborhood's culture, but it also limited my insights into education-

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related experiences not like my own.[1] As such, my access allowed me to go in-depth to answer research questions but also required me to practice reflexivity to ensure I was constantly aware of my biases and differences. My life experiences and scholarly study led me to align with the tenet of critical race theory that "racism is permanent" and as such Black people and their communities, especially those at the intersection of no-degree and poor, are in constant contestation with systems of power.[2] I followed Delgado Bernal's theory around cultural intuition which argues that scholars' personal and professional experiences are legitimate lens to interpret data, in addition to theoretical frameworks and prior literature.[3] Together, my professional work, scholarly background, and upbringing describe and inform my positionality in this research project. I come to this project to raise questions about education opportunity as a social equalizer but also to document what my community has done to sustain when equality was denied. My research is my commitment to my home.

Data Collection

I utilized a qualitative approach combined with the Black Sense of Place (B.S.P) theory to understand how power, education pathways, and place were related. The B.S.P theory and qualitative methodology informed each other, as my study relied on both to explore how Heights' residents contextualized education experiences within their neighborhood context.[4] B.S.P. theory focuses on how Black people create place within geographies of domination. At a basic level, qualitative research focuses on how people make meaning of the world and interpret their experiences. A qualitative study does not attempt to discover meaning, but instead centers how people construct meaning. As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for collecting data and inductive analysis.[5] In addition, the BSP framework viewed research as a geography where social, economic, and political arrangements decide often whose knowledge and data are

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cited/sited as valid.[6] In education research, Black people's experiences are often cited to show racial differences but rarely sited to expose racism's structural design. To challenge research as a geography of domination, both the framework and methodology called for Black people's meaning making to be central to understand the phenomena of interest: education pathways within the Heights community. This study explored how Heights community members' "process, meaning, and understanding" were situated within the local context.[7] The BSP framework was not used primarily to prove racism exist, but instead cite/site how white supremacy dominated Black people in place-based ways—a domination that was never complete.[8] More importantly, the theory helped document the incompleteness of racial domination in the Heights neighborhood.

Within qualitative research, I followed a critical case study design which allowed me to understand the dynamic factors or characteristics that inform the phenomenon of education pathways in the Heights.[9] From 15 months, I visited Twinsburg Heights monthly to conduct research for this study. There are three selection rationales for cases: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. My study followed the first rationale, intrinsic, which is "undertaken when the researcher is interested in the particular case itself — it is intrinsically interesting."[10] The Heights community itself is "intrinsically interesting" or represents a unique case as an outsider-within community.

Twinsburg Heights, Ohio is a low-income predominately Black neighborhood (around 1,000 residents) known as The Hilltop –reference to how the neighborhood sits on a hill divided from the larger predominately white suburb, Twinsburg City (about 19,000 residents).[11] Twinsburg is located halfway between Akron and Cleveland, about 20 miles each way. The Heights neighborhood has a 3 street by 7 street grid design and is comprised mostly of houses

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and a large public housing apartment complex, Pinewood Garden, at the entry of the neighborhood. There are seven churches in the small neighborhood, representing the only formal social institutions present. The Heights neighborhood is legally zoned within Twinsburg Township; together the population is near 3,000 residents. To clarify, Twinsburg Heights is a neighborhood within the unincorporated Twinsburg Township, which borders Twinsburg City.

Despite the community existing for around 91 years, there is no written history on the neighborhood. Further, unlike stereotypical narratives of low-income Black neighborhoods having access to under-resourced schooling, the Heights students attend the same school district that services the affluent city and exist in proximity to several public colleges. On one hand, the Heights neighborhood has access to a school district that is high performing and well-resourced based on state measures; the neighborhood has a 96 percent high school graduation rate like their affluent Twinsburg City counterparts. On the other hand, the neighborhood has lower college education levels with only 28 percent of neighborhood residents having an associate's degree or higher and only 10 percent of Black residents having a bachelor's degree rate. In a time when education institutions and policies are believed to be "social equalizers" or "engines of social mobility," the Heights neighborhood offered a type of controlled site to examine the validity of these beliefs.[12]

Further, the Heights community provided a bounded system—the neighborhood—which also determined who could be interviewed—the community members—and what other data sources—documents and archives—were relevant. Focusing on one neighborhood allowed me to: (1) unpack a specific context; (2) provide thick description of the situation to facilitate new meaning; and, (3) offer original insights for the reader. The in-depth details of a case study are useful for research "situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables

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from their context." In the Heights, power, place, race, and education opportunity were variables that were mutually constructed or inseparable. Likewise, the neighborhood's complex context caused the case study design to incorporate responsive and strategic research methods (Stake, 1995). That is to say, I added multiple methods to answer key questions as they emerged in the research process rather than relying on fixed approaches. The primary methods were semi-structured interviews, oral histories, and archival research. The case study design, along with the BSP framework, produced an in-depth mixed-method exploration of the Heights community that documented life trajectories and community voices.[13]

For interviews, the following criteria guided my selection of research participants: (1) identify as Black or African American, and; (2) identify as a community member of the Twinsburg Heights neighborhood. Using purposeful sampling, I recruited a participant sample that reflected three interview groups: *high school students, young adults, and parents.* A parent was anyone with a child less than 30-years old, a high school student was anyone enrolled in 10-12th grade, and the young adult was anyone between 18-30 years old that was no longer in high school. While some young adults were also parents, I intentionally recruited parents that were older than 30 years old. Those in the parent group often had high school- and college-aged children while young adults' children were in preschool or elementary. In addition, the sample reflects the neighborhood's housing diversity, meaning people who lived in Pinewood Gardens and the houses. There were 18 participants who had lived in Pinewood and 28 who lived in the houses. I was able to recruit 15 people for the parents and high school student groups and 16 people for the young adult group, for a sample total of 46 participants. The rationale for the sampling criteria follows my study's focus on Black people within a case, the Heights neighborhood. Further, the three-group sample design serves dual purposes. First, the three

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groups represent community members who are at different stages in their lives, which likely will provide cross-generational perspectives on the research questions. For example, the young adult group included residents who went to college and dropped out, are in college, never went to college, and have already graduated. Second, the three groups are expansive meaning participants also will represent different ages, genders, perspectives, and experiences in the Heights community. Using common communication channels in the neighborhood, I placed postcards in residential mailboxes and posted on the community Facebook page. The postcards and posts advertised my study and contact information. In addition, I provided postcards to each person I interviewed and asked them to share with other potential participants who fit my sample criteria. All participants were paid for their time and knowledge.

All interviews were conducted for 45-90 minutes, audio recorded, and transcribed. Most interviews were face to face except for four online video interviews that were with former residents who lived out of the state. Before each interview, I asked participants to write out a timeline on any events, moments, or people that shaped how they view their education experience or education in general. The writing exercise was meant to generate reflection prior to the interview, which may be significant for participants who have never been formally asked to voice their experiences or meaning making. The written timeline provided common moments, memories, and language for both me and the participant to reference. For the interviews, I used a semi-structured technique, which was in "the middle, between structured and unstructured. In this type of interview most of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions."[14]

Semi-structured interviews simultaneously permitted data collection and in-depth participant reflection. Although a question protocol served as a guide, the interviews were more a

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dialogue, which allowed the participants to explore experiences and sentiments they deem significant. All interview protocols had questions covering the following topics: (a) education life history; (b) experiences living in the Heights (c) perspectives on the Heights neighborhood as a community (d) relationship between Heights and education opportunity (e) the role of racism in their experience or community context, and, (f) recommendations for post-high school life pathways. The protocol differed for each of the three interview groups. For example, parents had questions that reflect how they make meaning of college for their children. Students had questions related to their post-high school and college decision-making process. Young adults had questions that reflect the purpose of college in their lives post-high school. For education pathways, I focused on participants across the three groups who were in school from 1980s to 2017; these experiences align with the historic time period when higher education and student loan financing expanded. Overall, the goal was to allow for perspectives that challenge, support, or alternatively explain education pathways in the neighborhood context. I wrote detailed notes after each interview on my reflections, interpretations, and personal conflicts. The interviews also help inform topics and ideas for me to explore through historical research. Some emerging ideas could not be answered in the archives, therefore I conducted oral histories.

For oral histories, I recruited key informants, whose names appeared in my archival research or provided by interviewees, as leaders in the Heights community. First, I conducted oral histories with two former trustees (local elected officials) who were residents of the Heights and viewed as political leaders in the community. They provided insights into key political struggles at the local government policy level related to the Heights development. Second, I conducted a group oral history with four Black women who were former Head Start teachers when the program was in the neighborhood. These women were constantly named as influential

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teachers by the residents I interviewed. As education leaders, they shared perspectives on what a community-based school meant for the neighborhood. These oral histories informed the development of the larger history on the Heights and the framing of community members' education pathways.

The community-created archive came from the Twinsburg Heights Oral History Project. In summer 2015, I was invited to work with the history project to help create a documentary on the neighborhood's history; my role was to provide college knowledge workshops for the high school volunteers and conduct on-camera interviews. Residents provided oral histories and hundreds of documents such as maps, newspaper clippings, photographs, flyers, short stories, and reflections. The documentary was released June 2016 and titled *Voices of the Hill*. The documentary filmmaker granted me full access to 20 unedited oral histories and all collected documents. The documentary, collected documents, and conversations with the filmmaker were all included in the data collection.

In addition, I conducted research in the archives such as the Twinsburg Historical Society, the Twinsburg Public Library, and online newspaper databases. While the Historical Society had no readily available information on the Heights community, it provided archival sources on early Twinsburg history. The BSP framework became useful as it emphasized finding Black people's places in the "quiet space" of archives; in this case, searching through yearbooks, government records, and newspapers that may not focus on the neighborhood and its community members primarily but still cites/sites their presence. The public library had a newspaper archive with issues of the local newspaper, the Twinsburg Bulletin, from 1950s to 2010. With the help of a research team made up mostly of Heights residents, I went through newspaper issues in each decade available following prior timelines and ideas in the oral history documentary and

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emerging ones from the archives. Based on early findings from the local newspaper, I conducted research through online newspaper archives that had The Cleveland Plain Dealer and the Akron Beacon Journal, both reported on the Heights neighborhood regularly. In total, I explored 2,231 issues of newspapers and took photographs of all key articles. I organized the newspaper findings by decade then tried to confirm interpretations with other historical data sources such as oral histories or archival documents.[15]

From the community-created archive, I uploaded photos of each document to Dropbox, and added future documents I came across in my research to the archive database. Documents were collected that provide an understanding of both the social and historical context for the neighborhood. The archival documents refer to newspaper clippings, photos, videos, and other sources that provide an understanding of the Heights community's sociohistorical context. Contemporary documents were school reports, newspaper clippings, event flyers, public records, and sources that provided insight into the present-day context. In addition, documents that were produced from the research process such as participants' timelines or descriptions of critical historical incidents were entered into the archival database. In total, 395 documents were collected and entered into the database. I used an analytical journal while conducting historical research that included my reflections, historical timeline, and conflicts through the emerging process.

Throughout the research process, a case database was developed to organize the multiple sources of data for efficient analysis in answering the research questions. The database included interview and oral history transcripts, archival documents, the oral history documentary, field notes, and the analytical journal. I followed the following steps in database development: "Information is edited, redundancies are sorted out, parts are fitted together, and the case record

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is organized for ready access either chronologically and/or topically."[16] The organizing scheme for my final database utilized both a chronological and topical order. The database was analyzed throughout the study through the constant comparative method. In addition, the B.S.P. theory informed coding analysis for the interviews wherein participants' perceptions and meaning making helped to understand Black senses of place and anti-Blackness on education pathways.

Data Description and Analysis

A descriptive analysis was used to write a historical description of Twinsburg Heights. The goal was to present the reader with a vivid image of the neighborhood as if they were there, met with the participants, and experienced the (under)development of the community. Further the description provided readers with a sense of what evidence later analysis would be based. To write a description of the Heights, I focused on two sub-descriptions: the socio-historical context and the participants' lived experiences. For the description of the sociohistorical context, the historical database was the main source of data on the development of the community and people's lived experiences growing up there. I also used interviewees' timelines to inform or clarify historical moments and themes. For the description of the lived experiences, I examined the interview transcripts and created biographical and detailed pathways for each participant. The goal was to provide the history of the neighborhood and the different choices and barriers community members experience within the sociohistorical context. Together, these sub-descriptions thoroughly explain the interplay between race, class, and place in the Heights.[17]

The constant comparative method was used to code the data (transcripts, documents, notes, and journals) through a step by step analysis. (1) I organized all relevant data sources, read them first for comprehension, uploaded them to Dedoose and then conducted open coding through typing descriptions next to any part of data that related to the research questions. (2) For

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each data source, I conducted axial coding which refers to merging the open codes into a list of categories. Each list served as a reference resource. (3) I constantly compared lists for each data sources to search for common and divergent categories. Through constant comparison, I formed a master list of categories or a codebook that continuously narrowed and emerged as I analyze more data. (4) Once the codes in my master codebook had saliency across the data or represented compelling information, I attempted to merge them into larger thematic categories based on my research questions, prior literature, theoretical framework, and cultural intuition. (5) Shifting to deductive analysis, I read through the data coded under the thematic categories to determine if the themes were supported and what themes can be merged.[18] All steps were a back and forth process rather than a linear one. I arrived at four categories to organize my themes: Heights history, Twinsburg City School District, College Pathways, and Post-Education Life Paths. These categories became the main chapters for this study and related themes were reported within each chapter. I used the B.S.P framework to constantly consider how education pathways were constructed in the Heights community. The theory focused coding on how participants describe their positionality, contestation with power, issues in community, value of community, value of college, potential solutions for community or college pathways, barriers on college pathways, or experiences in the local school district and community.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

I followed Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba's four measures to check the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.[19] *Credibility* refers to participants, whose voices are represented in the research project, as the only ones who can judge if they are represented accurately. I co-hosted two community cookouts with the Twinsburg Heights Neighborhood Association to present my research findings and receive

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feedback from residents. The first cookout was hosted in June 2017 and the second one was in August 2017; both were hosted on the land where the former community center once stood. In total, 104 residents participated in the cookout discussions on my findings. The points of disagreement such as if racism, culture, or individual choices explained limited education achievement in the neighborhood caused me to re-organize my findings. The discussions also led me to return to the archives and find more evidence for the political struggle residents waged against underdevelopment and displacement. As one resident said, "you are right. Twinsburg has always been racist to the Heights, but also make sure you tell what we been to ourselves. We built this community and this community center, that means something."

Furthermore, *transferability* refers to the researcher thoroughly explaining the study's context and their underlying assumptions for outside researchers or readers to determine the extent to which they can transfer or use findings. I provided a detailed description of the neighborhood context and explicitly stated my underlying assumptions throughout this study. *Dependability* refers to the record that shows the research process that led to the findings and *confirmability* refers to the process used to consider alternative or divergent evidence and explanations. I used my analytical journals, feedback from colleagues who read early drafts of my chapters, and cookout discussions to consider multiple explanations and perspective on research findings. Further, I utilized triangulation, which refers to multiple sources of data being compared to confirm, nuance, or refute interpretations and arguments developed in the research project.[20]

The limitations in this study show the boundaries of the data and focus the reader on what to expect from the research design. The first limitation was that community wide data is missing. I report limited data from the American Community Survey but was not able to report important

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comprehensive data on education levels, income, or homeownership. The survey data's margins of error were too large to for confident conclusions. Further, the school data had all Black students in the aggregate, meaning the Heights neighborhood students cannot be separated from the affluent students who live in the larger Twinsburg City suburb. I addressed these two limitations through in-depth interviews and cookout discussions that provided insight into people's educational experiences and outcomes. The second limitation was the lack of archival documents on the Heights neighborhood in the Twinsburg Historical Society, which details the development of both Twinsburg City and the Township. Effectively, the Heights does not exist in the archives. There were no previous written histories for me to refer to or compared my findings. As such, I relied heavily on the Twinsburg Heights Oral History project and local newspapers. The goal was for this research project to contribute to a Twinsburg Heights archive.

The third limitation was that my case study design does not utilize observational methods since I was not fully immersed in the Heights community for an extended period. Observations often are used for a researcher, who is an outsider, to understand a shared culture among a group of people. Although I already have key insights into the shared culture of the Heights community, observations likely would complement the behaviors and experience participants say they do or have in the interviews. I address this limitation through focusing the research project on meaning making and knowledge production around the community and its relationship to education pathways. Observational data would be helpful if I was an outsider to the research site and primarily interested in behavior over time such as the college choice process.

This case study hoped to understand how Twinsburg Heights community members found value in their neighborhood and experienced a range of post-high school pathways. The geography of education opportunity was the primary focus to understand the extent to which

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community members' perspectives align with the master narrative of schooling as always a benefit. Further, the study sought to document and understand other non-education pathways experienced in the community. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with parents, high school students, and young adults, I centered voices from a cross-section of the community. In addition, the cookout discussions allowed for collaborative knowledge production with residents around how this research can inform and assist in addressing community issues. Moreover, grounding the study in the neighborhood's sociohistorical context helped to explain how place, race, and opportunity were mutually constructed. Simply put, bridging the sociohistorical context and education pathways revealed what power dynamics shaped how opportunity was allocated to Heights community members.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework, Black sense of place, pushed the study to resist two common scholarly narratives. While both of the following narratives often document racial disparities, they differ in their conclusions. The first narrative concludes Black people's choices, culture, knowledge, and ability explain why the group has not been incorporated into the status quo. The second narrative concludes Black people's unequal experiences justify why special interventions are needed to incorporate the group. Both narratives often conclude Black communities are incapable of deciding on what terms they desire incorporation into policies, institutions, and society. Black life and Black places are thought to be only "dead and dying" so their knowledges are not engaged or centered.[21] In this study, Black sense of place focuses the study on Black people's perspectives, knowledge, and place-making to contest incorporation into the status quo as white supremacy. The Heights residents' history and ongoing struggle imagined justice beyond a status quo that relies on anti-Blackness; a status quo that claims Black people must first become credentialed and respectable to be human; their neighborhoods must be

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developed and gentrified to be valuable. While inclusion can be a pathway to transformation, I engaged and imagined the complexity of Black freedom dreams based on Heights residents' experiences and voices. The findings hope to contribute to more human forms of racial justice that do not require a credential but emerge from the collective agency and struggle in Black communities.

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