INTRODUCTION

The Assets of Home

"He's not your son," pronounced Uncle Hotsy. "I am."

It was an ultimatum to the nearly eighty-year-old Elsie Mae Boyd.

"I'm your flesh and blood." Looking through me, he continued. "He can't stay here."

Elsie Mae may not have been my mom by blood, but that's what we called her—me, a scrawny, nappy-headed boy, and a dozen other kids who had found refuge in her yellow brick single-family home. She was in her sixties when I was born, and she had raised me since birth.

Mom listened to her eldest daughter Dot and the son she gave birth to make their case that spring day. She was too old to "watch" a house full of kids, they said, especially when one of them was as boisterous, freewheeling, and insolent as me. I did get suspended from school on occasion, mainly for mouthing off to teachers and students. Mom prepared her share of ice packs because of the "scraps" I found myself in. To Hotsy and Dot, I represented trouble. To Mom, I represented her son.

I can't remember if I had gotten into a fight that day or if a teacher

had sent me home from school for bad behavior or if any specific incident triggered the intervention by Mom's grown children. She positioned herself in the doorway of the room where I had slept for most of my life and in which I now stood, frozen, petrified by anger and shame. She gripped both sides of the white, paint-chipped doorframe. The creases in her brown hands were reminders of their strength. Her well-manicured bouffant wig put her just above five feet tall. Still, she made a formidable barrier, her body between me and Uncle Hotsy—protecting me, as she always did.

The year was 1986. I was nearly sixteen. It was the first time I had to reckon with the possibility of losing my home—and my mother. "He belongs in foster care," Dot said calmly.

It is said that home is where our stories begin. The story of how this book came about also begins at home, and from what I learned from Mom. She defended her home so that it included not just her biological kin but kids from the neighborhood like me, whose families couldn't look after them for various reasons. Now, I can see that Mom rightly defined our home and family based on our circumstances, and she vigorously defended her definition of family against people and systems who would not accept it—even if those people were her children. I survived Hotsy and Dot's campaign and managed to stay in that home until I left for college at the age of eighteen.

Before that day in 1986, I didn't know what it was to be devalued as a human being. Until that day, I understood rejection only in terms of the dates with girls I couldn't get. Nothing had prepared me for that moment. Our very presence on 1320 Hill Avenue, in the small city of Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, was a testimonial to acceptance. I lived in a Black-majority city that we bragged about; we weren't like "those other Blacks" we looked down on, the ones who lived in neighboring Pittsburgh, because folks who lived in the city were somehow lesser. Calling Wilkinsburg home made us feel special during a time when the region was anything but.

Wilkinsburg was once a part of Pittsburgh, until its powerful

White residents seceded in 1876, setting up an antagonistic relationship with the bigger municipality early on. In the late 1960s, though, when work disappeared and demographics shifted, Whites fled Wilkinsburg, too, leaving the town half empty. Black folk trickled in, and this new Black majority eventually adopted Wilkinsburg, just as Mom had adopted me.

The adage goes that when White folks catch a cold, Black folks get pneumonia. When work disappears for White people, as it did in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area in the 1980s, Black people suffered even more, and Black women adjusted their families in ways to keep children from feeling the effects of extremely high unemployment. "In January 1983, the regional economy officially—that is, numerically—bottomed out," wrote journalist Bill Toland of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.[1] "Unemployment in Allegheny County [where Pittsburgh is located] hit 13.9 percent, a rosy figure compared to the rest of the Pittsburgh metropolitan statistical area, where the adjusted unemployment rate hit an astonishing 17.1 percent (unadjusted, the number was actually higher, 18.2 percent)." Many families struggled to realize the American Dream in Pittsburgh, but Black families, including my own, found it especially hard.

When Hotsy and Dot talked with Mom about sending me to foster care, I didn't feel I could turn to my biological family. My father, Floyd Criswell, had been killed at the age of twenty-seven in Jackson State Prison, about seventy-five minutes west of Detroit, when I was eight years old. He wasn't involved in my life prior to his death. I don't remember ever meeting him. My biological mother, Karen Perry, lived in Garfield, a low-income Pittsburgh neighborhood at the time, about four miles away, where she raised my half-sister Danielle, the youngest of her four children. Karen gave birth to my older brother Kevin when she was sixteen, me at eighteen, my younger brother Dorian at twenty, and my sister Danielle at twenty-two.

Kevin and Dorian lived in Wilkinsburg with Mom and me. Growing up, I didn't have much interaction with Karen, who I call

by her first name. Every summer, a few weeks before the start of the school year, Kevin, Dorian, and I got excited about the prospect of Karen taking us back-to-school shopping. Then, taking us clothes shopping seemed to be her most important role in my life. And I was just fine with that.

Karen never talked to me about why she gave me into Mom's keeping. Mom told me Karen handed me to her at Magee-Women's Hospital in Pittsburgh, where I was born. Even as a kid who knew nothing other than our home on Hill Avenue, I always knew that the senior citizen Elsie Mae couldn't be my biological mother. Though I was quick to fight anyone who challenged my calling her Mom, I came to know through my surroundings who and what a godparent was in relation to a biological mother. I grew up knowing my "cuz," "auntie," and "brotha" could be the kin of my heart or of my blood. The similar backgrounds of many of my friends reinforced this understanding of family. In Wilkinsburg, many in my peer group lived with their grandmothers, aunties, or other surrogates. The African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" is especially true when you factor in the economic and social realities Black people face. From our village, Black folk had developed an informal foster care system long before I became the beneficiary of that support. That system was as familiar to me as the texture of Mom's hands.

I came of age seeing how various hardships made parents give their children to surrogate parents for safekeeping. I bore witness to mothers who, to make ends meet, worked endless hours on multiple jobs as domestic workers and janitors. Mom used to be a domestic worker in the homes of wealthy White families, but she stopped her cleaning jobs around the time I was born and began watching children full-time to earn money.

Mom was the first entrepreneur and business owner I ever met. She filled a vital need in the market. Mom had help with her makeshift family; her daughter, Mary, lived with us. Mothers in our neighborhood had little choice but to entrust someone like Mom and Mary

Mary and (from left) Kevin, Dorian, me, and Angie

to love their children when, often, those Black women were taking care of White people's kids in their roles as domestic workers.

Mary also had cleaned people's homes, but she suffered a stroke, and after her recovery she assisted Mom with us kids. We called Mary our aunt, which was more believable than Elsie being our mom because Mary looked like most of the women who dropped kids off at elementary school.

Mom was married to Theodore Boyd until his death in 1977. Teddy, who served in the Second World War, was the first father figure in my life. I have fond memories of Teddy sitting on the grassy

knolls outside of a nearby shopping mall. I remember him leaving for work in the mornings to go to his job as a security guard before we kids went to school. After he died from "black lung," Hotsy, also a veteran, moved into our house. But his was no benign presence—Hotsy's name was on the deed of the home we lived in, and he eventually pushed to kick us kids out (or, at least, me). Compounding matters, Hotsy had "nervous breakdowns"—psychotic breaks—every few years, something I always attributed to his involvement in the war. Now I see that the post-traumatic stress from racism in Pittsburgh may have compounded the damaging effects of war.

More than a dozen children of varying ages spent significant chunks of time in our house. Some came just when they needed to be babysat, after school every day. Others would spend long stretches with us—days, even weeks—sleeping over. Six to seven of us lived in the 2,260 square foot home at any given time. Kevin and Dorian shared the master bedroom, where other children were also occasionally housed. They would share beds, if needed, or use pillows from the couches downstairs as a makeshift mattress. I slept with Mom in her bed until Kevin and Dorian moved up to the attic, whereupon I moved into their room. Hotsy and Mary had their own bedrooms.

The condition of the house reflected its numerous, active occupants. Fallen plaster and eroded drywall left the walls pockmarked, the wood frame exposed. The house went through a paneling phase when Hotsy did his best to cover the damage we did, but sections of it eventually came down, adding to the variations and blemishes. The roof bowed and the external brickwork buckled in places. The house needed significant repairs, but it was good enough for Kevin, Dorian, me, and others until we graduated from high school.

Mom and Mary made $5 a day per child, $25 per week for babysitting—if people paid. I don't recall Karen paying Mom for my brothers and me. Instead, she helped out by purchasing back-to-school clothes and Christmas gifts. Though Mom and Mary also received Social Security and Disability, the government subsidies and babysit-

Mom, me, and Mary in Wilkinsburg

ting revenue wasn't always enough. I recall families owing money to Mom and Mary for babysitting their kids, just as Mom and Mary owed the local drug and grocery stores. When their Social Security checks arrived, Mom would have us kids pay various bills across town.

Still, I never felt poor, at least not until I went to Allegheny College, a private liberal arts institution in Pennsylvania ninety minutes north of Pittsburgh, where so many of my peers owned their own cars and had bank accounts that always seemed to have money in them. In comparison, my grandfather "Twenty" gave me $50 and a "Good luck!" when he dropped me off at the steps of my dorm. And I couldn't have had a happier upbringing—at least, not until that day when Uncle Hotsy and Dot made me realize that my belonging was conditional and that, in their eyes, I *belonged* in foster care.

Insecurities about not belonging never quite go away. I couldn't ignore the bell Hotsy rang. The belief that I had to fight to be included

followed me to college and all the colleges where I ever worked, from my first, humble job as a camp counselor, helping the children of migrant workers, to the boardrooms of the Brookings Institution, where my cushy office has a nice view and my name is garnished with a flashy title. Yet I haven't outgrown my roots: I work in a unit of Brookings dedicated to making sure our economic growth includes all racial and ethnic groups. And over the weekends, I write a weekly column for the education website the Hechinger Report about how race impacts education.

But my sense of (in)security in where I live and work does not completely stem from unresolved family issues. In my office, which overlooks a main drag of one of the wealthiest areas of Washington, D.C., I constantly read insulting and infantilizing research and commentary about how Black people cause their own poverty by not getting married or by having too many children. For those writers, family planning strictly means that low-income women must figure out how to not have children. I look over my shoulder as I read these articles, thinking, "Is the researcher talking about me and my upbringing?" Well—yeah.

Privileged eyes constantly remove their gaze from root causes of social and economic despair to myopically perceive positive family adaptations as dysfunction or as causing poverty. You'd think people intuitively would know that Black people don't deliberately choose their family arrangements so they will be worse off. To be clear, we shape and create family configurations to protect children and adults. I don't think Karen, who had four children before her twenty-third birthday, could have overcome the obstacles she faced early in life to become a social worker if Mom hadn't taken in her three boys. In Black communities, it's fairly common to have women plan family based on a more expansive understanding of what a family is. A lack of opportunities for Black men and women demands innovation, creativity, and more options for family—not fewer.

The fact that many of my friends grew up with one female bread-

winner doesn't mean Black people don't want to be married or that Black men are unwilling to work. Instead, maternal caregivers stepped into the breach when an economy that didn't pay women fairly, denied Black men and women job opportunities, and criminalized labor in the underground economy made it harder to form nuclear family units—if they wanted to do so. But those aren't the stories you read in much of the research on Black communities that ends up recommending changes in individual behaviors rather than endorsing anti-racism policy. Theorists who posited that poverty was mainly about individual choices produced the foundational studies undergirding family planning research. First popularized in the 1960s by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, culture of poverty theories argued that low-income people share inherent characteristics and values that keep them impoverished. Thus, children who grow up in poor communities fall victim to the decisions of their parents, replicating the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Subsequently, low-income mothers were—are—rendered culpable for putting their children in poverty. Culture of poverty theories manifest themselves in a seemingly constant focus on how Black folk aren't living up to White norms instead of probing how to dismantle systems that privilege White people at Black people's expense. I now know that my existence is a manifestation of Black women's resistance against the criminalization of poverty and the devaluing of Black lives. For me, family planning research has mostly been a thinly veiled negative reinforcement campaign that attempts to punish Black people for poverty we didn't create.

Since 1965, when Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan published his report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, better known as the Moynihan Report, researchers and journalists have continued framing poverty mainly as a function of individual choices—that is, mothers form families that put children in harm's way. Moynihan also offered a robust structural analysis of the economic and social conditions that help shape Black family structures. However, he set a dangerous example by identifying the

main problem as Black people not living up to White middle-class ideals. This is a mold that researchers of Black people and cities willfully maintain to this day. One of the major goals of this book is to show that *there is nothing wrong with Black people that ending racism can't solve*.

What Hotsy and some researchers called a no-parent home I called family. I had multiple mothers, guardians, and father figures whose love didn't fit in a neat little nuclear family structure. In that Hill Avenue home, I learned to read, write, share, love, and accept others who didn't share my genes. Mom regularly said, "I took you from the hospital, and you were born into love." It was her way of making the single Black mother debate irrelevant for me.

Still, my struggles with Hotsy, Dot, and Patrick Moynihan are with me and manifested in my work on Black-majority cities.

In the U.S. context, we, as researchers and as residents, are bombarded with studies that project how bad Black families, students, and residents are compared to an assumed White norm. Researchers rarely ask these analytic questions: What is good about Black families? Where are the assets of Black communities? According to the research nonprofit the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, "Assets provide the tangible resources that help individuals move out of and stay out of poverty."[2] Assets include the material and nonmaterial, such as physical property, federal treasury notes, cash, stocks, bonds, brand names, savings, copyrights, and more. Assets are the physical, nonphysical, and behavioral resources that can be exchanged for quality of life improvements. People are the most important asset of all. My upbringing was an asset.

Our relentless pursuit of disparities between Black and White people often omits the policies that were designed to devalue Black assets. Those omissions help foster a sense of superiority among Whites while minimizing financial and social privileges gained from not acknowledging root policy causes of disparities.

As a way of moving toward research frameworks that look for assets in Black communities, I spoke with several of my Black colleagues who grew up in Black-majority places. I asked them two basic questions: "What are the benefits to living in a Black-majority city?" and, "Why do so many of us choose to stay in them?"

One of my peers, the Brookings fellow Makada Henry-Nickie, responded, "Home feels safe." She leaned back, sprouting a smile that spoke of relief and comfort, and added, "I don't have to explain myself." However, much of the research that is motivated to bring about equity or fairness amounts to making a case of why we should belong.

Though Henry-Nickie currently lives in Washington, D.C., home for Henry-Nickie is the Black-majority island country of Trinidad and Tobago. She acknowledges that being a Black woman and an immigrant from a Black-majority country gives her a particular appreciation of Black-majority cities in the United States. Henry-Nickie is a researcher who works with data every day. She, like many Black immigrants, feels the collateral damage of negative expectations, stereotypes, and assumptions she didn't grow up with but now has to live with in her adopted country. The expectations of Blacks in America spill over onto those who haven't been reared in our context.

Adding insult to injury, we're professionally trained and rewarded to make White people the default referent group that Blacks are measured against. In doing so, we acquire a tendency to center White people in our work.

I was first introduced to the practice of White centering later in life as a graduate researcher, when I first learned how to carry out a regression analysis, a staple of quantitative research. Regression analyses examine the relationship between two or more variables—say, the impact of race on academic achievement. For a category like race, one must pick a referent group for the purposes of comparison. I was taught to make White men (not White women) the default referent in most of my models. In the aforementioned example, achievement

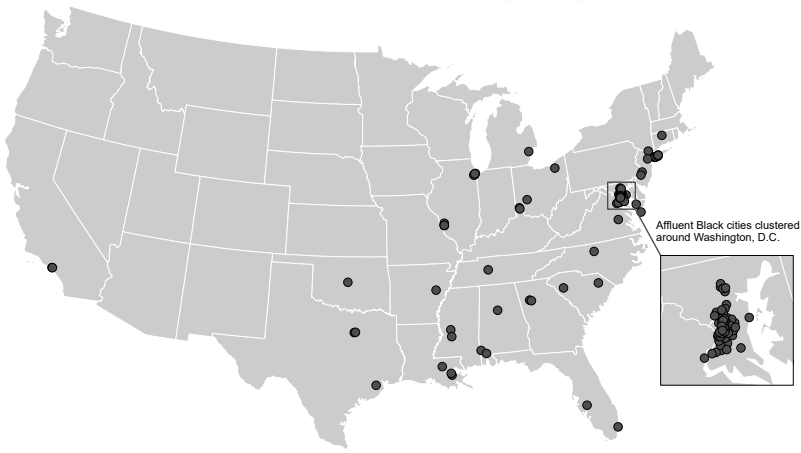
test scores of White women, Black women and men, as well as their Hispanic non-White, Asian, and Native American counterparts are measured against White men. Regression models are mathematically most stable if the referent group is the largest within the sample you are drawing from. For that reason, in the United States, data sources that make note of racial categories are generally presented sequentially, with "White," the largest single racial group, listed first.

But if we really are interested in improving Black communities, it's much less useful to select Whites as the referent. Historical discrimination categorically leveled against Black people makes it difficult for many research projects to make a true apples-to-apples comparison with White people. For instance, to compare a Black person's income to that of a White person without accounting for wealth that was systematically denied to Black people by federal policy is to bury one's head in the sand and ignore the roles of racism and White privilege. Racism is a common denominator for Black people; it's a given. It's much more useful, in many cases, to examine the variation *within* the Black population to see what factors and conditions can be attributed to differences.

In leading up to my study on devaluation (presented in chapter 2), I examined incomes of Black families living in Black-majority cities. It was a very simple study that simply asked, "Where are Blacks with high incomes living?" Incomes are proxies for decent job opportunities, good schools, and safe living environments. Figure I-1, a national map of Black-majority cities ranked by median household incomes of Black families, shows that 124 communities outpace the national median household income for all races ($53,889), according to data from the 2015 American Community Survey.[3] Black families are especially thriving in various city/suburbs in Maryland, which hosts more than half the top 124 Black-majority cities. The DMV—that is, the D.C.-Maryland-Virginia area—is Black bougie heaven.

Using median income as a proxy for financial status is a very imperfect practice. Measuring the middle of an income distribution—

FIGURE I-1. BLACK-MAJORITY CITIES WITH MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME ABOVE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE ($57,652) IN 2017



SOURCE: American Community Survey U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

median income—of a particular city often masks the earning and labor disparities of particular groups that are not employed by the dominant industries in a market. That's especially the case for Black families when popular publications put out various lists for the wealthiest places to live. Not everyone benefits from a thriving economy. That's why colleagues of mine within the Brookings Metro program encourage more robust measures of economic health that include growth, inclusion, and prosperity.[4] However, detailing strength among Black populations within Black cities offers a vantage point to opportunities that may lead to investments.

I examined home prices in these neighborhoods and found that many of the homes were of similar quality and had similar neighborhood amenities as those in similarly situated White neighborhoods. However, they were priced significantly less—the basis for my devaluation studies. One might say homeowners in Black neighborhoods received a discount. However, those same communities are hemorrhaging vital tax revenues and equity merely because of the

concentration of Black people. The price difference excited me because it was clear that homes in Black neighborhoods were not the problem society portends them to be—they were devalued. Instead of centering White neighborhoods as a standard to be reached, I sought Black assets and found a path toward a solution that didn't involve fixing Black people. We can pursue solving for devaluation.

When acclaimed author Toni Morrison was asked in a 1998 interview whether she would begin to feature White characters more prominently in her work, she responded, "You can't understand how powerfully racist that question is, can you? Because you could never ask a White author, 'When are you going to write about Black people?' . . . Even the inquiry comes from a position of being in the center." Morrison continued, "There are no pluses for me. Being an African-American writer is sort of like being a Russian writer, who writes about Russia, in Russian, for Russians. And the fact that it gets translated and read by other people is a benefit. It's a plus. But he's not obliged to ever consider writing about French people or Americans or anybody."[5]

A critical disadvantage in public policy research with the use of White centering in disparity research is that it distracts our attention from finding potential solutions that can positively impact the Black community. It keeps a focus on having Black people strive for benchmarks made impossible through racism. My examinations of Black people among Black-majority cities is a deliberate attempt to look for variations, evidence that may be signs of positive resistance, adaptation, and struggle that similarly situated people can learn from and use. It's also about my learning how to tell our story.

Ultimately, the point of view of the researcher determines what group becomes the standard against which all others are measured. All researchers are filled with cultural norms and traditions that are inextricably linked to the racial setting, which ultimately influences our frameworks, methods, and findings. And it's impossible to remove

our childhood experiences from our point of view. Our segregated histories influence the subtle perspectives of our work. Research can never be neutral, above the fray. All research is imbued with the norms and values of the person conducting it. Inclusion is in my family history and subsequently inseparable from my scholarship. That is to say, there is nothing dispassionate about research. This truth is especially true when it comes to privilege and racial bias. I once heard author and scholar Brittany Cooper say, "Ain't shit about White supremacy rigorous."[6] In other words, Whiteness gets in the way of quality. This is why truly rigorous research actively addresses our biases, particularly around racial prejudice.

Think tanks and universities must see diversifying the stable of researchers as a proactive solution to hedge against bias and to add value to Black communities. While there is no guarantee that Black, Latino, Asian, or Indigenous researchers will challenge the orthodoxy they were trained in, they are more likely to have insights into how the methods and findings may or may not serve the community the person lives in or is from. When the Public Health Service began studying, in 1932, the progression of syphilis—the Tuskegee Experiment—by giving hundreds of Black men the disease without their consent, it's a severe understatement to say they could have used some Black researchers (from any hood). That study went on for forty years.

Investment in researchers from underrepresented groups is an investment in rigor. It's also an ethical and moral investment. However, the methods and perspectives researchers are trained to use must also change if we are going to add value to communities that have been robbed of vital resources by racism.

All researchers need to learn how to center a community or group other than White people. The default position of Whiteness leads to horribly inaccurate and predictable interpretations of results: namely, that Blacks need to catch up. We need to focus more on

real sources of disparities. The evidence that racism is directed at Black people to impede their social and economic progress keeps growing (and growing), but the focus on disparity and individual behaviors persists.

For instance, 2018 research from the Quality of Opportunity Project, a research undertaking led by noted economist Raj Chetty, shows that even wealthy Black men who live in tony neighborhoods are more likely than their White male counterparts to have sons who will grow up to be poor.[7] The researchers controlled for many factors, including the family's socioeconomic background, neighborhood, education, and wealth, among other things, and still disparities existed. The *New York Times* created a stunning data visualization based on the study that showed how Black children in wealthy families become adults in lower income brackets.[8] The graphics also represent how different racial groups that started out rich end up poor; even here, more Black children end up poor than kids of other races. Many are calling this research groundbreaking.[9]

The charts presented in the *Times*' reporting also highlighted White men's elevated position in society. Instead of focusing on the negative impact of racism on Black boys, the headline of that story could have read, "Racism enables Whites to maintain wealth." Yet the reporting on the study and most of the feedback inexplicably placed the scrutiny on Black men. So I was partly wrong. There are instances when we should center White people: when we spotlight racism and privilege.

Of all the reactions to the amazing charts in the *Times* article, you didn't hear much about White male power. Economist Arindrajit Dube summarized this in a tweet: "If you overlay the @nhendren82 (+coauthors) percentile-percentile plots, it suggests the exceptional mobility is for White men. This point should be discussed more when hypothesizing explanations for these patterns."[10] Dube is saying we need to scrutinize White privilege. What society needs is more evi-

dence of how racism works—for the benefit of White people. Expose that. Put that in the headline.

Research that merely lays out racial disparities without acknowledging the role of racism ignores the sources of inequality. It ultimately leaves little option but to blame Black people for hurting themselves. It fuels fears that inferior populations are ruining cities. Worse, the only people empowered by these data are the people who produce them. Communities burdened by racism don't need comparison studies that, in essence, suggest they have to catch up to or become White. Disenfranchised groups need studies they can use in court to litigate against discrimination; information that can be used to build wealth; knowledge that reveals the erasing of history; and inquiries that dismantle racist systems. In addition, Black communities need research that highlights assets worth building on. By accounting for racism, researchers can better examine true value. In housing, for instance, if we can show the tax that people pay for racism, we are better able to assess the true value of homes. Then, we can begin to find ways to restore the value that Black communities deserve and identify systems that rob Black communities of the American dream.

When you get right down to it, many comparisons of Blacks to Whites are unconsciously (or consciously) asking these questions: Why can't you be more like White people? Why can't you get married and act like "normal" middle-class White families (without the leg up that federal policies have given White people over the decades)? Why can't you achieve academically like White people?

In addition, when White people are assumed to be the norm or standard, everyone else is deemed abnormal. Then, the underlying question driving the research is: Why can't Blacks be normal?

Mom never once referred to my home or my friends' homes as broken or as the source of failure. She knew the importance of narrative on the emotional well-being of children and communities. I grew up

getting only tidbits about my biological parents' story from Mom and Mary, and that was deliberate. They carefully curated information about my biological family to protect them and me from incurring any shame from a world that claimed I was a deficit.

I learned about what happened to Floyd and Karen much later in life. Mom would impress upon us that Floyd died in prison while breaking up a fight. (My brothers and I did believe the "dying in jail" part, but her portrayal of him as a Good Samaritan didn't quite add up.) I mostly didn't mind the insistence on rendering my biological parents, especially my father, in a good light. I eventually learned that he was very human and had plenty of good in him. As a child, I didn't fully grasp Mom's insistence on his goodness. Now that I'm a father myself, I have a deeper appreciation of the stories we tell our children—and why we tell them.

This book picks up where Mom left off.

Mom presented the narrative of Karen and Floyd's lives so that we wouldn't be scarred by others' interpretations of their shortcomings and so we could leverage their strengths. The story we told about ourselves wasn't one of poverty and a lack of love; we were never made to feel that the way we grew up was abnormal. We had a loving home, a Mom who fought like a lioness to protect her cubs, and a city that, for the most part, shared her values.

Mom and Mary both had to leave 1320 Hill Avenue so they could receive adequate health services in their final years, leaving Hotsy alone in the home. Unable to keep up with the taxes and his own health, Hotsy also left the home, moving to an independent living facility where he resided until his death. Wilkinsburg now owns the home. Its price is nowhere near its true value in relation to the children Mom reared and the parents she undergirded, as well as its market worth—it is devalued.

I have a responsibility to restore my home and community's value. *Know Your Price* is not about viewing Black communities through rose-tinted glasses. This book, like Mom, is about seeing—not devaluing—

our true potential free from bigoted judges. It's about understanding root causes. My home, upbringing, community, and culture have significant value even though others devalue them. In addition, my children's future—and your son's, and your daughter's—is linked to our abilities to give value back to Wilkinsburg and other Black-majority cities. Those children could live in a Black-majority city. Approximately 9 million Black people do, roughly 20 percent of the country's Black population. And many other ethnicities live in these cities, as well.

Know Your Price is not an argument for creating all-Black cities. Wanting one's culture and background not to be insulted, invalidated, or erased isn't an argument for segregation. White, Hispanic, and Asian people already live and love in Black-majority places. And we love this multiculturalism (especially when we're not targeted by 911 calls) because Black folk are inherently diverse, representing different ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and gender constructions. To disavow the presence of others is to deny parts of ourselves.

If there is a direct message to White people in the book, it's to relay that helping individuals doesn't require fixing them. Try fixing policy, instead. Likewise, we can't wait for White folks to see that Black people aren't broken. Researchers will write yet another (and another) Moynihan Report, so *Know Your Price* is also a call to researchers. We need the tools, analytics, and frameworks to properly assess the cities, neighborhoods, and people others devalue.

In addition to calling attention to assets (investment opportunities) in Black-majority cities as well as structural change, I write this book for people who find themselves in the same situation I was in that day in 1986—fighting to belong, to stay in your homes, your communities. It would be foolish to assume that investors will immediately reverse their thinking upon reading my work and start financing Black people, firms, and institutions instead of exploiting devaluation as a path to make profits. Seeing value in inner-city housing stock has helped spur gentrification—just ask the residents of Harlem, Oakland, or Washington, D.C.

Mom moved to Wilkinsburg during the massive intra-city migration in Pittsburgh in the 1960s. I should say that Mom was displaced. In 1961, city officials voted to raze approximately 1,300 structures within the heart of Black Pittsburgh, the section known as the Hill District, to make room for the construction of the Civic Arena sports complex. Over 1,500 families, approximately 8,000 people, were displaced, which spurred a migration to the East End section of town—the Homewood-Brushton neighborhood of Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg. Mom's story of how she got to Wilkinsburg is one many Black families in Pittsburgh can tell; Pittsburgher and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson captured one aspect of it in his play *Two Trains Running*, which offers a framework for a solution to positive change (as well as the title for my book).[11]

The play, which is set in 1969, the year after the Civil Rights Act was passed and Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, illustrates the economic injustice Black people still face. It presumes that Pittsburgh's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which seized land in the neighborhood of the Hill District throughout the 1960s as part of an urban renewal project, purposely undervalued Black residents' homes and businesses to purchase the land on the cheap. The protagonist, Memphis, owns a building and restaurant, both of which are slated to be seized by the city through an eminent domain clause in his deed. A Black man, Memphis is certain the city would assess his property differently if he were White. Referring to the eminent domain language in his deed, Memphis says, "They don't know I got a clause of my own . . . They can carry me out feet first . . . but my clause say . . . they got to meet my price!"

Another character in the play, Hambone, painted a fence for a grocer who promised him a ham upon completion. Hambone painted the fence, but the owner never paid Hambone the ham. "He gonna give me my ham" is a refrain throughout the play. It's unclear if Hambone suffered from a mental illness before the incident or developed

one after, but waiting for the grocer to pay what he promised drove him mad. He died demanding what he was owed.

Memphis, meanwhile, went back and forth with city officials, armed with an accurate valuation of his property and a demand that the city meet his price. The last scene of the play epitomized the kind of result Black business owners, home owners, and all residents can realize if we are collectively as committed as Memphis was in not selling himself short.

"I went down there to the courthouse ready to fight for that twenty-five thousand dollars I want for my property," Memphis said. "I wasn't taking no fifteen. I wasn't taking no twenty. I want twenty-five thousand. They told me, 'Well, Mr. Lee . . . we got a clause, and the city is prepared to put into motion'—that's the part I like, 'prepared to put into motion'—'the securing of your property at 1621 Wylie Avenue'—they had the address right and everything—'for the sum of thirty-five-thousand dollars.'" Memphis, elated to receive the compensation he demanded and deserved, starts making plans for a new restaurant. In real life, Mom, like so many other Black families, was forced to move from the Hill District to Wilkinsburg.

Knowing the worth of our homes, businesses, and communities—assets—starts with knowing that our assets are constantly being devalued. The devaluation of our assets affects us physically, psychologically, and economically in negative ways, one of which is to rob us of our sense of self-worth and dignity. Demanding our proper price helps us achieve just and equitable distributions of needed resources and reinforces the notion that there is nothing wrong with Black people that ending racism can't solve.

Racist federal, state, and local policies created housing, education, and wealth disparities. Policy must work for Black people in the same way it has supported White people's efforts to lift themselves up. Bootstrapping, financial literacy, and other things we wrongly attribute to White success didn't save them from urban plight and

rabid unemployment during and after the Great Depression. Federal housing, transportation, and employment policies did, and the U.S. government largely excluded Black people from those efforts.

When upliftment is too rigidly viewed as a zero-sum game, there is no incentive for an overwhelmingly White U.S. House and Senate with mostly White constituents to re-create policy history for the benefit of Black people. Therefore, change must emanate upward from the neighborhoods to the halls of Congress. To be clear, I'm not disguising a call for bootstrapping as activism. Bootstrapping won't solve many of the problems Black people face, especially those around economic mobility. Pragmatically speaking, Black people must leverage the assets we possess to excite change. As Frederick Douglass said in his 1857 "West India Emancipation" address at Canandaigua, New York, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."[12] Knowing your price is about leveraging the power we possess.

There are certainly plenty of Black people who know they have value—folks like Memphis and Hambone. However, communities need researchers to provide enough frameworks and information so leaders and families can challenge governments and markets that devalue, dehumanize, and demean us for economic gain. This book is about understanding those processes as well as how our agency and assets can dismantle those structures. We have little choice but to mobilize the resources at our disposal, but we must deploy them toward structural change if we want outcomes free of the influences of racism.

I represent Wilkinsburg. My ups and downs as a person are undoubtedly rooted in many of the struggles of my hometown. Our fates are intertwined. The childhood conflict I related earlier has shaped my entire adult life, which has been beleaguered with unpredictable outbreaks of rage, largely stemming from reminders of past feelings of vulnerability and worthlessness. Minor disagreements with

lovers, friends, colleagues, and strangers often turned into blowout arguments, for reasons unknown to them. To those whom I verbally assaulted, I apologize.

In my late thirties, I "progressed." Instead of outright verbally assaulting people, I aggressively debated with those who consciously or unconsciously reminded me of Hotsy, still taking people to the brink of hurt feelings and broken friendships. Again, I apologize. While many interpreted my anger as passion, I hurt the people in my life and myself. The stain of unresolved contempt toward Hotsy and others kept me trapped in internal conflict. I deeply wanted to belong, to matter.

This book is written using different styles to convey a state of my personal development and my varied levels of connection with certain Black-majority cities. Sometimes my internal conflicts will emerge in my writings about cities. Chapters are part memoir, part essay, and part *cri de cœur*, with a splash of "dispassionate" analysis, varying in degree. I hope people will turn to the associated research reports on the Brookings website.

Some chapters are emotionally distant; others are very personal. The degree to which I insert my personal narrative into each chapter reflects the level of personal and professional investment I have with each featured Black-majority city. Nonetheless, the goal at the onset of the project was to highlight assets in Black-majority cities, which in and of themselves should be viewed as assets to our democracy. I aimed to push back against the harmful narrative, rooted in White supremacy, that Black people are deficits in need of fixing. And, finally, I set out to identify potential solutions that can be used in Black-majority cities to restore some of the value lost from racism.

I start with using my hometown as a case study of sorts, illuminating the dynamics of devaluation and how it throttles economic growth in geographic areas with high concentrations of Black people. By retracing my old high school cross-country training route, I illustrate in chapter 1, "Who Runs the City," how Pittsburgh's tech

boom was spurred by common economic development practices that overlooked and ignored Black people and institutions worthy of investment, reifying structural inequality. Consequently, cities need help in identifying assets that have been devalued. To illustrate how research methods can be used to identify assets, in chapter 2, "A Father Forged in Detroit," I show how racism lowers the prices of owner-occupied homes in Detroit's Black neighborhoods, lessening past and current residents' (including my father) abilities to climb the proverbial social ladder. If we can solve for devaluation by restoring value in our homes, we should be able to lift our communities and the people in them. In chapter 3, "Buy Back the Block," I examine one man's efforts to restore value through real estate development in the historic Black neighborhood of Ensley, which is in Birmingham, Alabama.

White and middle-class flight leaves many physical structures unoccupied, including school buildings, that are tactically placed to optimize a neighborhood's access. Adding value to communities will require converting some of these vacant properties into organizations and firms that meet communities' needs. Chapter 4, "A Different Kind of School," examines one effort to convert my first school into a business incubator.

There will be mistakes in adding value to communities. In chapter 5, "The Apologies We Owe to Students and Teachers," I show how my own efforts to reform schools devalued Black teachers of New Orleans. In chapter 6, "Having Babies like White People," I return to family. The devaluation of property is really a manifestation of the debasement of Black people. Restoring value in our communities will require the expansion of options to make family, gaining reproductive justice rather than restricting it through family planning. I will show how social connections and reproductive justice literally make Black lives matter through an examination of racism, infant mortality, and surrogacy.

Restoring value in communities will require a legislative agenda delivered by the people we elect. Chapter 7, "For the Sake of America, Elect a Black Woman President," highlights the Atlanta mayoral race to show how Black women voters and elected officials provide a vantage point that can unify communities in an era of fractured politics. In closing, I show in chapter 8 that, in spite of many efforts to remove Black culture from city landscapes like Washington, D.C., chocolate cities can't be erased because our brilliant culture won't allow it.

I work toward fixing systems instead of people. I can help my hometown forge a new path in the face of new challenges caused by devaluation. But I'm also creating a new path for my own development. Like many Black men, I directed my unresolved anger at people I should have loved instead. I do my best to atone for those actions throughout the text. However, I choose to keep some of my anger—an anger we all should have when our home, our hometown, is taken from us without a fair hearing—for this project. This time, I will direct my indignations toward biased policies instead of people.