

Intersectionality Matters: Black Women, Labor, and Households in Black Suburbia



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The number of Black suburbs has expanded since the 1960s, however, research on gender and how Black women contribute to their formation is understudied. Grounded in an intersectional framework, this article places women at the center of the analysis of Black suburban life. Using a multisite ethnography conducted during the Great Recession, I make a case for a Black diasporic suburb model and analyze the labor and household practices Black women use to sustain their families' suburban lives. This article generates new insights into the heterogeneity of and Black suburbs in general, and the dynamic culture and economies of Black suburban women, in particular. Thus it contributes to new thought in Black feminist geography and the sociology of suburbs.

Keywords: Black suburbs, intersectionality, women, work, diaspora

This article examines understudied Black suburbs from the perspective of the middle-class Black women who shape them.¹ A new Great Migration is occurring (Wiese 2004). Black Americans and Black immigrants have been uprooted from unaffordable cities and migrated to older suburbs in the Northeast and Midwest and to newer suburbs in the South (Clergé 2019; Johnson 2014; Lacy 2007, 2016). Black suburbs range from low-income suburbs on the edge of urban centers to affluent exurban areas. Researchers have examined Black

suburbs (Johnson 2014; Lacy 2007; Lewis-McCoy 2014), but few have investigated how gender and national origin intersects with race and class to shape Black women's experiences in suburbia.

Although stark racial and gender inequities persist in the U.S. economy, some Black women have attained a level of education and income that put them in the middle class (Malveaux 2013; Simms and Malveaux 1986), facilitating their and their families' suburbanization. Despite these economic and geographic shifts,

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© 2023 Russell Sage Foundation. Clergé, Orly. 2023. "Intersectionality Matters: Black Women, Labor, and Households in Black Suburbia." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 9(1): 86–103. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2023.9.1.04. I thank Trina Vithayathil, Zophia Edwards, Cedric DeLeon, Kara Cebulko, and Grey Osterud for reading earlier versions of this work and providing feedback. A previous version of this article was presented at the Race in Marketplace Conference, Paris, France in 2019. Direct correspondence to: Orly Clergé, at clerge.ory@gmail.com, UC Davis, 1 Shields Ave, Davis, CA 95616, United States.

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1. By Black, I refer to women who identify themselves as belonging to the Black racial category and are the descendants of racial slavery in the United States and the Caribbean.

media coverage of the 2020 presidential campaign emphasized the significance of White suburban voters, particularly White suburban women, to the outcome of the election. Black suburbs and the women who live there were rendered invisible in this national conversation. Yet exit polls demonstrated that the margin of victory for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, the first Black and Asian woman vice president, came from Black women voters, who are the most loyal sector of the Democratic Party base, and from voters in suburbs of color in swing states such as Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Michigan (Lung-Amam 2020).

To encourage more attention to the unique experiences of Black suburban women with overlapping inequities of racism, sexism, nativism and classism, this article applies an intersectional framework (Collins 1990, 2015). Using a multisited suburban ethnography conducted in the wake of the Great Recession, this article places women at the center of the analysis of Black suburban life. It shows that their labor and housing practices are heterogeneous, very few of them resembling the conventional models of White, native-born, and middle-class suburbanites. I make a case for a Black diasporic suburb model and analyze the varied occupational, entrepreneurial, and household formation strategies Black women use to sustain their homes, families, and communities in these suburban spaces. This article generates new insights into the heterogeneity of suburbs in general, and Black suburbs in particular. Consequently, it expands the sociology of suburbs and Black feminist geography.²

LITERATURE

As reflected in the literature, racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia all shape the configuration and meanings of space. These forms of inequality are at the core of how suburban space has been constructed in the U.S. Black feminist geographers (McKittrick 2006) have demonstrated that Black diasporic communi-

ties have taken up urban spaces originally designed to reproduce the power of the dominant White, heterosexual patriarchal order, turning them into sites of struggle. The theoretical lens of intersectionality unveils what is often hidden in these spaces: the experiences of Black women as they encounter racism, sexism, classism, and nativism on the ground. This framework was developed by Black feminist scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2000). Crenshaw, a legal scholar who confronted laws forbidding discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or national origin rather than any combination of these factors, coined the term intersectionality in order to account for the complex, multidimensional forms of oppression experienced by Black women in a White patriarchal society. This analytical praxis reveals and challenges the multiple, overlapping systems of power that articulate and legitimize domination (Crenshaw 1990). According to Collins, intersectionality is the “critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (2015, 2).

Intersectionality offers a framework for examining interlocking systems of oppression as they manifest in suburban as well as urban spaces. I build on the Black feminist origins of intersectionality by placing the experiences of Black women in the center of the analysis of Black suburban life. Historically, Black women’s experiences of work have encompassed their bodies, labor, and places of residence. Black women’s long history in America began with their enslavement and exploitation as laborers and breeders for more than three hundred years. Then, under racialized industrial capitalism, they were employed and undercompensated mainly as cooks, cleaners and laundresses and seasonal laborers. They have continued to do care work in the neoliberal capitalist era, but those who have become

2. A Black feminist geography is the study of the distinctive intersecting racial, gender, and class inequities that shape the distribution of Black women across rural, urban and suburban geographical spaces. This study is also concerned with understanding how Black women engage in emancipatory practices to free themselves from these inequities.

middle-class professionals also do corporate mammy work (Collins 1990). As Black women labor has changed over time, so have their households and geography shifted.

Black Women's Suburban History

Black women's work, families and households, and location within the United States were radically transformed after the turn to the twentieth century. During the Great Migration (1910–1970), millions of Black men and women escaped the South. Large numbers of Black women left the violent racial and sexual abuses of Jim Crow and the dead-end work of sharecropping, field labor, and domestic servitude in the rural South (Hine 1997; Chatelain 2015). Northern migrants moved into jobs in industry and the service sector in growing cities such as Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago (Du Bois and Eaton 1899). During this period, Black women continued as domestics for White women, but more of them did day's work and lived outside rather than in their employer's household, so they attained greater autonomy from white coercion and abuse.

Black women also migrated to Northeastern and Midwestern suburbs during this prewar period, although this trend has often gone unnoticed. Andrew Wiese's (2004) study of Black suburbs, which places gender at the center of the analysis, argues that Black women had distinct suburban employment and migration patterns from Black men until the 1960s.³ For example, industrial suburbs in the Midwest were initial magnets for migrant Black men, who became steelworkers in the 1920s. Black women, however, worked largely as domestics and lived in Black service- and working-class suburbs. These suburban areas were the home base of domestic workers employed by affluent suburban Whites seeking leisured lifestyles. Black families often built their own suburban homes and communities from the ground up in these segregated and unequal suburbs. This is in part the result of Blacks being denied access to loans, but also their desires to create suburban communities

that resembles the extended family communities, large homes, and rural lifestyles they left behind in the South.

As suburban development expanded after World War II, public policies and private actions on the part of Whites combined to ensure that Black American families, both working-class and middle-class, were prohibited from buying into "lily White" suburbs. Racial exclusion from suburban housing was not simply an outcome of practices of developers like Levitt and Sons, who built Levittown on Long Island, but also a well-orchestrated strategy of local, state, and federal governments in cooperation with banks (Rothstein 2017). The denial of mortgages to qualified non-White buyers, legacies of racially restrictive covenants on land and houses, racist real estate practices, and White violence locked Black men and women out of suburbs and segregated them into small, densely populated areas near city centers. Those who worked in affluent suburbs were barred from living there. Instead, they were confined to inferior housing in unincorporated, neglected suburban areas adjacent to the White suburbs they serviced. Homeownership is the primary source of wealth accumulation in the United States. Therefore, racism in lending and access resulted in White Americans amassing an average level of wealth that is ten times higher than that of Black Americans over time (Darity et al. 2018).

The civil rights movement's freedom fighters such as John Lewis and Diane Nash sought to dismantle the racial caste system that had relegated Black women and men to insecure, low-paying occupations, and demanded the desegregation of workplaces, schools, the ballot, and neighborhoods by organizing boycotts and mass demonstrations, bringing political pressure on federal and state lawmakers, and filing legal suits. The federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 barred racial discrimination in housing, challenging the exclusionary practices of suburban housing markets.⁴ Larger numbers of African Americans attained college and professional or advanced degrees, and entered

3. As Wiese states, "If the shadow of race was clear in patterns of suburban settlement, the distinctive nature of Black employment also shaped a highly gendered process of suburbanization" (2004, 50).

4. Fair Housing Act, 42 U.S.C. 3601 et seq. (1968).

into previously all-white private and public sector employment. Although many Black women remained in service occupations, greater numbers earned college degrees and gained access to higher paying service or clerical jobs and to professional positions. In New York City, Black American women left domestic work and pursued public- and private-sector employment opportunities. Black immigrant women transitioned from work in homes to hospitals (Model 2008).

This post-civil rights movement advance in the incomes of some women while others were segregated into low-wage jobs reshaped Black urban and suburban geographies. The emergence of greater occupational diversity and class stratification in the Black community expanded the Black middle class and Black suburbs.⁵ The majority of Black people in the United States today live in suburbs (Frey 2011). Black families move mainly to predominantly Black suburbs, or suburbs with substantial proportions of Black and Brown residents. In 2018, the hundred largest metropolitan areas included 418 Black suburbs, which made up “5 percent of all suburbs and [was] a fivefold increase since 1970” (Douds, Lewis-McCoy, and Johnson 2021, 1). For example, the proportion of Black families living within the New York City boundaries has decreased significantly. They have been uprooted by the high cost of living of urban areas, often as Black neighborhoods are gentrified, or seek larger homes and a better quality of life. They move to suburban settings on the outskirts of the city or to older suburbs in Nassau County (Clergé 2019). New York’s suburbs saw a 30 percent increase in the number of Black families between 1990 and 2010.⁶ These trends are a part of a national, decades-long suburban migration of Black families (Johnson 2014).

SETTINGS

The data for this article emerge from a multi-site ethnography conducted between 2008 and 2016 in two areas I call Cascades and Great Park,⁷ which are among the hundreds of middle-class suburbs where multinational Black communities have formed (Wen, Lauderdale, and Kandula 2009). I spent two and half years living in Cascades, in the borough of Queens, and Great Park, in Nassau County, carrying out participant observation and conducting interviews. Realtors advertise Cascades as a “suburb with city taxes,” emphasizing its unusual combination of predominantly single-family housing with relatively low property taxes. I define Cascades as a suburb because its residents identify it as suburban and contrast it with the dense urban areas where many had previously lived. Its proximity to Nassau County blurs the lines between it and Long Island. In fact, many parts of eastern Queens were constructed as suburbs by developers interested in luring White families in Manhattan to their new suburban style communities in the mid-twentieth century and its suburban character has persisted with the arrival of Black diasporic families. Great Park, is an inner ring suburb. Nassau County operates independently of surrounding local governments, and its tax structure funnels capital into the municipality. The analysis that follows shows that Black women are central to the functioning of these areas.

Cascades: Suburb in the City

Cascades is a predominantly Black middle-class suburban area in the racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse borough and county of Queens. In 2008, when I started this project, the population of Cascades was more than 75 percent Black and 40 percent foreign born. Its residents were well educated; more than 25 per-

5. Despite these advancements, Black women across class remain underemployed, underpaid, and experience significant abuse on the job. As Collins reminds us, “U.S. Black women may have migrated out of domestic service in private homes, but as their overrepresentation as nursing home assistants, day care aides, dry cleaning workers, and fast-food employees suggests, African American women engaged in low paid service work is far from a thing of the past” (2000, 46).

6. The rate of increase varied by nationality: African Americans increased by 16.8 percent, Afro-Caribbean immigrants by 87.6 percent, and African immigrants by 74.9 percent (Logan and Stults 2021).

7. Cascades and Great Park are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of my interviewees.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Cascades, Queens County, Great Park, Nassau County, and New York City

	Cascades	Queens County	Great Park	Nassau County	New York City
Median household income (dollars)	70,174	56,780	82,315	97,049	51,746
Black (dollars)	71,148	58,527	91,872	81,215	41,589
Asian (dollars)	73,493	55,207	105,481	116,673	55,090
Latinx (dollars)	69,112	50,710	58,701	70,525	36,022
White (dollars)	54,848	62,491	89,526	102,404	71,851
College educated (percent)	27.0	29.9	31.6	41.4	34.0
Management-professional (percent)	29.3	31.3	35.5	43.2	38.1
Owner-occupied housing (percent)	66.2	44.5	74.1	81.3	81.3
Poverty rate (percent)	7.3	11.6	7.3	4.0	16.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2012b (2009 inflation-adjusted dollars).

Note: Poverty rate is the percentage with incomes below the national average.

cent of adults held bachelor's or associate's degrees (see table 1). Almost 30 percent were employed as professionals or managers. The median annual household income in Cascades was higher than that of White and Latinx residents of Queens and even higher relative to the median income of all U.S. households. The generations of Black families who moved from tenements or high-rise buildings in the boroughs to single-family homes here felt that they had significantly improved their situation. Residents work throughout the metro on various work shifts in diverse occupations and industries. Interviewees included nurses, engineers, transportation workers, postal workers, small business owners, accountants, service workers, and teachers.⁸ Cascades is a hypersegregated space. Queens County was 17.7 percent Black, but more than 75 percent of its Black population was clustered in Cascades (U.S. Census Bureau 2012a). Immigrants made up a slightly lower proportion of Cascade's residents than in Queens County, but much higher than in New York City.

Great Park: Out on the Island

Over the past twenty years, as poor, low-income, middle-class, and affluent families of color have been pushed or chosen to move to the suburbs, Nassau County has experienced unprecedented racial and class segmentation (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2012). On paper, Great Park is a racially integrated space, with a population roughly one-third Black, one-third Latinx, and one-third White. However, its Black population is concentrated in the northern sections and is multinational. The White population has declined precipitously over the past twenty years. In 2012, the median household income of Great Park was higher than that of Queens and Cascades but lower than Nassau County as a whole. Relative to the national median household income, however, Great Park residents are affluent.⁹ Great Park is considered a bedroom suburb; residents commute to work elsewhere in the county or in New York City. On workday mornings, Volvo Crossovers, Mercedes SUVs, and Honda minivans fly down the main street onto the highways heading west. Residents are

8. In the past, the Black middle class largely relied on public-sector jobs, such as with the U.S. Postal Service, but the Republican and neoliberal attack on government since the 1980s has led to a large reduction of these opportunities and a decline in the conditions of employment they offer. Being a postal worker was a solid middle-class job in the mid-twentieth century. It is no longer.

9. Some parts of Great Park are more affluent than others. In 2010, the western section's median household incomes were \$99,872 and \$95,673, and that of the eastern section was \$69,081 (American Community Survey 2012).

employed in health care, public service, business, construction, and professional and managerial occupations. Black residents work in a range of fields: as technology specialists, nurses and doctors, engineers and small business owners and have earned associates and bachelors degrees at the city and state's public universities, which have enabled them to rise into the middle class.

For Black Americans and Black immigrants, owning a home in Great Park is the culmination of years of learning, earning, and saving. Parents work constantly to meet mortgage and tuition payments. Many are still paying off substantial debts for their own college educations well into their forties and fifties. What separates Great Park from Cascades is property taxes. Nassau County residents pay property taxes that can exceed \$20,000 per year. The combination of high taxes and high mortgages prohibits many families from living here and puts financial pressure on those who do. What sets Black families apart from their White neighbors, however, is that they must pay what is colloquially called a Black tax: they have to earn more to live in a suburb where Whites earn less than they do, and many pay more to live in overpriced homes that they purchased as housing prices were rising before the 2008 housing market crash.

Over the course of ten years, I returned to these neighborhoods to remain in contact with residents and pay attention to the transformations occurring there. Thick descriptions of social practices in these spaces were complemented by sixty in-depth interviews with Black middle-class adults, the majority of whom were the parents of teenagers whom I also interviewed for a separate project. Forty-three of these interviewees identified as women. I was invited to social events and private parties but, most important for this article, into their homes where I witnessed and documented their living arrangements and activities of everyday life.

Although the participant observation phases of this research allowed me to be in gender-mixed or single-sex spaces, the interview settings were anchored in gender norms. I gathered more narratives from women than

from men. I was a young woman in a world of middle-class men and woman, many but not all of whom were husbands and wives. When a woman "hangs out" with men, their conversation and interaction is perceived in socially defined ways (Lacy 2007). After explaining who I was and why I wanted to speak with them, men were reluctant to set up one-on-one conversations with me. Instead, they often told me that their wife had to be a part of the meeting, to which I readily agreed. At other times, I was instructed to get in touch with their wife and schedule a time to talk with her and their teenage child. "Take my wife's number," they said. Doing research on relations of family and kin, class, and race necessarily involves many sensitive subjects, and interactions proceed through unspoken rules which become clear only through encounters in the process of fieldwork. Although both women and men were busy juggling their jobs and family responsibilities, women more often made themselves available to me for interviews. In the next section, I outline my findings on Black diasporic suburbs, how Black suburban women navigate work and housing in them, and explain why we should use intersectionality as a tool for examining suburban inequality.

FINDINGS

Cascades and Great Park are what I theorize as Black diasporic suburbs. A view into the experiences of the Black women and mothers who encounter intersectional oppression based on race, class, gender, and national origin in these spaces points to their two key distinctive characteristics: the histories and legacies of anti-Black American racism, and Black immigrant exclusion.

Anti-Black Racism

The residents of Black diasporic suburbs inherit the legacies of anti-Black policies in housing and development. For Black Americans, who were the first to desegregate Cascades and Great Park, buying suburban homes was a part of a long, intergenerational journey from the rural South to urban New York and then to a segregated suburb. Sarai, a Black American mother of two in her forties who is employed

as a financial manager, grew up on Long Island and moved to Great Park after marrying her husband, Jesse. She was the child of the early wave of Black Americans to leave Harlem and Brooklyn for the suburbs in the 1970s. Sarai's father, a successful financier, purchased a single-family suburban home. When her family arrived, Sarai was the only non-White child in her kindergarten class. By the fourth grade, the White girls and boys she had befriended had disappeared one by one and were replaced by Black children. Her narrative underscores the fact that the suburbs were sites of covert racial violence against Black boys and girls during desegregation. As an adult, Sarai has observed similar patterns in Great Park. Her White neighbors avoid interacting with her and her children, she is treated with suspicion in White-owned stores, and her son has been harassed by police at a nearby neighborhood park.

Sarai's encounters with racism on Long Island and in Great Park exemplify the histories of exclusion and marginalization that characterize Black diasporic suburbs, and her observations resemble the testimonies of other Black women (and men) I interviewed. These legacies continue to matter today. Public authorities disinvested in these communities as Black families moved in. For example, many residents noted that Cascades and Great Park received inferior government services relative to the Whiter neighborhoods and towns adjacent to them. Garbage removal had become less consistent over time. Mothers often pointed to the underfunding of local schools and the targeting of their children within them. Emergency services, too, had declined. Madeline, a Jamaican nurse in her fifties who lives in Cascades, observed that during snowstorms the government quickly sent salting machines and snowplows to Whiter areas even as a passenger bus remained stuck on her street for days after a blizzard.

Black Immigrant Exclusion

Cascades and Great Park are shaped by the substantial presence of Black immigrant households. Much of the research on Black suburbs overlooks the extraordinary migration histories and practices of their residents. Shifts in migration patterns since the 1960s mean that

many more immigrants now bypass cities and move straight to suburbs on arrival in the United States than ever before (Lacy 2016). Cascades and Great Park provide ample evidence that segregated suburbs are also multicultural diasporic spaces. Queens County residents hail from more than a hundred countries and ethnic groups; more than half of them speak a language other than English at home. Caribbean immigrants are the most significant pan-ethnic group in Jamaica, Queens (Lobo and Salvo 2013). In 2000, 75 percent of Jamaica, Queens' population was Black. Black Americans made up just 50 percent of its Black residents and Caribbean immigrants almost 25 percent (Logan and Mollenkopf 2003, 52). Haitians and Jamaicans are the largest ethnic groups. Those who identify as Hispanic (who may be of any race) are primarily from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Columbian diaspora, all of which include people of African descent.

Black immigrant women who live in the suburbs navigate a host of interconnected racial, class, and gendered inequities, as do Black American women. As Collins points out, "Women of African descent are dispersed globally, yet the issues faced may be similar. Transnationally, women encounter recurring social issues such as poverty, violence, reproductive concerns, lack of education, sex work, and susceptibility to disease. Placing Black American women's experiences, thought, and practice in a transnational, Black diasporic context reveals these and other commonalities of women of African descent while specifying what is particular to African American women" (Collins 2000, 29). Collins emphasizes the shared position of Black women on the global scale to examine how Black American and Black immigrant women encounter the common and differing inequities of racism, classism, sexism, and nativism in the same suburban space. Diasporic suburbs provide a unique field for researchers and policymakers to compare the two groups in the same suburban space rather than across national borders or in different urban settings. As this study shows, Black women with American and Caribbean backgrounds develop similar creative strategies for survival and success.

An important gendered inequity that all

Black women encountered but was more acutely problematic for Black immigrant women than for their U.S.-born counterparts was the instability of their husband's work and its impact on their family's housing in suburbia. Windsome, a Jamaican immigrant wife and mother of two who was employed in the public sector, struggled to keep her home from going into foreclosure. Windsome and her husband, Jimmy, had lived in their home for five years, purchasing the house in Cascades after living in the basement of their relatives' house for years after arriving in New York from Kingston, Jamaica. The day of our interview, she was in tears because her teenage daughter and son had recently discovered the foreclosure notices that she had been receiving for months. "I've tried to hide mail from them. I keep getting these notices from the bank. I don't know what to tell them, we might lose our home. I've been trying to work extra hours and it is so hard for my husband. We don't want the children to worry, but we can't hide this anymore."

The 2008 foreclosure crisis had a severe impact on families in Cascades and Great Park. Some of the highest rates of home loss occurred within their zip codes. Subprime mortgages targeted not only Black Americans (Carr 2007), but also Black immigrants, who were often unfamiliar with U.S. mortgage lending practices. Windsome's home came into foreclosure because her mortgage costs increased dramatically because of a sudden, steep rise in the interest rate. At the same time, her husband lost his blue-collar job amid large-scale layoffs during the Great Recession, reflecting the adage that Black men are "the last hired, and the first fired." Collins (2000) remarks that one of the main economic challenges for urban Black middle-class women is that their status is lower and their positions poorly paid, and that their husbands or partners may be offered higher-paying yet insecure jobs. This pattern of racialized and gendered economic inequality persisted in suburban area. Like many other families in New York suburbs, Windsome confronted the intersectional suburban inequalities that Black women face but whose stories are hidden behind data derived from large surveys. Her efforts to "save her home" demonstrate the interconnected layers of inequality

based on race, gender, national origin, and class that Black mothers must navigate on behalf of their families.

Political Place-Making

Black U.S.-born and immigrant women use a host of sociopolitical resources to navigate the matrix of race, class, and gender discrimination they face, and some organize and engage in political action to combat racism and nativism in their suburbs. Angela, a second-generation Jamaican immigrant in her forties, ran for office in Great Park. She explained that she was tired of "the same old Italian or Irish guy" dominating suburban politics and failing to serve their Black constituents. She sought to ensure that Black families who paid taxes in Great Park had their interests represented. She was aware that she faced barriers that White women politicians did not. As she explained,

My running mate on the ticket was White, and it was funny because all of our people were Black. So it was culture shock for her, but she realized what nice people we were. I had to mention my credentials. She doesn't have any. She might have gone and taken a class in Nassau Community College; other than just a high school degree, that's it. But she's respected. I had to prove myself. Then during the race she had family members who got in trouble with the law, with the police. It was kind of kept hush hush. But they . . . didn't go crazy, overboard with it in the race. But if it had been my family. I was probably the more qualified candidate, but she's one of them, you know. She knew the players, I didn't know the players. But I wasn't really involved in that end of things, you know?

Actively participating in politics added responsibilities to Angela's very busy life as a mom of teenage children, the daughter of aging parents, and an active member of her church community. She exemplifies Black women's activism in suburbia as she seeks to create social and political change in a municipality with a persistent pattern of White, male political leadership despite substantial proportions of Black and immigrant residents. Sarai, Windsome, and Angela's stories reveal that

when we center the experiences of Black women in suburbs, we recognize the distinctiveness of Black diasporic suburbs relative to Black suburbs, White suburbs, and Asian ethnoburbs (Li 1998, 1999). Three issues define Black diasporic suburban life: anti-Black racism, nativism and xenophobia, and political action. The intersection of these realities in the lives of Black women makes them rich spaces for further sociological exploration of the diversity of suburban life.

WORK, OCCUPATIONS, AND INCOME IN DIASPORIC BLACK SUBURBS

Black American and Black immigrant women have a fundamentally different relationship to work and occupations than Black men, White women, and White men (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1990). Black American women labored first as enslaved people and then as domestic servants to White families. Black immigrant women from the Caribbean, too, emerge from histories of enslavement, colonialism, and postcolonialism, but they are relative newcomers to the United States. Since the 1960s, the work opportunities and occupational prospects of both have expanded as discrimination in employment has been outlawed, but persists.

Black Women's Employment

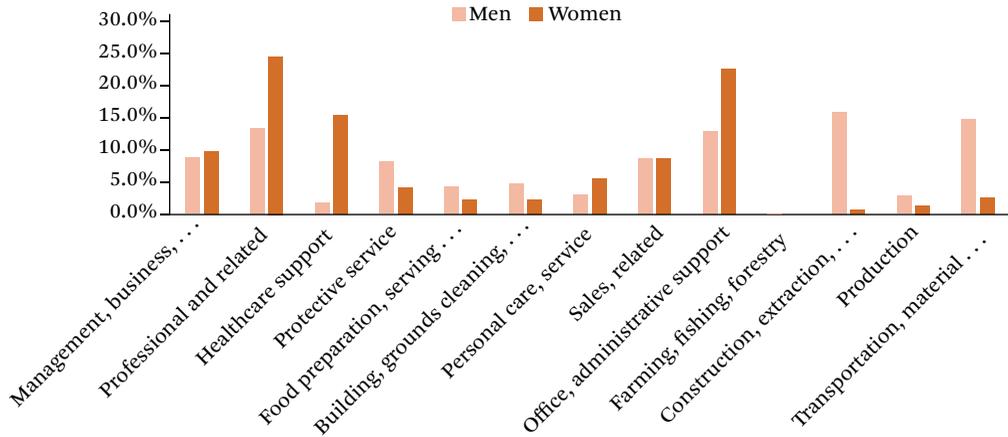
Black women have more variegated occupational and earning profiles than ever before. They have made their way into jobs and professions in health care, finance, education, and nonprofit organizations that have made it possible for them (and often their partners) to buy into the suburban housing market in New York. But the numbers conceal salient features of Black suburban women's economic position. This study reveals two important findings about the world of work and occupations that animates Black diasporic suburbs. The first is related to gender and occupations, and the second to extending the notion of work to include what Black culture terms "side hustles" that Black suburban women engage in.

In terms of work, I found important dynamics between gender and occupation that differ from the typical model of the White middle class. The assumption is often that in middle-class suburban homes, the men hold blue-

collar or white-collar jobs. As more White women entered the paid labor force in the 1980s, they, too, entered white-collar or pink-collar occupations. In Cascades and Great Park, however, the occupational patterns of Black middle-class men and women who were married or cohabitating were not straightforward. The occupations of Black women in Cascades and Great Park reported in the American Community Survey reflect the patterns I observed in the field. For example, women in Cascades were more concentrated in professional, health-care, and administrative occupations, and men largely in construction, transportation (see figure 1).

Family members in married, cohabiting, and intergenerational households often held jobs that might conventionally assign them to different classes. For example, in many cases women held white- or pink-collar jobs in gender-segregated fields while their husbands clocked in and out of blue-collar jobs every day (Vickerman 1999). For example, Paula, a Black American banker in her fifties, was married to Tony, a Black American school bus driver. Tony had worked for his bus company since the 1980s and recalled a time when the Irish dominated the occupation and Blacks in the city had a hard time "getting in." They have owned their home in Cascades since the 1980s, raised three children in their detached, single-family Tudor home, and were close to paying off their thirty-year mortgage. They planned to sell their house and move to Atlanta to join their eldest child after their youngest was settled in college. Other couples included the following wife-husband combinations: nurse and mechanic, counselor and foreman, and financial analyst and deliveryman. Given the gender differential in wages, some of the men with blue-collar jobs might have earned as much as or even more than their female partners with white-collar jobs. In an intergenerational Black American household, a grandmother was a teacher, a grandfather was a business owner, and a daughter was a banker. Through my observations and conversations, I realized that white-collar employment was too simple a requirement for being considered middle class. Instead, Black households gained middle-class incomes through complex combinations of varied occupations.

Figure 1. Occupation by Gender, Cascades, 2012



Source: Author’s tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau 2012b.

Note: The data presented is for all residents in Cascades. Because Cascades is predominantly Black, the assumption made is that the data largely reflects the experience of Black residents.

New York’s leading economic position makes it a place where astronomical amounts of wealth are accumulated and circulated. As New York solidified its position as “rich-tropolis” where \$25 million is considered “economy-class rich,” Wall Street financiers and entertainers have become super rich. Across the Brooklyn and 59th Street Bridges, the managers and professionals who make up the city’s middle class have incomes which have remained comparatively stagnant since the 1970s. This economic context has important implications for how we analyze occupation as a marker of status in Black diasporic suburbs. Although racial discrimination in the labor force has declined over the past fifty years, the racialized neoliberal economy has created new modes of exclusion along racial, gender, ethnic and class lines. This process is matched by chronic poverty and the reduction of pathways to mobility out of poverty such as public education and redistributive public policies.

In this context, Black suburbanites have found occupational and sectoral niches in order to get ahead in the labor market and to build and maintain their lives in some of the most expensive suburban counties in the country. The Black American middle class relies largely on public-sector employment. In Cas-

cadés, roughly a quarter of residents work in the public sector as teachers, police officers, and administration (see table 2), relative to 16 percent of the U.S. population as a whole (Hill 2020). The “good government job” has provided the incomes and security that have given Black families across the country a solid foothold in the middle class. This is largely the story of U.S.-born Blacks, though; their birthright citizenship has allowed them access to civil service occupations that are closed to non-citizen immigrants. Long waiting lists, the privatization of services, and attacks on unions decreases the prospects for public sector work for U.S.-born and naturalized Black people and their children.

The expansion of the private, nonprofit, and health-care industry since the 1970s has offered significant employment opportunities for Black New Yorkers. Black immigrant women have historically done care work in hospitals and homes (Foner 2001). Those working in hospitals have been able to secure well-paying, unionized jobs that allow them to enter the middle class and buy into the suburban housing market alongside their U.S.-born counterparts (Greer 2013). In 1990, among U.S.-born Blacks in New York City, one in four men and almost one in three women worked in the public sector (Model 2008). In contrast, more than

Table 2. Gender, Education, and Employment in Cascades and Great Park

	Cascades	Great Park
Gender		
Men	45.4	48.3
Women	54.6	51.7
College-educated		
Men	20.2	n/a
Women	26.8	n/a
Employed in public sector		
Men	24.7	16.1
Women	27.0	19.7
Employed in private sector		
Men	61.3	67.0
Women	53.9	63.5
Self-employed		
Men	6.8	11.6
Women	3.9	6.0

Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census Bureau 2012.

Note: All figures are percentages.

one in three foreign-born Black women were clustered in health professions, and one in five worked in private hospitals as registered nurses, respiratory therapists, anesthesiologists, records managers, or chefs. By 2012, the proportion of foreign-born Blacks in health care had declined slightly.

Side Hustles and Entrepreneurship

The second important finding related to gender and work is that women in Black diasporic suburbs strategically engaged in side hustles to make ends meet. Although many outsiders assume that residents of middle-class suburbs typically hold one full-time, well-paying job, this was not the case for many interviewees. Examining singular occupations conceals the various streams of income that enable Black middle-class families to thrive in suburbia, particularly in expensive global cities like New York. Many mothers were working in formal positions, engaged in the unpaid, second shift at home, and also earned money from entrepreneurial activities.

If we rely on census data on those who re-

port being self-employed, we miss the creative entrepreneurial labor of Black women in these suburbs, which in turn bolsters the culture and economy of their neighborhoods and towns. During my time in the field, I was invited to meetings that encouraged multiethnic Black families to engage in entrepreneurship and investment to liberate themselves from debt and gain financial freedom from their full-time jobs. "My goal is to become my own boss one day. I am starting with this small business on the weekends, and will see what I can do from there," said Katia, a nurse in her fifties who recently recruited women in her church as clients for her beauty and wellness business. My interviewees had one job that provided a regular income and benefits, but before the 2008 financial crisis their side hustles generated additional income to pay for home improvement projects, a newer car, private school tuition, sports or music lessons, summer camps, travel back home, or remittances.

Black American and immigrant women used their networks to recruit clientele for their small businesses. For example, Mary-Josette, a Haitian woman in her fifties, owned a beauty salon but was also did part-time social work. She provided informational support to newly arrived Haitian immigrants who were applying for Temporary Protected Status, and navigated online portals for others seeking to change their documentation status. She shared information about her services with those who came to her salon. Other parents held one full-time and another part-time job, worked multiple shifts at the same job, or engaged in seasonal work. One Jamaican mother was a real estate agent but also prepared tax returns from January to mid-April. Some nurses worked their regular hospital shifts but visited homebound sick and elderly patients on weekends through private agencies. Teachers taught summer or night school to upgrade their kitchen cabinets or "bless" their grandchild with a formal first communion celebration. Financial managers hosted investment meetings in their living rooms to present lucrative (sometimes pyramid) schemes to potential investors. I met a social worker, Renetta, who spent her evenings and weekends preparing cakes and catering desserts for birthdays, christenings,

anniversaries, graduations and showers of relatives, church family, friends, and a growing clientele in Brooklyn and Queens. “Baking has been my passion since I was a young girl. I learned many techniques from my grandmother when I visited her during the summers in South Carolina. Now I do it when I can, and make some extra cash,” she told me. These side hustles often took place in informal, personal networks.

Cascades residents had easy access to their social networks, which were mainly local, whereas Great Park residents’ networks more often centered in New York City proper. Cascades residents had more dense personal networks in their predominantly Black neighborhood and adjacent areas; Great Park residents lived in a racially integrated setting and often traveled longer distances to frequent neighborhoods and institutions in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Harlem, and Queens to connect with family, friends, and church family and complete tasks for their side hustles. Furthermore, a greater proportion of Cascades mothers were engaged in side hustles than Great Park moms. This was largely a function of income differences; mothers in Cascades earned significantly less than their counterparts in Great Park, and were more likely to have intergenerational and transnational households with significant financial needs.

Black suburban women responded to the limits of their take-home pay from formal work by harnessing their talents to earn more income in informal settings. This strategy was in part a response to the economic squeeze imposed by the Great Recession, but also belongs to a long tradition of making ends meet by Black women who have been historically locked out of well-paid, secure jobs. In Cascades and Great Park, Black families sought to maintain their homes and cars and often to pay for private school tuition, as well as other childcare and education-related costs. Their suburbanization was facilitated by the earnings from their main occupations, but their participation in side hustles helped them purchase material goods and services they would otherwise have to cut out of the family budget. For Black moth-

ers in particular, who have always had to do the “patchwork” necessary to thrive in an anti-Black economy, the Great Recession required them to “work, work, work” to avoid falling out of the middle class and to pass their class status on to their children (Clergé 2022).¹⁰ Although side hustles are not new among Black women, they would be seen as out of place in suburbs where residents are assumed to be comfortable financially. Although residential suburbs are seen as neutral spaces when it comes to employment and entrepreneurship, Black women’s side hustles reflect both their marginalization in the job market and their ability to use their creative skills to generate additional income. Sometimes, their side hustles reflected their true passions, and their occupations were the jobs they did to earn “real income.” Side hustles are a dynamic yet invisible labor Black women engage in, which has important implications for understanding suburban housing stability, cultural economies, and entrepreneurship for them, their families and communities.

BLACK DIASPORIC SUBURBAN HOUSEHOLDS

In addition to rethinking how we operationalize work and occupations in suburbia, we must also reconsider the household as a central category for Black middle-class families. When social scientists examine suburban households, they assume that the household is supported primarily by the labor of two adult spouses or partners, that their income is spent primarily to support the household and its dependent members, and that the nuclear family is the predominant household form. Black households in diasporic suburbs do not conform to this model because their extended kinship ties and practices of mutual aid, which are both economic necessities and cultural preferences, modify the boundaries and composition of households in significant and varied ways. Single parenthood, too, is not uncommon, but Black single parents often augment their households in ways that sustain the well-being of their children and relatives. The flexibility of family and household formation is a distinctive

10. This is a reference to the popular 2016 song “Work” by the artist Rihanna.

feature of Black suburban life as well as of Black urban life.

Remittances

In Cascades and Great Park, Black women's income from their occupations and side hustles were spent not only within their suburban household but also for households across borders. Black American women explained that they provided regular financial and material support to family members in other households within the United States, particularly the South. Black immigrant women, too, transferred money to lower-income family members in the Caribbean. These domestic and international remittances from Black suburban households demonstrate that these women have not left their households and families behind in their places of origin as they moved to New York and its suburbs, but instead have sustained financial ties with households elsewhere, forcing suburban scholars and practitioners to question the very category of the suburban household.

Black women whose families came from the U.S. South and Black women whose families came from the Caribbean employ similar ways of providing monetary and material support to their extended families. The need for remittances to family members in households across borders is well documented (Stack 1996; Cohen 2011; Bonner 2004; Itzigsohn 1995; Orozco 2002). Tara, a fifty-two-year-old Black American lawyer who lives in Great Park, sent money monthly to her grandmother in South Carolina to contribute to her transportation and medical expenses. When her parents were absent, Tara's grandmother raised and supported her in Harlem. When Tara graduated from the City University of New York, her grandmother returned South. Now that her grandmother needs help to make ends meet on her fixed income, Tara said, "I will do everything to help her. I

would not be where I am today if it was not for my grandmother."

Black Americans' remittances to relatives elsewhere in the United States are the direct result of the racial wealth and wage gap that causes a higher proportion of Black Americans than Whites to need additional financial support to stay afloat. This assistance is facilitated by strong kinship and cultural ties within Black families, and greater financial responsibility is placed on upwardly mobile members of the family. "Informal forms of social support are important in the Black community. . . . Extended family members serve as key bastions of psychological and economic assistance, providing emotional support, money, childcare, housing and food to their relatives when necessary" (Chiteji and Hamilton 2002, 9). Researchers should analyze how money earned by suburbanites is distributed across households, calling into question the very idea of the independent household.

Cascades and Great Park's suburban commercial districts reveal that Black immigrant families engage in regular transfers of money and material goods to families and friends in the Caribbean. The institutions required to send capital and goods, such as Western Union, C.A.M., and shipping companies, are numerous in Black diasporic suburbs. For example, the Black woman-owned Marianni's Market sells Haitian spices, calling cards, music, and paysans-style clothing. The market is certified by C.A.M., the money transfer business for the Caribbean. Customers pay a nominal fee to wire money back home. The tools needed to facilitate the movement of material goods to the Caribbean such as large barrels are visible in grocery stores, convenience stores, and in some cases, on sidewalks in front of shipment businesses.¹¹ Although this is often assumed to be a urban immigrant phenomenon, my time in the field demonstrated that as Black immi-

11. Blue barrels are widely used by Caribbean immigrants to ship goods to loved ones in their home country. In these barrels, many of my interviewees packed blenders, foodstuffs, school uniforms, hair products, generators, and medical supplies for loved ones in Haiti and Jamaica. The crushing rates of inflation in Haiti and Jamaica make it too expensive to purchase basic goods in country. Suburban women and men pack these barrels a couple of times a year because it makes more economic sense for their transnational household structures. The sale of blue plastic bins and money transfer businesses in Cascades and Great Park facilitate a financial support system by which the diasporic Black middle class assists family members across borders.

grant women suburbanize, they continue to provide support to loved ones in the villages they left long ago, helping those households, communities, and countries remain afloat under crushing conditions of inflation, debt, political instability, and climate change.

Single-Parent Households

In addition to fostering households across borders, the women of Black diasporic suburbs formed and lived in single-parent and multi-generational households. The prevailing assumption in the scholarship and everyday life is that suburban households consist of conventional, two-parent, heterosexual families. In the field, however, I encountered Black mothers who were single, separated or divorced, and raising children. In Cascades, 37 percent of households were headed by married couples, 41.2 percent of household heads had never married, and 21.2 percent were separated, widowed, or divorced. Great Park had a higher proportion of married household heads (51 percent), and single women headed one in five households (U.S. Census Bureau 2012a). Lameek, a forty-four-year-old teacher and mother of one, was not married but had a good relationship with her child's father. She decided not to marry because of the many problems she faced while dating. She felt more comfortable and stable raising her daughter on her own because she felt that "men can be more trouble than they are worth. I have everything I need; so does my daughter."

These renderings of suburban household life in Black diasporic suburbia make sense if we see them through intersectional eyes. Collins reminds us that "in general, everything the imagined traditional family ideal is thought to be, African American families are not" (1990, 47). These patterns persist in suburbia. Single parenthood is often believed to be characteristically urban. Black poverty and inner-city ghettoization have often been blamed on the higher

proportion of Black families headed by a single mother. My time in the field revealed that there is no one normative middle-class suburban household type. The diverse array of household composition requires us to forge new definitions of suburban families and households, which are altogether outside the culturally racist assumptions about Black families and Black women, in particular (Collins 2000).

Although postwar suburbs were designed to be spaces for White, middle-class, two-parent households, an intersectional lens on contemporary suburbs helps us recognize their heterogeneous household structures. For example, almost one-third of the families I interviewed were unmarried adults with children. Their inheritances, incomes, and family organization facilitated middle-class lifestyles.¹² In Cascades and Great Park, single-parent families were most often headed by Black American and Black immigrant women, although I interviewed a few single and divorced fathers as well. For example, Avril, a forty-five-year-old college-educated high school teacher and the mother of a teenage son, owns the Cascades home her parents passed down to her. Juanita, a forty-eight-year-old divorced Black American tech manager, shares her Great Park home with her parents and three teenaged sons.

Multigenerational Households

Within diasporic suburbs, middle-class households were also intergenerational. In some cases, single mothers moved in with or took in their aging parents. Ayanna, a forty-eight-year-old Black American mother of two who works in the public sector, lived with her two parents in the Great Park home that she grew up in. She was married for ten years, but after her divorce and her father's bout with an illness, she decided it was best to move her and her sons in with her parents and take over responsibility for the home. Michelle, a fifty-three-year-old Jamaican financier and mother of two, purchased

12. The sociologists Lynda Dickson and Kris Marsh (2008) argue that declining rates of marriage and childbearing have created a larger number of Black middle-class households that consist of single persons living alone. The authors demonstrate that two-parent households with children are not always the norm. In 2000, for example, 11 percent of Black middle-class households were twenty-five to fifty-four-year-old single people living alone, nearly double the proportion in 1980. I argue that this redefinition of middle-class households should include both single-parent and multigenerational families.

a ranch-style home in Great Park so that she could accommodate her father, who was unable to use stairs.

Some two-parent families lived with grandparents as well. Antoinette, a Haitian nurse in her forties who resides in Great Park, flies her mother, Mary Paul, age sixty-five, in from Haiti once or twice a year. When Mary Paul arrives, she lives in the finished basement in their Tudor home. Mary Paul is able to go to the doctor for her annual checkup and watch over Antoinette's three children during school vacations while Antoinette and her husband are at work. In other households, adults share one- and two-family homes with their young children and aging parents year-round. The presence of grandparents not only shields the older generation from the financial stresses of aging and retirement, but also serves the needs of parents whose long hours or multiple jobs require them to spend a significant amount of time away from home. Coresident relatives are not only the most reliable source of childcare but also tend to share the parents' cultural values. Relying on a family member enables parents to avoid paying exorbitant sums for childcare and gives them more income to devote to their children's other needs. Single parents, one parent and an adult child, siblings, and cousins from urban areas come together to purchase homes and improve their residential situation.

The other significant household pattern among my respondents that calls for a rethinking of the dominant image of suburbia is the consistent presence of young adult children living with their parents.¹³ The high costs of housing and college in New York meant that young adults who want to attend college or work in the city often stay at home well past the age of eighteen. Bernadette, a fifty-eight-year-old Haitian mother, allowed both her daughter and her son, who were in their twenties, to stay at home

while they attended local colleges and started careers in the city. "It is not our culture to say 'oh you are eighteen, goodbye,'" Bernadette explained. The day I interviewed the family, her son was in between jobs, but was updating his room so it looked more suitable for an adult rather than a teenaged boy. After graduating, adult children continue to live in and contribute to the financial stability of the household. In other circumstances, their schooling or joblessness make them adult dependents. Nationally, one-third of eighteen- to thirty-six-year-olds live in their parents' homes; this arrangement is more common among Blacks than Whites (Fry 2016).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

If we see the socioeconomic and housing structures of suburbs through the eyes of Black women, what do we learn? First, Black women make significant contributions to Black diasporic suburbs. These suburbs are distinct from Black suburbs, White suburbs, and Asian and Latinx ethnoburbs because they have evolved from histories of anti-Black and anti-Black immigrant patterns of segregated labor and residence and are today occupied by Black Americans and Black immigrants seeking to claim suburban space. Black women use their cultural, economic, and political skills to maintain households within these suburbs as well as across regional and international borders. Black women maintain diasporic ties with families and households in the U.S. South, Haiti, and Jamaica, compelling sociologists of suburbs to rethink the category of the suburban household. My hope is the draw attention to the ways in which these labor and household patterns exist beyond the typical city.

Second, single-parent and multigenerational households are assumed to be concentrated in cities, and two-parent families are re-

13. In Cascades and Green Park, young adults who went away to reputable colleges and universities found lucrative jobs in the city or out of state. Others struggled to find jobs while in school or after graduation that would enable them to rent their own apartments. Many remained at home with their parents in order to manage the high cost of living in New York while getting started in their careers. This pattern is in sharp contrast with the middle-class American ideal of the transition to adulthood and intergenerational mobility. For Black as well as White families, this middle-class norm became increasingly impossible to achieve as the Great Recession and the student loan debt epidemic kept millions of high school and college educated young people from launching into adult independence.

garded as characteristic suburbs. However, Black diasporic suburbs encompassed heterogeneous household types. These households help Black suburban mothers and wives meet the needs of themselves and their family members for financial support and care. They help families to pool resources strategically so they can maintain financial and emotional stability. For example, living with grandparents allows mothers to save money on health-care and childcare. The larger square footage of suburban homes relative to city apartments make this arrangement feasible. Culturally, the suburban household is a domestic space where Black diasporic families can continue the practices of reciprocity, kinship, and community they share with Black diasporic groups globally. Black women and their families mold diasporic suburbs into places where they and their multigenerational families can survive and thrive, contribute to local economies, and pass on their class status and culture to their children.

In terms of work, households with married or cohabitating heterosexual couples often included individuals whose occupations were customarily associated with differing class positions. Many women worked in white-collar jobs in health care, primarily as nurses, or as educators; their husbands or partners were employed in blue-collar jobs in transportation and construction. This demonstrates that Black suburbanization is powered by families with a range of occupational backgrounds and flexible economic strategies. In terms of income, Black women's lives challenge assumptions about how middle-class suburbanites earn. Departing from the typical pattern of holding a single, full-time job, these women work multiple morning, day, afternoon, evening and night shifts to generate income. They also brought money into their households through side hustles, entrepreneurial activities related to producing and selling goods or services outside their formal occupation. The income allowed mothers, aunts, and daughters to purchase material goods for themselves or their homes that would otherwise be a luxury on their salary.

My hope is that by using a Black feminist frame, this article will help generate new paradigms of suburban life that reflect the intersectional lived experiences as well as political ac-

tion to improve living conditions beyond the city. The findings presented here have important suburban, state, and federal policy implications. As evidenced by the dynamic work and household arrangements of Black suburban women, they and their families are balancing economic commitments, opportunities, and constraints inside and outside their suburban homes. A host of governmental and institutional supports are necessary to keep their households in suburbs and across borders afloat and thriving. Often suburbs are sites of political marginalization, overseen by small governments that lack the capacity or the political will to provide social programs that assist suburban residents (Johnson 2014). This article and issue aim to encourage urban and suburban governments to tailor policy and funding toward the needs of the growing Black migrant and immigrant communities whose diverse labor, earning, spending, entrepreneurship, families, households and cultures are integral to making suburbs more equitable.

The data explored in this article were collected before the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States. Since then, I have remained in touch with Cascades and Great Park residents, and have seen firsthand not only the Black Lives Matter protests for racial justice, but also the attacks on Black and Brown immigrant communities by the Trump administration, the targeting of Asian Americans at the onset of COVID 19, and the pandemic, which has undermined the health of Black and Brown people and essential workers in suburban settings. Black suburban women have been crucial to ensuring that medical institutions stay open and their households and communities remain safe. They are the essential workers: transit workers, nurses and doctors, delivery people, grocers. They left their suburban homes in Cascades and Great Park to ensure that New York City and Long Island's vital institutions continued to function. Some, exposed to the virus on the job or at home, perished, now have long COVID, or have resigned. Therefore, as the federal government redesigns economic and social policies and local governments consider how to help families emerge from the economic and health devastation of the pandemic, we must look to socio-

economic needs of women of Black diasporic suburbs for blueprints of equitable and sustainable suburban futures.

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