From the holdings of the Department of Special Collections , Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ

These documents are either in the public domain, or can only be used for educational and research purposes (Fair use) as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, all users agree that their use falls in the public domain or within fair use as defined by the copyrightlaw. We do not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material inour collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via our website, catalog, or directly from staff.For more information regarding copyright, credit, and citation please review the information onthe Copyright, Credit and Citation Guidelines page of our website.
https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/policies/copyright-credit-and-citation-guidelines. If you have any questions, including how to order higher-quality images from the collection, contact Special Collections Public Services via our Ask Us! Form. https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/ask-us

---

Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026 Sociology

2022

BARRIERS TO MOBILITY IN THE PERSISTENTLY POOR RURAL SOUTH

Parsons, Ryan James

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

---

http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01b5644v70w

U.S. Copyright law: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, §108, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve a violation of copyright law. https://www.copyright.gov/title17/title17.pdf

BARRIERS TO MOBILITY IN THE PERSISTENTLY POOR RURAL SOUTH

Volume 1

Ryan J. Parsons

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO

THE FACULTY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE

BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Adviser: Mitch Duneier

MAY 2022

© Copyright by Ryan J. Parsons, 2022. All rights reserved

Abstract

Social mobility has becoming increasingly constrained through spatial and racialized processes, but the micro-level mechanisms that structure these patterns remain understudied. This dissertation draws on three years of ethnographic participation in community life in Sunflower County, Mississippi, to document patterns of immobility in a rural, predominately Black community. In addition to this ethnographic data, the dissertation leverages extensive archival research and a systematic interview study of Sunflower County households. The dissertation builds an argument for a microsociology of social mobility that is attentive to the "mobility moments" that structure trajectories. These small interactions with people and institutions have the potential to shape mobility paths in unexpected ways and add nuance to population-level analysis of mobility checkpoints, the easy-to-measure life events that are often centered in analyses of mobility.

The dissertation supports this theoretical argument with four empirical chapters. The first reinvestigates the concept of "caste" and its use in early American studies of race relations in the South. It offers an alternative conception of caste from an economic sociology perspective that highlights how caste describes interactions across groups, rather than properties internal to groups. The second chapter uses archival data to explore the Great Migration, suggesting that White elites were willing to facilitate Black outmigration at the expense of local community sustainability and vitality. The latter two chapters leverages ethnographic analyses of education in Sunflower County. In the third chapter, I describe how young people with college aspirations navigate the prospect of social mobility pathways that require geographic mobility. In the fourth, I turn to the experiences of students experiencing remote learning during the COVID pandemic

to highlight the steep cost associated with navigating a stratification process. The conclusion suggests directions for policy applications and future research.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	6
Chapter 1	7
Chapter 2	37
Chapter 3	76
Chapter 4	112
Chapter 5	159
Chapter 6	194

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many people who made this dissertation possible. I received invaluable support from my committee through this process: Mitch Duneier and Kathy Edin were excellent and compassionate co-chairs. Matt Desmond provided key suggestions on making my writing more incisive. Bob Wuthnow ensured that my writing was compassionated and measured, and I am deeply thankful for his continued support in his retirement. Kevin Kruse ensured that my historical material was handled and contextualized well. Other faculty in the Department also contributed to this process. I am appreciative for past mentorship and advice from Kim Scheppele, Miguel Centeno, Carol Stack, Dalton Conley, Filiz Garip, Tim Nelson, Yu Xie, Fred Wherry, and others across the University. I am thankful for generous support from the Graduate School, the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, the Center for the Study of Religion (now the Center for Culture, Society, and Religion), and the University Center for Human Values. I also benefitted from the intellectual community fostered by the Joint Degree Program in Social Policy and the School for Public and International Affairs. Many colleagues in the Department provided the intellectual and moral support to complete this project, particularly the members of my cohort in the PhD program and those who joined me in various writing groups. Finally, I am deeply grateful to the families of Sunflower County for their shared participation in this project and their willingness to share their lives with me, and I regret that I cannot name them all here.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Fannie Lou Hamer is buried in a small municipal park of her hometown of Ruleville, Mississippi, just four miles north of the Sunflower County plantation where she had worked as a sharecropper for much of her adult life. Her husband is buried in a plot to her right. To her left, she is reproduced in bronze, posed with her back arched, eyes closed, one hand holding a microphone, the other raised to Heaven. The pedestal of the statue is inscribed with her famous statement at a Malcom X rally in Harlem: "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." Hamer was an ardent advocate for voting rights for Black Americans in the 1960s; many of the Freedom Riders and Freedom Summer volunteers that passed through Sunflower County remember her as a towering figure, equally eager to help organize volunteers and teach them how to shell peas. By the end of Hamer's life, Black Mississippians had gradually acquired the right to vote normally, standing for and winning elections at the local level (the Mississippi Delta elected its first Black congressperson since Reconstruction in 1987; Mississippi has not had a Black senator since 1871 and has never had a Black governor). While Hamer is best known for her voting rights activism, her life intersected with many of the challenges that Black Americans face in the contemporary United States. In 1961, Hamer underwent surgery to have a tumor removed and was also subjected to a "Mississippi appendectomy"; she was sterilized without her consent. Though she was never able to have biological children of her own, she and her husband adopted two girls that they had been raising, plus many other nieces, nephews, cousins, and other children that stayed with them at times. One of her daughters died in childhood after the local hospital refused to admit her because of her mother's activist work. Hamer died of breast cancer in 1977.

Hamer's other daughter lived. She moved on from the small town of Ruleville to East St. Louis, then Grand Rapids, Michigan, back to St. Louis, and finally back to Ruleville. Along the

way she had two sons, Shadney and Trenton. I met Trenton at a Black History program in Ruleville in February 2019, where he spoke to the students of the Leadership Institute, a nonprofit organization I had been volunteering with for a few years. Trenton doesn't have any memories of his grandmother; she had died before he was born and he's the baby of his family at 22. I caught up with Trenton a few months later in the cafeteria of Mississippi Delta Community College a few miles south of Ruleville to learn more about his life. Trenton was born in Grand Rapids, but after his mother's marriage ended, he moved with her to St. Louis and got caught up in a rough crowd. He joined a gang and dropped out of high school in order to provide for his mother. Life in St. Louis quickly became too expensive and too fast paced for both Trenton and his mother; his mother moved back to Ruleville after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and Trenton followed shortly after. Once in Sunflower County, Trenton found a pace of life that suited him better – he acknowledges that the legacy of racism is still in the air, but so is a feeling of collective struggle and a greater sense that everyone is in this together. He was able to get his GED through Mississippi Delta Community College and enrolled in an automotive repair program. His tough teenage years in St. Louis still impact him, however. Trenton was briefly incarcerated for being an unwitting accessory to a car theft, and his older brother is currently incarcerated in Michigan for a similar offense. One of the grimmest ironies I encountered in my fieldwork was that Fannie Lou Hamer's grandchildren are legally barred from voting in many states, all while her surviving daughter struggles with the same disease that killed her. Trenton's story is a national one – his path through education and the beginnings of a career took him across the country before taking him back to Sunflower County. But while the struggles he faced are embedded in institutions across the United States, they especially palpable in the historical context of his grandmother's home community.

***

Damian lives about five hundred feet from Fannie Lou Hamer's grave in Ruleville in a cramped two-bedroom apartment. Prior to the 2019-2020 school year he stayed there with his "grandmother" (on paper, she was his mom's cousin), grandfather, uncle, older brother, and two young sisters. His mother and stepfather were living in Memphis to be close to the children's hospital where their youngest son, Ja'keal, was receiving care for sickle cell anemia. Over the summer Ja'keal's condition stabilized to the point that they could move back home, returning to Memphis once a month for a transfusion. Damian's home is cramped: his grandmother and grandfather share one bedroom while his disabled uncle and older brother share the other. The rest of the family converts the living room into a pallet each night, with his parents on an air mattress in the middle and the rest of the children moving back and forth between a set of couches and the air mattress. Damian's grandmother became disabled after years of work as a janitor at the local hospital led to permanent back pain. Damia's mother, Kyoto, started working as a certified nurse assistant at the same hospital.

The 2019 novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic made the apartment feel all the more crowded. When Damian and his siblings went home for spring break in March 2020, the school year came to an abrupt end: while teachers sent home packets of optional worksheets, there was no instruction, assessment, or any type of engagement until late September. When the students of the Sunflower County Consolidated School district "returned" to school virtually, they did so without any technical support from the district. The Chrome Books and WiFi hotspots that the district had purchased with money from the CARES Act arrived months late, so many students either resorted to Zooming into class on their phone or opting to complete worksheets instead of normal class. More often than not, Damian's Algebra I class had only one or two other students

in synchronous lectures. The education that Damian and his Black, public school peers received during the 2020 calendar year – just about four and a half months of normal instruction – bears a sobering resemblance to the education Fannie Lou Hamer would have received in an era in which *de jure* segregated schools adjourned after a short term to allow Black students to work in the fields.

The configuration of poverty and class mobility in Sunflower County in the first decades of the 21st century is largely similar to the structure documented by Hortense Powdermaker and John Dollard in their community studies of Sunflower County in the 1930s. Both described a rigid "caste" system divided along racial lines.

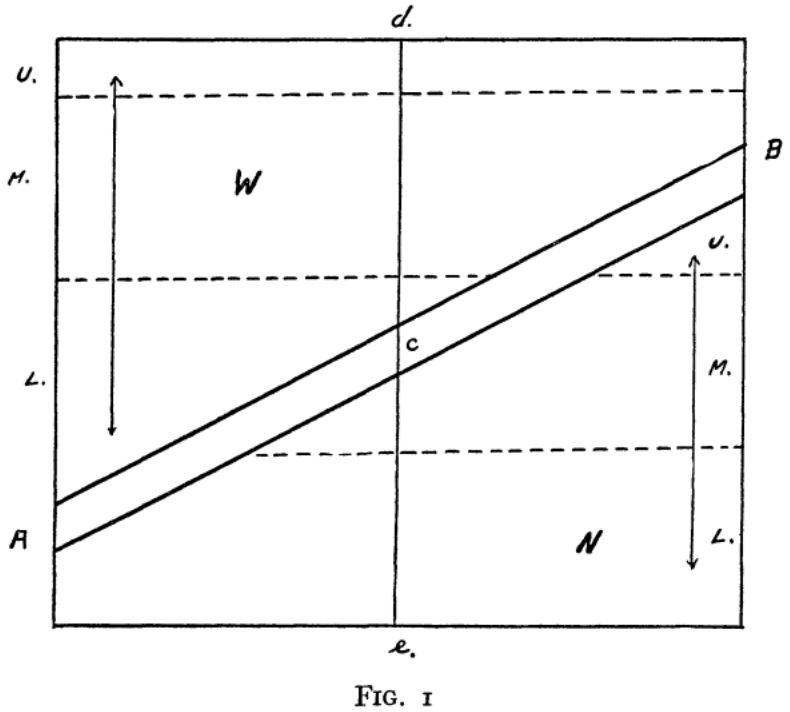


FIG. 1

Figure 1: Visualization of the Caste System from Warner (1936:235)

The figure above captures W. Lloyd Warner's interpretation of Southern caste; the upper trapezoid divides the White "caste" into three classes, while the Black ("Negro") caste is in the bottom right. The thick caste line "c" represents barriers that cannot be crossed; while the caste

line might rotate (representing either more or less equal class distributions across each caste), mobility across this cultural and political race barrier was impossible. While notions of race rigidity, fluidity, and the social construction of respective categories have evolved since Warner's time, the underlying class distributions in Sunflower County are largely the same. A small White elite and larger White middle class dominate the economy; a larger Black middle, working, and underclass are economically and socially marginalized. Moreover, mobility within classes has become increasingly restricted.

This pattern exists beyond Sunflower County. Recent work by economists Chetty and Hendren map patterns of social mobility across the country. Their analysis finds that children born into poverty in Sunflower County have some of the worst odds of moving up into the middle class or higher. The county lies in the middle of a larger cluster of immobility that stretches from the Mississippi River in the west to the lowlands of South Carolina in the east. How did Sunflower County – and the other predominately Black communities in this region of low mobility – fail to transition out of the rigid class and racial caste system documented by social scientists in the 1930s? Put simply, why haven't social and economic conditions changed for the better despite decades of political progress?

The poverty experienced by Fannie Lou Hamer, her grandson, and her neighbors lies in the shadow of the relative wealth of the land around her home community. As I drove from Ruleville to Sunflower to Indianola to Moorhead and back again over the past three years, the tedium of the drive was frequently punctuated by the sudden appearance of crop-dusting planes zooming just fifty or so feet above me, swooping into endless fields, spraying fertilizers and pesticides on a new crop of genetically modified soybeans or cotton. Ten thousand of those acres belonged to Senator Jim Eastland, who represented Mississippi in the United States Senate from

the late 1940s through the 1970s. Eastland was an architect of much of the legislation that governed the South's agrarian economy and a staunch opponent of Black suffrage and civil rights legislation. He was also Fannie Lou Hamer's employer. Farmland still offers a lavish source of passive income for those fortunate enough to inherit it; an estate as large as Eastland's might easily generate a million dollars a year in rental income.

The overall claim made in this dissertation can be roughly summarized as follows: The persistence of poverty and Black social immobility in spatially concentrated regions like the Deep South have their roots in the White supremacist ideology that emerged after the Civil War. The end of slavery and Reconstruction represented a brief period of time in which the possibility of a fully enfranchised Black electorate and economically empowered citizenry was conceivable – and was conceived of as a threat to White economic dominance. The White elite of the Deep South used the decades after their successful emergence from Reconstruction to design ideologies and institutions that would prevent this sort of equality from taking hold. Given this historical context, I argue that immobility, population decline, and social stagnation can be tied to a series of mobility "frustrations." By frustrations, I refer to barriers, traps, obstacles, and penalties embedded in local institutions that limit mobility aspirations for the poor or their children. Upward mobility requires a series of planning, decisions, and accomplishments, and the long process that precedes measurable mobility entails encounters with a broad array of local institutions. A long history of racial exploitation and White supremacy shaped these institutions, creating the recurring risk of frustrated mobility. This introductory chapter begins by summarizing the relevant theoretical literatures that motivate this argument. I then introduce the field site, sources of data, and methods before providing a brief overview of the remaining chapters.

Reconstruction and Reconfiguration

This project is rooted in the history of the American South, and the Mississippi Delta region in particular. The Delta consists of a dozen flat counties in northwest Mississippi. From North to South, the region stretches from Memphis to Vicksburg, Mississippi. Its western boundary is the Mississippi river, and it stretches in the east to, roughly, the I-55 highway that bisects Mississippi. The region itself is not actually a river delta, but rather an alluvial flood plain. Millenia of flooding both smoothed out the region's topography and left a deep layer of nutrient rich silt. In many ways this is a history of labor and control over that labor; by 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, the Delta was a barely habitable malarial swamp whose farmland was prone to frequent flooding. Access to the rich soil left behind by those floods required large concentrations of both capital and labor; the plantation system of slavery offered both to those wealthy enough to afford it. The exploitation of the Delta, however, began late in the era of legal slavery, and the end of the Civil War required wealthy White landowners to find new ways of preserving their control over labor.

The period that followed – Reconstruction – was marked by occasional successes for newly freed Black Americans – they were able to own land, hold elected office, and build their own civic and educational institutions. In his groundbreaking analysis of Reconstruction, Du Bois ([2007] 1935) argues that the slave population's ability to organize and marshal the power of their labor during the Civil War accelerated the collapse of the Confederacy and forced the Union to embrace emancipation and the abolition of the institution of slavery as a central goal. The power of this "general strike" and subsequent attempts to restructure society provoked strong reactions from the White elites who had managed to maintain influence in the South. The history of Southern society (and American society more broadly) that began with Reconstruction

is thus one of White elites preventing the formation of a politically and economically organized coalition of Black Americans. These impulses shaped the post-Reconstruction period, the rise of Jim Crow, reactions to the Civil Rights Movement, and subsequent social forces that remain influential today. White elites like Eastland hewed to a more cynical interpretation of Reconstruction generally known as the Dunning School, named for its architect, historian Arthur Dunning (1901). Dunning and his followers argued that Reconstruction had been an oppressive and overly radical attempt by Northern Republicans to impose a new social order on the South overnight. His followers further held that social and political co-existence between White and Black Americans was fundamentally impossible – their racist ideology contended that Black Americans would never be capable of operating in a modern democracy. Historian Eric Foner (1988) argues that the Dunning School was more than just a conservative interpretation of history; it was a core part of the Jim Crow ideology that undid any progress made during Reconstruction and subsequent attempts to inculcate change in the South.

Automation and Depopulation

Depopulation – the persistent loss of population without obvious prospects for growth – has been a hallmark of demographic change in rural America. After post-War peaks in the 1950s, nearly half of counties in the United States have persistently lost population due to outmigration and falling fertility rates. Accounts of this population shift often focus on structural variables such as automation and natural decreases in fertility as incomes rise (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). The impact of automation on rural populations and agriculture is significant; one tractor could perform the labor of hundreds of manual workers. The mechanization of agriculture accelerated after World War II-era metal shortages ended, resulting in the abrupt displacement of millions of agricultural workers. These structural transformations had dramatic impacts on the lives of Black

Southerners. Historian Donald Holley rosily describes the mechanization of agriculture in the United States as a second emancipation: "The transition from handpicking to machine picking resulted in enormous improvements in the lives of everyone who depended on cotton for a living" (2001: xiii). This optimism ignores the extent to which the social structures in place were ill-prepared to accommodate displaced agricultural workers.

Both Powdermaker (1939) and Dollard (1937), the two social scientists who studied Sunflower County in the 1930s, briefly noted the pending arrival of mechanization; both works were published at the end of American agriculture's reliance on manual labor. Dollard's predictions foreshadow the pattern of outmigration that would take place in the decades following his study (Dollard's comments on this issue are reproduced in their entirety as they capture both the scale of the problem of mechanization and the profound inability of Jim Crow-era White analysts to conceive of a future in which Black Americans could remain in the South as anything other than manual laborers):

> There is question, of course, of the increased use of mechanical power which may replace both Negro and White tenant. On some plantations, tractors are being used increasingly. There is also the threat of a machine for picking cotton. This is the crucial threat since it is the picking of the cotton rather than the planting or cultivating of it which makes the masses of Negroes indispensable. If this invention should prove practicable and be wildly adopted, the South would be faced with a radically new problem as regards the Negro. We might expect then an efflorescence of fantasies of colonizing the Negroes in Africa, or of putting them in a separate state. The colonization fantasy occurred occasionally in the minds of [Sunflower County residents]. Another possibility, of course, is the more even distribution of Negroes throughout the country, should they be needed again in the high-speed industrial machine of the North. While this would solve some of the problems of the South, it would certainly raise new ones in the North and make the American race problem a national instead of regional issue (131).

While Dollard looks to structural shifts awaiting Sunflower County, Powdermaker looks back at the status quo's roots in slavery; her analysis highlights the durability of the plantation mode of production and hints at the social tension mechanization would bring:

> "After freedom" there was still cotton to be planted, cultivated, and picked. There were still plantations. And there was a set of *mores* so strongly entrenched that not even a war could dislodge them. The Negro was still the worker. The White man, much poorer than before, still made the decisions. Landlords who had sufficient wealth after the Civil War to continue as planters, translated the responsibility for slaves to the responsibility for tenants. Sometimes a man's tenants were the same Negroes who had formerly been his slaves. Many slaves merely transferred their dependence from master to landlord. Money still played only a small part in their dealings. Nevertheless, the Negro was free. He had acquired the right to move, even though he has not always been able to exercise that right (80).

An important implication of this study is that large scale automation has already had profound impacts on American society and patterns of inequality. As concerns over deindustrialization and automation begin to reshape the Rust Belt and urban areas, understanding the consequences of rural automation will have important implications for inequality in the United States. In addition, the processes of automation and population decline have had dramatic impact on both the trajectories of Black Americans who opted into urbanization and the communities they left behind. These impacts are explored in detail below.

Social and Geographic Mobility

The Great Migration, the movement of Black Americans from the South to the rest of the country that began in the 1920s, represents the most significant and transformative period in the reshaping of the rural South's population and community structure. While the Great Migration is often framed as the movement of Black Americans to communities of greater opportunity,

analysis of migrants' outcomes yields mixed evidence. Quantitative studies in demography and sociology provide a less optimistic evaluation and have found little evidence that migration improved rural Black migrants' socio-economic outcomes. Analysis by Eichenlaub, Tolnay, and Alexander (2010) find no evidence that migrants from the South fared better in terms of income, educational attainment, or employment than Black Americans who remained in the South or who migrated within the South. These patterns are found across a range of migration destinations. Tolnay and Eichenlaub (2006) find no advantage for migrants who move to the West rather than the industrial Northeast. Conditions for Black Americans were not improved by increased shares of Black Americans in urban populations; community size had no impact on occupational outcome (Tolnay, 2001), and the earliest cohorts of migrants were relegated to the "worst" neighborhoods in destination cities (Tolnay, Crowder, & Adelman, 2000). Finally, Black American migration to Northern cities is associated with an increase in racial disparities in incarceration rates; Black and immigrant incarceration rates increased during the Great Migration, net of any observed increases in crime (Muller, 2012).

Outcomes for the second generation of emigrants from the South are similarly ambiguous. Despite conventional understandings of migration as a means to improve opportunities for children, Alexander et al. (2017) find only modest gains for the children of migrants relative to their peers in the South. The lack of convincing evidence for positive economic outcomes associated with the Great Migration is compounded by a corresponding lack of clear analysis of social outcomes within the social sciences (Tolnay, 2003). Threats of impending violence, such as those described in Wilkerson (2010) point to a potential external driver of outmigration: the implicit desires of the rural South's White power elite. Mechanization threatened to create a class of unemployed and underemployed agricultural workers just as

frustration with Jim Crow was coming to head and the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to take form. The puzzle reflected in the above literature suggests that the Great Migration and subsequent barriers to the South's economic and social development can be understood as an attempt by rural White power elites to maintain control over the rural South.

In short, geographic mobility has rarely been an effective solution for Black Americans in the rural South seeking to find better economic opportunities elsewhere; these trends have persisted to the present. Black Americans, and Black men in particular, have the lowest returns from internal migration in the United States (Leibbrand, 2020).

Mobility Moments

Mobility can be measured in many ways. Blau and Duncan's (1967) seminal work on mobility in the United States conceives of mobility as movement to and from occupational categories. In this context, "upward" mobility is defined in the context of socially constructed prestige hierarchies; a farmer's son who attends college and begins work as a teacher or paralegal might be considered upwardly mobile because his job is more prestigious than his father's, even if their incomes are comparable. In this framework, a society with high rates of social mobility is marked by high rates of inflows and outflows across occupational categories. The model proposed by Blau and Duncan is roughly linear; parent characteristics predict educational attainment, which in turn predicts first job. The Wisconsin model, broadly summarized by Haller and Portes (1973), incorporates social psychological factors into this model; parental characteristics also predict the types of people – "significant others" – with whom the child interacts. These interactions shape career and educational ambitions later in life. A different approach is found in the allocation model of mobility (e.g., Kerckhoff 1976) which highlights the role of social structure in allocating and restricting access to mobility

opportunities; student ambitions cannot overcome structural barriers such sexist admissions policies or racist hiring practices. The allocation model complements larger theoretical claims about inequality found in Tilly (1998) who argues that categorical inequalities are preserved through a combination of opportunity hoarding and gatekeeping.

Recent work by Raj Chetty (e.g., Chetty & Hendren [2018]) uses income tax data to advance a simpler definition of measured mobility: relative position in the income distribution. In this framework, a child who grows up with parents in the 20th percentile of income is considered upwardly mobile if their own income as a young adult is in a higher percentile relative to their age peers. What unites these perspectives on mobility is a general concern with the individual's desire to improve their quality of life or to facilitate their children's ability to do the same. Questions about the precise measurement of mobility, while important for large scale quantitative work, can be resolved with a simpler conception of mobility as achieving one's goals for their lives and the lives of their family members.

Much of this prior work on mobility is concerned with the stark shifts in socio-economic status that herald successful upward mobility. These shifts are measured by the acquisition of credentials (e.g., enrolling in or graduating from college), the acquisition of wealth (e.g., purchasing a home), or increases in income relative to some previous point in time (e.g., via a raise or promotion). These mobility "milestones" are important in that they represent a dramatic change in the quality of life – graduating from college opens up a new range of vocational options and buying a home means that housing payments represent wealth accumulation rather than wealth transfer. Historically, these milestones have been the primary object of concern for sociologists and demographers (Rindfuss, 1991:493), primarily because they are easy to measure

and are well captured in administrative and survey data. Birth, graduation, marriage, retirement, and death represent key milestones at which capturing a point-in-time

However, these discrete mobility milestones are themselves the outcome of a long sequence of smaller decisions and achievements. Enrolling in college requires completing a college preparatory curriculum, which requires opting into difficult coursework, which requires remaining motivated to complete daily assignments, and so on. Securing a mortgage for a home requires having both a good credit history and a suitable down payment, each of which can only be accomplished if a long series of smaller decisions and tasks are navigated successfully. This approach to mobility captures a microsociological interpretation of what Haller and Portes (1977) refer to as "those sets of events by which individuals come to occupy their positions in the social hierarchies of wealth, power, and prestige" (54).

By framing mobility as the cumulative outcome of many small steps, this framework highlights what I refer to as *mobility moments*, points in time in a longer mobility process that prove to be pivotal in the ultimate success or failure of that process. These mobility moments are distinct from the mobility milestones referenced above in that they are rarely noticed, much less celebrated or documented. While being admitted to an affordable university is an important checkpoint, it is only possible after successfully navigating countless mobility moments: convincing a teacher to write a favorable letter of recommendation, having a positive experience on a college tour, waking up on time to take the ACT or SAT.

This dissertation is concerned with a broad component of socio-economic mobility in the United States: the transition to adulthood and its entanglement with educational attainment.

Transitioning to Adulthood

While my engagement with my field site included a range of institutions and conversations with people and families across the life course, in the chapters that follow I am primarily concerned with the transition to adulthood as a site of mobility opportunity. Middle school, high school, and young adulthood represent a time in which major mobility milestones are concentrated (Rindfuss 1991). Most people's education trajectories become fixed based on high school performance, and having children becomes a biological possibility for most. The sequencing of milestones associated with transitions to adulthood has a major impact on later life outcomes, and childhoods in poor, rural spaces can be marked by transitions that serve to reinforce subordinate class positions (Miller & Edin, 2022).

Educational Attainment in an Immobile Context

Educational represents an essential component in both status attainment and economic mobility; acquiring educational credentials opens up access to jobs that with higher incomes and higher status. Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of socio-economic mobility, but access to education is not evenly distributed. The quality of local public education is directly linked to the strength of the local economy; local property taxes represent a significant revenue source for public school districts, resulting in a vicious cycle: weak local economies cannot afford to invest in poorly performing schools, which in turn discourages new business from moving in, which perpetuates the problem of weak property values. Thus the problem of wealth inequality and restricted access to educational attainment are mutually reinforcing and deleterious to social and economic mobility.

Education ought to be the central institution through which mobility is facilitated – William Winter, a moderate governor of Mississippi in the 1980s, has remarked that the only road out of poverty goes by the schoolhouse (Weber, 2015). However, scholars of education

have long noted that schools often serve other functions. They have been identified as reproducing the existing structure of the labor market in a capitalist framework (Bowles & Gintis, 1972), socializing students to inhabit their parents' class position and social norms (Willis, 1977), and producing "worker-learners" who defer to authority once they enter the labor market (Golann, 2015). Despite the limiting role that schools play in social reproduction, educational attainment remains the strongest predictor of earnings and quality of life for adults. The role of educational institutions in places like Sunflower County is thus of utmost important to addressing patterns of persistent poverty and immobility.

The schools in places like Sunflower County, however, have rarely provided opportunities for upward mobility. Dollard's analysis of education in Sunflower County highlights their role in providing stratified education: a liberal-arts curriculum for White residents and a vocational education for Black residents (1937:191). Powdermaker noted that even the few Black Southerners who were able to succeed in education and graduate from college felt a greater sense of alienation; their educational achievements highlighted the structural discrimination they faced without providing a means to ameliorate or sidestep those barriers (1939:307). Contemporary schools in Sunflower County continued to suffer from underinvestment, disinvestment, and competition from private schools founded in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. These "segregation academies," many of which received public funds in their first few years of operation, have led to the complete re-segregation of education in Sunflower County today (Bolton, 2005; Crespino, 2007; Carr, 2012).

Children growing up in Sunflower County are faced with bleak prospects: the economy of the county has failed to provide adequate jobs for working- and middle-class Black residents

for decades, forcing students to choose between stagnation or having to uproot themselves and seek better fortunes elsewhere.

Frustrated Mobility

In his original study of Sunflower County (1937), Dollard notes that the "usual human response to frustration is aggression against the frustrating object" (267). Given the rigidity of the Deep South's caste system and the threat of extra-judicial violence, Dollard argues that "some of the hostility properly directed towards the white caste is deflected from it and focused within the Negro group itself (267). Intra-group aggression thus allows the Black oppressed caste to express their frustration while maintaining a necessary peace with the White caste. Dollard also notes structural reasons for intragroup violence:

> It is clear that this differential application of the law amounts to a condoning of Negro violence and gives immunity to Negroes to commit small or large crimes so long as they are on Negroes. It may be indulgent in the case of any given Negro, but its effect on the Negro group as a whole is dangerous and destructive. One cannot help but wondering if it does not serve the ends of the white caste to have a high level of violence in the Negro group, since disunity in the Negro caste tends to make it less resistant to the white domination. If this should be a correct observation, it need not follow that the tolerance of violence is a matter of conscious policy on the part of the white group; instead it would be seem to be pragmatic, unformalized, and intuitive, but nonetheless effective. (280)

Dollard formalized his theory of frustrated aggression in a monograph entitled *Frustration and Aggression* (Dollard et al. 1939), arguing:

> More specifically the proposition is that the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression. (1)

In this postulate, "frustration" refers to any barrier to accomplishing a goal, and aggression refers to any action the goal of which is to cause injury to the person at whom it is directed. The aggression does not necessarily need to be directed at the cause of frustration, nor does it need to

be understood as a proportional response. As a matter of broader social psychology, Dollard writes of his work in Sunflower County:

> Dollard has formulated the general principle of frustration and aggression from these earlier Freudian writings and has applied it to a Southern community in the United States. In terms of the theory he has analyzed, for example, the reactions of the Negro caste to the frustrations imposed by the white group. As a result of this examination of a cultural situation which ordinarily is observed only sociologically, he has been able to reveal the psychological effects of the social structure upon the organization of personality and behavior. (22)

His work makes a limited appeal to broader structural theories of Sumner and Keller and Karl Marx. Dollard identities his frustration-aggression thesis as an implicit feature of Sumner and Keller's theory of intragroup cooperation; the 'sacrifice of present freedom' required to achieve collective goals is the source of frustration, and thus, intragroup aggression. Of Marx, Dollard notes that theories of class struggle "have introduced unwittingly a psychological system involving the assumption that aggression is a response to frustration" (23).

In this dissertation, I borrow Dollard's conception of a "frustration" to help describe what happens when mobility aspirations fail or are otherwise impeded. A frustration is, in general terms, any obstacle or barrier which restricts someone's ability to achieve a previously-determined goal. When these frustrations occur within a *mobility moment*, they operate as *mobility frustrations*: not only do they force a recalibration of occupational, educational, or social lives, they also force an internal realignment or reaction that shapes one's optimism, confidence, or even willingness continue with a broad plan.

A Microsociology of Mobility

The central theoretical concept developed in the chapters that follow is that of the *mobility moments* and their corresponding *mobility frustrations*, encounters between someone with mobility aspirations and some forces that obstruction a constituent step of their mobility

goal. These frustrations are the result of factors external to the individual; that is, they do not stem from an individual's innate ability or actions but rather from adverse encounters with a person, institution, or social system along the way. A mobility frustration in turn leads to *frustrated mobility*, or life plans which must rapidly adapt to the obstacles that obstruct their original ambitions.

A first type is the *Acute* or *Interpersonal Frustration*. These refer to encounters with other people who are able to influence mobility processes, independent of any institutional or organizational power that they may also exercise. Frustrations of this type include racist or classist comments, microaggressions, and other malicious behavior that directly impact mobility goals or the steps necessary to begin working towards those goals.

Institutional Frustrations are the next level of mobility frustration documented in this study. These refer to encounters with local institutions that mediate access to mobility opportunities. These can be compounded by cooccurrence with acute frustrations (e.g., a landlord filing for an eviction while also suing for excessive back rent or a city clerk including a racist comment alongside an official denial of some sort of administrative relief), but even a sympathetic local official can obstruct mobility aspirations if the regulatory architecture of that institution compels them to do so.

A third type is the *Structural Frustration*, in which elements of the larger social structure – elements which transcend any particular organization or person – complicate or inhibit upward mobility. Oftentimes these frustrations reveal themselves as mutually exclusive or even paradoxical social forces. Outmigration, for example, is a particularly salient structural frustration for the families included in this project. Weak local labor markets and declining populations mean that outmigration is often the best path towards upward social mobility, but

outmigration also intensifies the social problems that make outmigration necessary in the first place.

The final type of frustration, the *psychological* or *emotional frustration* is not a cause of frustrated mobility in itself but is rather the effect of one of the prior frustrations that precedes a change in plans or other redirection away from a mobility aspiration. For example, an eviction might prompt a sense of ambivalence or hopelessness about the prospects of securing affordable housing, much less owning a home, which may, in turn, lead to suboptimal housing decisions in the future. Noting these emotional frustrations is important as they represent another moment in which policy interventions may be useful; interventions after a moment of frustrated mobility can help people and families reassess their plans and navigate around sources of frustration.

Field Site and Method

In his 1929 text *Social Mobility*, Pitirim Sorokin sets out the task of studying stratification and mobility as a joint project requiring both quantitative and qualitative analyses – the former to describe the architecture of social strata and the latter to investigate the lived realities of life amidst stratification:

> How high is it? How long is the distance from the bottom to the top of a social cone? Of how many stories is it composed? Is its profile steep, or does it slope gradually? These are the problems of the quantitative analysis of social stratification. It deals, so to speak, exclusively with the exterior architecture of a social building. Its inner structure, in its entirety, is the object of the qualitative analysis. The study should begin with the height and profile of the social pyramid. After that the pyramid should be entered and an investigation of its inner organization made from the standpoint of stratification (17).

The project builds on the body of work surveyed above and enters the social cone of racialized mobility process through an ethnographic and historical community study. It is set in Sunflower County, a county in the Mississippi Delta which has a long history of population loss, economic stagnation, persistent poverty, and racial inequality. At its core, this is an ethnographic

project centered around my participation in and observation of these social processes. The ethnographic data are supplemented by archival research and a proposed interview study of select neighborhoods in the county.

The largest town in Sunflower County has around 9,000 people. Small villages and hamlets ranging in size from 30 to 1,000 people surround the county seat. Nearly a third of the county's residents live in poverty and the county is one of the 20 least mobile counties in Chetty and Hendren's spatial analysis (2018). A quarter of the population is White and 70% are Black; the remaining population is composed of a small number of Latinx and Asian American families. The county's population has decreased dramatically from a pre-war high of 65,000 in the 1930s. This combination of high rates of geographic mobility and low rates of economic mobility make Sunflower County an ideal site for this project. In addition to a local analysis of the institutions that determine economic prospects, the concurrent analysis of outmigration pressures and trends ties the project to larger structural forces that reshaped American society after World War II. Sunflower County was the object of study for two seminal works in the social sciences in the 1930s which documented conditions of class, racial segregation, and mobility aspirations in the South. John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* ([1988] 1937) was one of the first works in social psychology to examine how experiences of racial caste systems and racial domination shaped individual experiences. Hortense Powdermaker's *After Freedom: A Cultural Study of the Deep South* ([1993] 1939) was one of the first works in anthropology to study an American community and provides important insights into how Black cultural attitudes were evolving in the post-Reconstruction era. By staging an "ethnographic revisit" (Burawoy, 2003), this project is able to connect contemporary conditions of inequality and immobility to the historical forces that produced them.

Within Sunflower County, specific sites were chosen to maximize access to both families who aspire to upward mobility (or who have such aspirations for their children) and the local institutions that they encounter. Regular sites for active participant-observation include historically White and Black churches, an afterschool and summer program that serves public school students in the county, the local small claims and municipal courts, meetings of local government bodies, and civic activities like farmers' markets and arts fairs. Observations within these domains are supplemented by expert interviews with the professionals and leaders embedded there. These organization-based sites are complemented by frequent informal interviews with families, people socializing on sidewalks, and other sites of everyday life.

In addition to this ethnographic data, the project makes extensive use of several historical archives. The main archive used in the study is the constituent correspondence files of US Senator James Eastland held at the University of Mississippi. Eastland was a resident of the county and an influential Senator during his tenure from the 1930s to the 1970s. These files contain letters sent by Mississippians, many of whom were writing with concerns about the changing civil rights landscape and prospective social changes. Because these letters were initially written as private correspondence, they provide unique insights into how local elites and average White citizens were discussing these issues and possible forms of organized resistance. This archive is supplemented with additional archives related to the White Citizens' Councils stored at the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi.

The ethnographic fieldwork is structured by the logic of the extended case method discussed by Burawoy (1998) in which analysis is guided by extending observations across time and space, connecting local social forces to broader social structures, and linking analysis of the

case to broader theoretical concerns. The project's attention to both the historical forces at work and the spatial diffusion of the population and attendant opportunity structures gives the project is broad foundation; linking this analysis to theoretical conversations about inequality and mobility provides for a more wide-reaching argument. The specific choice to rely on ethnographic methods in this case is motivated by Katz's (1997) arguments for ethnography's ability to detect previously untold stories of communal life and describe its object of study over time in processual terms.

The practical, day-to-day fieldwork is informed by the notion of an "inconvenience sample" (Duneier 2011) and the inductive case selection strategy developed by Small (2009). These strategies call for periodic assessments of the data gathered to date and possible ways to expand both the theoretical reach of the project and the types of stakeholders who have been included. Moreover, these approaches ensure that the fieldwork process can be shaped by unexpected findings. The extended nature of my fieldwork provides opportunities to develop the relationships necessary to access a more comprehensive segment of the community. The past two and a half years of fieldwork have already provided important connections and familiarity with key institutions; the ongoing fieldwork leverages those connections to embed myself in the community more deeply. The long duration of my fieldwork is also important as I reflect on my own position in the field. As a White man from Mississippi, I am mindful of the role that people who share those identities have played in creating adverse conditions in this field site and am conscious of the need to build relationships over time.

The archival data is analyzed using the framework proposed by Stoler (2010) in which archives of imperial or colonial societies are interpreted not as objective documentation of historical fact but rather as a record of how power elites made sense of the changing nature of

their power. The final component of the project, a systematic interview study of three neighborhoods in Sunflower County, occurred during the summer of 2021 as restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview study focused on three neighborhoods in Sunflower County: one in Ruleville, one in Indianola, and one in Moorhead. The interview protocol is included as an appendix. Seventy heads-of-household were interviewed about their household income and life histories, perspectives on work and economic opportunity, social and educational opportunities, and experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. The project has been reviewed and approved by the Princeton Institutional Review Board (IRB# 11083).

Chapter Outline

The dissertation contains two parts. The first draws on historical evidence to demonstrate how these mobility frustrations evolved, transformed, and became embedded in local institutions. The second part draws on ethnographic data to document how mobility frustrations are impacting the lives of families in Sunflower County today. It does so by considering two processes that are integral to upward social mobility: education and wealth accumulation.

Chapter Two revisits earlier literature on race and class stratification in the Deep South and provides a critical examination of the concept of "caste." A re-articulated understanding of caste is developed to explain patterns of occupational immobility in communities like Sunflower. *Chapter Three* concerns the role of the White elite of Mississippi in the Great Migration. By exploring letters and pamphlets contained in the archives of US Senator Jim Eastland, a wealthy Sunflower planter, I consider how local White elites conspired to push out "surplus" Black labor rather than work towards a modern economic system that would have created employment opportunities locally.

Chapter Four introduces the students and families of the Leadership Institute, an afterschool and summer program for public school students in Sunflower County. This chapter describes how the necessity of geographic mobility as a prerequisite for social mobility creates additional barriers to upward mobility for young people. By following a cohort of high school students over three academic years, I capture how their college plans form, are executed, and what happens when they fail to proceed as hoped. *Chapter Five* examines the experiences of students amid the COVID-19 pandemic and explores the "situational stratification" experiences that students and their families wrestled with as they adapted to remote learning.

Chapter Six concludes with an analysis of interview data collected during the final months of fieldwork when pandemic restrictions had eased. In addition to summarizing the *mobility moments* that students and their families experience, I also consider what these entrenched patterns of frustrated mobility for the community as a whole. The chapter is anchored in one of the most consistent findings from the interviews: while most caregivers believe that Sunflower County is a good place to raise children and retired, almost none of them wanted their children or grandchildren to stay in the area after high school. I suggest that this is a community marked by *terminal poverty*, a self-sustaining vicious cycle of poverty in which mobility for the individual undermines opportunity for the community.

***

In the introductory chapter of *Interaction Ritual*, Erving Goffman introduces a turn of phrase to highlight the importance of studying interactions as a social event: "Not men and their moments," he writes, but rather "moments and their men" (year, page number). Goffman's careful analysis the small interaction and its role in constituting social life represents a key intervention for sociologists – social structures only exist insofar as we are able to experience

them - but the study of mobility requires attention to sequences of interactions. To invert Goffman, the qualitative study of mobility is interested in people and the moments that generate their mobility trajectories. This dissertation is a story of the moments that young people in Sunflower navigate as they fight for control over the trajectory of their lives.

References

Alexander, J. Trent, Christine Leibbrand, Catherine Massey, and Stewart Tolnay. 2017. "Second-Generation Outcomes of the Great Migration." *Demography* 54(6):2249–71. doi: 10.1007/s13524-017-0625-8.

Blau, Peter Michael, and Otis Dudley Duncan. 1978. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: Free Press.

Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. 1977. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Burawoy, Michael. 1998. "The Extended Case Method." *Sociological Theory* 16(1):4–33. doi: 10.1111/0735-2751.00040.

Chetty, Raj, and Nathaniel Hendren. 2018a. "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects*." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133(3):1107–62. doi: 10.1093/qje/qjy007.

Chetty, Raj, and Nathaniel Hendren. 2018b. "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility II: County-Level Estimates*." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133(3):1163–1228. doi: 10.1093/qje/qjy006.

Dollard, John. 1937. *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 2014. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880.* Oxford University Press.

Duneier, Mitchell. 2011. "How Not to Lie with Ethnography." *Sociological Methodology* 41(1):1–11. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9531.2011.01249.x.

Dunning, Arthur. 1901. “The Undoing of Reconstruction.” *The Atlantic*, October.

Eichenlaub, Suzanne C., Stewart E. Tolnay, and J. Trent Alexander. 2010. “Moving Out but Not Up: Economic Outcomes in the Great Migration.” *American Sociological Review* 75(1):101–25. doi: 10.1177/0003122409357047.

Foner, Eric. 2014. *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863 - 1877*. Updated edition. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.

Golann, Joanne W. 2015. “The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School.” *Sociology of Education* 88(2):103–19. doi: 10.1177/0038040714567866.

Haller, Archibald O., and Alejandro Portes. 1973. “Status Attainment Processes.” *Sociology of Education* 46(1):51. doi: 10.2307/2112205.

HOLLEY, DONALD. 2019. *SECOND GREAT EMANCIPATION: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped ... the Modern South.* Place of publication not identified: UNIV OF ARKANSAS Press.

Johnson, Kenneth M., and Daniel T. Lichter. 2019. “Rural Depopulation: Growth and Decline Processes over the Past Century: Rural Depopulation.” *Rural Sociology* 84(1):3–27. doi: 10.1111/ruso.12266.

Katz, Jack. 1997. “Ethnography’s Warrants.” *Sociological Methods & Research* 25(4):391–423. doi: 10.1177/0049124197025004002.

Kerckhoff, Alan C. 1976. “The Status Attainment Process: Socialization or Allocation?” *Social Forces* 55(2):368. doi: 10.2307/2576228.

Leibbrand, Christine. 2020. “Unequal Opportunity? Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Disparities in the Returns to Internal U.S. Migration.” *Social Currents* 7(1):46–70. doi: 10.1177/2329496519869339.

Miller, Emily, and Kathy Edin. 2022. “Coming of Age in Appalachia, Emerging or Expedited Adulthood?” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(3).

Muller, Christopher. 2012. “Northward Migration and the Rise of Racial Disparity in American Incarceration, 1880–1950.” *American Journal of Sociology* 118(2):281–326. doi: 10.1086/666384.

Powdermaker, Hortense, Brackette F. Williams, and Drexel G. Woodson. 1993. *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Rindfuss, Ronald R. 1991. “The Young Adult Years: Diversity, Structural Change, and Fertility.” *Demography* 28(4):493–512. doi: 10.2307/2061419.

Small, Mario Luis. 2009. “`How Many Cases Do I Need?’: On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research.” *Ethnography* 10(1):5–38. doi: 10.1177/1466138108099586.

Sorokin, Pitirim Aleksandrovich. 1998. *Social Mobility*. London ; New York: Routledge/Thoemmes.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tilly, Charles. 2009. *Durable Inequality*. Nachdr. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Tolnay, S. E., and S. C. Eichenlaub. 2006. “Southerners in the West: The Relative Well-Being of Direct and Onward Migrants.” *Social Forces* 84(3):1639–63. doi: 10.1353/sof.2006.0071.

Tolnay, Stewart E. 2001. “The Great Migration Gets Underway: A Comparison of Black Southern Migrants and Nonmigrants in the North, 1920.” *Social Science Quarterly* 82(2):235–52. doi: 10.1111/0038-4941.00020.

Tolnay, Stewart E. 2003. “The African American ‘Great Migration’ and Beyond.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29(1):209–32. doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100009.

Tolnay, Stewart E., Kyle D. Crowder, and Robert M. Adelman. 2000. “‘Narrow and Filthy Alleys of the City’?: The Residential Settlement Patterns of Black Southern Migrants to the North.” *Social Forces* 78(3):989. doi: 10.2307/3005939.

Warner, W. Lloyd. 1936. “American Caste and Class.” *American Journal of Sociology* 42(2):234–37. doi: 10.1086/217391.

Weber, Eric Thomas. 2015. *Uniting Mississippi: Democracy and Leadership in the South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Wilkerson, Isabel. 2011. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*. 1. Vintage Books ed. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Willis, Paul E. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Job*. Repr. Aldershot: Gower.

Chapter 2: Interpreting the American Caste System as Racialized Economic Performance[1]

In 1891, Minnie Cox, a Black woman and alumna of Nashville's Fisk University, was appointed postmistress of Indianola, becoming one of the first Black people to hold a federal office in Sunflower County (and the first Black woman in the United States to serve as postmistress). The position came with a $1,100 salary, a comfortable $31,000 per year in 2020 dollars. The local newspaper expressed measured optimism about Cox's role, noting that her husband was a property-owning college graduate (Mrs. Cox herself was not interviewed). "President Harrison need have no fears about his appointee being ill-treated," they wrote, though they also qualified their support: "Cox, of course, knows that the white people would prefer to have a white Democrat" (quoted in Hemphill 1980:737). By 1900 the willingness of the (White) people of Indianola to support a Black public official had waned considerably. The political row that followed took several dramatic turns: White business leaders forged at least two resignation letters from Cox. Another set of White leaders organized a parallel, private post office just outside of town (observers archly noted that everything about this shadow post office was white – its carriage, the horse that pulled it, and the bushy beard of the deputized postman). In response, President Roosevelt shuttered the Indianola Post Office entirely, prompting intense arguments on the floor of the United States Senate. Ultimately the dispute seems to have been resolved in the Whites' favor when two prominent Sunflower County landowners accompanied President Roosevelt on a hunting trip in the Mississippi Delta (coincidentally, the same trip that included the bear hunt that inspired the Teddy Bear). Mrs. Cox's tenure ended in early 1904 with

[1] Portions of this chapter were published in:

Parsons, R. (2021). Interpreting the American Caste System as Racialized Economic Performance. *The American Sociologist, 52*: 367–389.

her quiet resignation. While Cox and her family were able to relocate to Memphis and prosper in insurance and finance later in life, her short career as postmistress represented a last gasp of Reconstruction in Sunflower County.

Elements of Cox's experience can be abstracted and formed into a template for the overall nature of racial progress and social equality in the Mississippi: symbolic progress by the Black community, nominal acceptance by the White elite, the use of private or parallel institutions to undermine Black progress, and revanchist plots conceived in back rooms and hunting lodges. While Minnie Cox's experience is familiar in some ways, the circumstances in which it unfolded constitute a context unique to the Black-White dynamic in the United States. Cox attained her position as part of Reconstruction-era Republican dominance of the South. Her eventual expulsion from the position (and Sunflower County) accompanied the White elite's reconstitution of the racial order of the antebellum period, albeit one which accommodated Constitutional restrictions on slavery. Reconstruction is a natural inflection point in the history of racial stratification in the United States. The Civil War was an abrupt end to the prevailing social order of the American South; Reconstruction represents a period of experimentation and conflict that produced a new racial order inherited by future generations down to the present. This builds a theoretical framework that extends from an analysis of the Reconstruction racial order, particularly the analysis put forward by W.E.B. du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*. Central to Du Bois's argument is an analysis of the "general strike" enacted by the enslaved population of the South; by abandoning the fields and making their services invaluable to Northern armies, the Black people of the United States forced the North to take abolition seriously while decimating the economy of the South. The other main argument put forward by Du Bois captures the arc of what happened next: faced with the choice between political enfranchisement of Black

Southerners or a return to power by the old Southern elite, the Federal Government opted to hand over control of the South back to its old architects.

The concept of caste was a prominent tool for theorizing on race and race relations in early American sociology and has returned to contemporary discourse in legal (Alexander 2010) and journalistic (Wilkerson 2020) writing. However, the concept of caste largely disappeared from sociology and the analytical utility of caste within larger conversations about race is limited by a lack of clarity on what caste *is* and how it operates as a separate force from racism or White supremacy. In a review of the first wave of literature on caste in the United States, Brooks (1946) noted that "there is a wide difference of opinion [within writing in the caste tradition], ranging from a denial that social classes exist, to an elaborately worked out scheme in which both co-exist in the same structure" (1946:207). A second concern with this school of thought was its comparative approach to caste; by searching for functional similarities between caste in the United States and, for example, India, theorizing on caste has overlooked the specific material conditions that produce a "caste" system in a given spatial context. Continuing his critique of early caste theorizing, Brooks (1946) argues that "the importation of the concept from a different cultural setting only beclouds the issue and hinders straight thinking on a race situation which is indigenous and calls for analysis in terms of its own historical and cultural setting" (1946:211). This is closely related to a third limitation: the anthropological functionalism that motivated early theories of caste led to a focus on cultural practices (endogamy in particular) rather than the underlying and persistent dynamics between groups in space and time. The focus on culture highlights the final limitation of the caste literature: by focusing on caste as a property of groups, rather than as a property of *relations* between groups, the concept of caste is limited by its assumption of fixed group membership and rigid rules regarding inherited statuses. I seek in this

chapter to resolve the tension between understanding "caste" as a property of group membership and as a property of inter-group relations by leveraging concepts from economic sociology to describe how caste is a system that governs socially-constructed economic relations.

The overall theoretical position of this chapter can be summarized as follows. Caste is a property of group interaction, rather than as a property of the individual. In most cases, caste is an explicitly racialized order and is distinct from "race" as an analytic category by virtue of this emphasis on social interaction. The American caste system can be interpreted as a *performance circuit* (Wherry 2012), a concept from relational economic sociology that describes how chains of commerce and economic interaction are sustained through a cultural toolkit of roles, etiquettes, frames, and other dramaturgical devices. The function of the caste system in the United States is to structure socioeconomic interaction so as to disincentivize threats to the underlying power imbalance between Black and White communities in the United States, even as the explicit nature of race relations evolved. The transition from slavery to Reconstruction to Jim Crow (and so on) has, at every turn, been calibrated to preserve the relations of production and consumption that were forged in the antebellum period. This stability is accomplished through caste rules organized around three issues explored below: (a) the entanglement of occupational and social roles; (b) the entrenched and reinforcing division between Black and White communities and (c) the contingent nature of upward mobility for Black Americans that makes collective action risky. I build support for this argument through an analysis of the central writings on caste from the Jim Crow, pre-World War II period. The analysis in this chapter is confined to the specific case of Black-White race relations in the United States Deep South.[2] While caste, or caste-like, relationships existed elsewhere in the United States, much of the early

[2] The "Deep South" typically refers to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Texas and Florida are also frequently included.

social science work on caste in the United States was motivated by an interest in understanding Black-White relations in the post-Reconstruction period. While in practice racial identities are fluid and subject to ongoing negotiation, the elites during the Jim Crow period took those categories as fixed, as reflected in the rigid caste rules discussed below and social norms that "assigned" multiracial people to the Black caste (e.g., Brook 2019). This conception of "caste" makes several interventions into both original and contemporary assumptions about caste. Early work using caste in the United States proceeded with the assumption that "caste" was a property of individuals and highlighted sexual norms; this chapter centers the role of caste in governing *interactions* between groups rather than as an individual identity. By prioritizing the *consequences* of caste (stability and immobility through the performance of caste) over the *mechanisms* (e.g., rules governing endogamy and caste membership), the articulation of caste in this chapter provides a framework for exploring how relative caste inequalities have persisted over time, even as social norms have nominally progressed. This conception of caste is portable to other spatial and racial contexts, allowing analysts to separate the historical and material conditions that produce a caste regime from the performative and interactional roles that constitute it in given points in time. In doing so, this chapter bridges two literatures: analysis of caste theories of race relations and relational economic sociology. The chapter proceeds as follows. I begin with a brief overview of the forces that prompted social and economic transformation in the South after the Civil War, noting how this period of experimentation represents an ideal time period in which to study caste as a dynamic concept. I then review the literature on caste in historical sociology of race and race relations followed by a review of common criticisms of the caste approach. The chapter then introduces the concept of the performance circuit (Wherry 2012) developed within the relational economic sociology

pioneered by Viviana Zelizer (2012). The latter portions of the chapter describe how the Southern caste system, understood as a performance circuit, served to prevent or hinder social and economic progress. I focus my analysis on the work in the 1930s and 1940s in order to offer a more refined analysis of how caste operated in the Jim Crow Deep South, a time and place when the American caste system was at its most entrenched and systematic and as the impacts of mechanization and the Great Migration were beginning to take hold. This concept of caste is developed with the case of the American South, but the performance circuit framework offers an approach to caste systems (and, more generally, interaction systems across social strata) that is portable to comparable cases divided by religion, class status, and other social systems.

The Economic History of the South as a Site of Social Experimentation

> *The result [of Reconstruction] was the continuation of the War on a different field. The folk sense of the South, habituated to the subordination of the Negro, reacted to reconstruction by intensified pressure for his subordination. The aristocratic domination of southern politics was destroyed by the Civil War, and during reconstruction the poorer white people were increasingly admitted to political participation and power; otherwise they might have combined with the similarly disadvantaged Negroes. (Dollard 1937:57-58)*
>
> *The various federal resources which come into this region tend to be spent in conformity with the plantation, the philosophy and practices of which root back into slavery. New techniques of exploitation have been evolved. (Raper 1936:7)*

In a column written shortly after the Civil War, Georgia newspaper editor Whitelaw Reid remarked that "In many portions of the Mississippi Valley the feeling against any ownership of the soil by [N]egroes is so strong, that the man who should sell small tracts to them would be in actual personal danger. Every effort will be made to prevent [N]egroes from acquiring lands; even the renting of small tracts to them is held to be unpatriotic and unworthy of a good citizen" (quoted in Hargis, 1998:244, brackets in original). The end of the Civil War provided a crucial opportunity to dissemble the social-economic order that built on enslaved labor and replace it

with something equitable and doing so would have required some measure of land reform and expansion of Black participation as full members of the economy and society, but this transition was prevented by revanchism among the White elite and the end of the federal government's Reconstruction efforts. Indeed, the decades after the Civil War were a period of busy experimentation for the White elite who were struggling both to regain their lost power and to design a new social order.

The South was built upon a system of production in which White landowners extracted value from Black labor – while the constitutional amendments that resulted from Reconstruction banned outright slavery, there was a strong impulse to modify, rather than replace, those relations of production (see, e.g., Blackmon 2009). Cox (1976) make this point a central feature of his analysis of race relations:

> Current race relations can be understood mainly, though not entirely, by an analysis of the Negro's continuing, post-Civil War, economic role in the South. Indeed, that role and its cultural concomitants served basically to determine his social status not only in the South but also in the nation as a whole. (1976:41)

The end of slavery offered dramatic transformations for the lives of formerly enslaved people, but the association between race and certain jobs persisted, with White workers being unwilling or reluctant to accept "Black" jobs that might result in a loss of caste or social status (Johnson, 1936). The former White elite had an upper hand in this period of experimentation – the Civil War abolished slavery without addressing the White supremacist attitudes that fueled it or the economic incentives that made it so attractive. Accordingly, the economic and social arrangements that followed the Civil War were modeled after the plantation system. In the absence of serious land reform or other attempts at social restructuring, systems like sharecropping were the natural successors to the system of labor relations inherent in antebellum slavery (Cox 1976:45; Mandle 1979; Woods 2000). The limited attempts to reform the economic

structure of the South were coupled with President Andrew Johnson's ambivalence about reforming the political structure – when faced with the choice between facilitating Black participation in electoral politics or allowing the White oligarchs to regain their positions, Johnson decided in favor of White power (Du Bois, 1935). The situation during Reconstruction can be summarized as a struggle to create a new political, social, and economic order in which Whites had a significant advantage. The patterns of spatial segregation that emerged created both opportunities for interaction and conditions of social isolation. Much of the segregation in Southern towns followed a "streets and alleys" model of neighborhood segregation in which White families lived along major streets and Black families were clustered in the alleys behind them (Grigoryeva & Ruef, 2015). In more remote communities, sharecropping families were typically physically distant from both White homes and towns, but the structure of sharecropping required frequent interactions with landowners and commissaries (Dollard 1937, Powdermaker 1993). Thus, while Black families in towns and the countryside were isolated at the smallest levels, the economic organization of plantation and town life required frequent interaction across racial lines.

These dynamics persisted into the Civil Rights Era. The economic transformation, and attendant social transformation, of the South created new shared conceptions of space and the rules governing access to those spaces. Drawing on nascent neoliberal ideologies, the distinction between "public" and "private" spaces in the mid-century South acquired valences of "Black" and "White," respectively, and were in turn marked as inferior and superior spaces (Hohle 2012). Kruse (2005) documents a similar trend in Civil Rights Era Atlanta; as legally mandated desegregation took hold in public facilities such as schools and parks, Whites responded by redefining "integrated" spaces as "Black" spaces. They moved into new suburbs and used

municipal boundaries to recreate *de facto* segregation. In doing so, they also developed a political ideology that opposed tax funding for the types of public facilities they left behind. More generally, local institutions throughout the South were recalibrated to preserve both social segregation and the rigidity of economic classes (Ward 2011, Moye 2004); elites developed new practices of "pragmatic segregation" to accomplish these divisions while fending off criticism from pro-Civil Rights activities (Crespino 2007). Thus, the long arc of White reaction to Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement was the creation of a spatial-economic order that was defined by race-based expectations of who could access certain spaces and how they might behave. In this order, the boundaries between economic and social become blurred. While many of the rules and legal arrangements surrounding racial subjugation and labor experienced nominal change, the relative position of White and Black communities in the Deep South persisted. This persistence was accomplished through careful experimentation and compromise that offered enough ostensive progress to deflect pushes for more systematic reform. Common across all of these eras – Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement – was a complex system of rules, roles, and frames used to structure interactions across racial lines.

Caste and Race in American Sociology

The concept of caste appeared early in sociological literature in the United States. Park & Burgess's seminal textbook *An Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921) describes the differences between caste prejudices and race or class prejudices in terms of a difference of degree, not kind (1921:50). Park expressed the same sentiment in a later paper, writing that "race prejudice is like class and caste prejudices - merely one variety of a species" (1928:12). Caste itself is conceived of as a form of group membership in which inherited scripts and roles

determine behavior, and caste boundaries are preserved through endogamy. Presaging the rigidity of later formulations of caste, Park and Burgess's textbook continues in noting that:

> The caste offers to its members ideas already molded, rules of conduct already approved; it relieves them, in short, of the fatigue of thinking with their own brains. When the caste to which an individual belongs is known, all that is necessary is to press a button of his mental mechanism to release a series of opinions and of phrases already made which are identical in every individual of the same caste. This harmonious collectivity, powerful and eminently conservative, is the most salient analogy which the nations of the Occident present to that of India. In India the caste is determined by birth, and it is distinguished by a characteristic trait: the persons of one caste can live with, eat with, and marry only individuals of the same caste. (1921:203)

This early, and clumsy, application of an interpretation of the Indian caste system to race relations in the United States was refined through empirical studies of Southern communities that soon emerged, but later usages of caste continued this emphasis on caste as an individual property.

Starting in the 1920s, this cohort of social scientists descended on the South, researching and writing a corpus of community studies that dealt largely with issues of race and class division. These authors included Powdermaker (1939) and Dollard (1937) in Indianola, Mississippi; and Davis, Gardner, and Gardner (1941) in Natchez, Mississippi. These scholars and their projects played prominent roles in the progression of the careers of many other social scientists (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner's project, for example, was one of the first research jobs held by St. Clair Drake, who later wrote *Black Metropolis* with Horace Cayton). The basic premises of the caste theory of race relations contained in their work are straightforward: Black and White America (or, at least, the South) are divided by a rigid and ineffable boundary that exceeds the form of divisions implied by the terms "race" or "class." Instead, each side of this boundary (each "caste") contains within it the same class divisions reflected in broader society. An attempt to formalize this approach comes from one of its earliest proponents, W. Lloyd

Warner. Warner was the supervisor for Davis, Gardner, and Gardner's work (1941) in Natchez, and wrote its introductory chapter. Warner proposed a definition of caste in which caste "describes a theoretical arrangement of the people of the given group in an order in which the privileges, duties, obligations, opportunities, etc., are unequally distributed between the groups which are considered to be higher and lower…Such a definition also describes class" (1936:234). He developed a diagram (reproduced below as Figure 1) that represented the schema of Black and White caste relations in the United States:

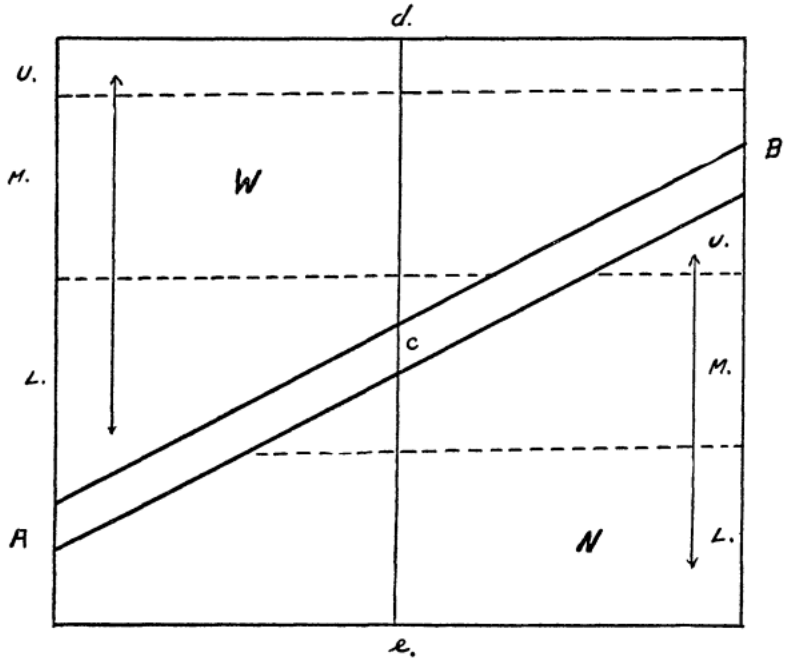


FIG. 1

Figure 2: Visualization of the Caste System from Warner (1936:235)

The capital W and N stand for, respectively, "White" and "Negro." The dashed horizontal lines demarcate class divisions; the letters "U", "M", and "L" referring to upper, middle, and lower classes. The diagonal line running from points "A" to "B" is the caste barrier (denoted by the letter "C"). The line from point "d" to "e" is included to represent what "progress" might look like in a caste society; as the caste barrier "c" rotates counterclockwise towards this line, the

differences in the class structures of each caste diminish. A perfectly vertical caste barrier would indicate a system of caste distinction but class equality – that is, a "separate but equal society." What, though, constitutes this caste barrier that plays such a pivotal role in the theory? The general concern is with restrictions on sexual activity. The fundamental rules of a caste society as described by Warner (1936) are (a) marriage between castes is impossible and (b) one may not change their caste. A corollary of (a) holds that the child of interracial relationships (by definition, born out of wedlock) belongs to the "lower" caste. Recent work by Wilkerson (2020) expands these two rules into eight, but the conception of caste she develops is still largely extrapolated from attitudes towards interracial relationships. While the community studies highlighted below have their own emphases, the centrality of these two norms is found, at least implicitly, in each.

This approach to caste prioritizes caste as a system of group *membership* rather than group *relations*, an approach that has also been used to describe caste in India. Béteille (1965) described caste as a system

> …characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system. (1965:46)

That is, caste is an inherited group membership accompanied by an inherited occupation. While the relative position of castes and their constituent boundaries may shift, the boundaries *between* castes are taken as absolute.

John Dollard and Hortense Powdermaker's community studies of Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County, Mississippi, engaged with the caste system of the Deep South more explicitly. In *Caste and Class in a Southern* Town, Dollard (1937) reaffirms the principles of the caste barrier listed above: interracial marriage and caste mobility were restricted, even though

sexual contact across racial lines was frequent. Dollard elaborates this framework by identifying three types of "gain" enjoyed by the superordinate White minority: an economic gain, in the which the labor of Black workers is extracted through sharecropping and other exploitative relationships; a sexual gain, in which White men have access to both White and Black women for sex; and a psychological gain, which refers to the feeling of superiority that Whites enjoy under the system. Powdermaker's *After Freedom: A Cultural Study of the Deep South* (1939) describes the same six-part class/caste system (two racial castes divided into three classes) and focuses her analysis primarily on the role of culture. While she stops short of calling the Deep South's racial arrangement a full caste system (1939:44), Powdermaker describes an arrangement of class and race division, combined with norms about cross-racial interaction, that resemble those documented by her peers. Echoing Dollard, she wrote extensively about the tension between the White elites' anxiety about interracial relationships and the frequent sexual liaisons between White men and Black women.

Analysis of caste plays a central role in *Deep South*, Davis, Gardner, and Gardner's study of Natchez, Mississippi (1941). The first chapter is written by W. Lloyd Warner, who uses the space to elaborate on the caste theory he described (summarized in Figure 1 above). His comments here highlight the role that the caste theory played in the larger constellation of the sociology of race: the nature of Black-White race relations in this South, he contends, transcend anything that can be explained by individual level prejudice. While this supposition foreshadows the vocabulary of systemic racism that would come later, the analysis that follows in *Deep South* continues to use endogamy and restrictions on sex as its foundation:

> All the social structures in the society operate to reinforce (44) the caste system - associations, churches, the courts, even the schools and the Negro class system - for *none of these challenges the fundamental separate, endogamous nature of the two caste groups* (45, emphasis added).

Despite this primacy of rules governing sexual contact within these definitions of the caste system, in practice interracial relationships in these communities were common; Dollard, in particular, notes an extensive pattern of relationships between White men and Black women. The caste system's interest in relationships and race is thus more motivated by attaching stigma and legitimacy than actually restricting sexual relationships.

Not all scholars writing about caste in this period centered sex and gender relations in their work. In his analysis of the caste structure of the tobacco industry after the Civil War, Johnson (1936) notes the importance of racial segregation as a system of attaching social meaning and stability to economic life:

> Segregation, even enforced by distinctions that are little more than symbolic, is regarded as of vital importance to the normal equilibrium, and, generally, to the best interests of both races. The traditional racial sentiments are shared fully and felt deeply by the workers, and especially by the white workers, who regard the practice of segregation as essential not merely to their economic security but also to their racial and social status. (1936:59)

This attention to the affective implications of the racial caste system, typically an overlooked dimension in analysis of race and racism (Thomas, 2014) highlights a mechanism through which the economic structure of the caste system structures its social meaning. Johnson's analysis, which is rooted in an analysis of tobacco processing and manufacturing in North Carolina, also highlights the importance of place in shaping a caste system: while the caste norms he documents are highly rigid at the level of the city, he notes that dramatically different arrangements exist at factories in Kentucky and elsewhere (Johnson 1936:60).

More recent writing on caste by Wilkerson (2020) builds on the foundation developed by Warner and his students. Beginning with Warner's initial "rules" for caste – endogamy and permanence – Wilkerson identifies eight "pillars" of caste that include endogamy rules,

occupational hierarchies, enforcement through dehumanization and purity rules, and ideological rationalization for caste hierarchy. Wilkerson similarly continues the comparative tendency of the caste school, finding evidence for her conception of caste in India, Nazi Germany, and the American Jim Crow South. In short, the prevailing argument of caste theories since the 1930s has been a focus on describing what it means to belong to a caste and how membership is assigned. While these analyses include discussions of intergroup interaction, the central concern of analysts has been how those interactions are restricted, rather than how they are accomplished and the effect that those interactions have on sustaining or challenging the caste system over time.

Criticisms of the Caste School

Criticisms of the caste perspective emerged shortly after its founding texts were published. Cox (1944), in an essay evaluating the racial theorizing of Park and Ruth Benedict, offers a common critique of caste theories as they apply to race relations in the United States: "The omnibus scope of the concept of race relations is here continued until it becomes clear that there is confusion…If race prejudice is like caste prejudice, what is caste prejudice? These queries remain unanswered" (454). This challenge highlights the central problem of caste as a tool for social analysis, particularly in the framework described by Park's (1921) early writings on caste: caste prejudice was seen as something more severe than race prejudice, but the qualitative distinctions between the two concepts remained unelaborated.

Related criticisms focused on the static nature of the early caste school's analysis. The cohort of scholars who studied the Black and White communities in the Deep South described the communities as they saw them but Brooks (1946), echoing Cox (1944), writes that the caste viewpoint

> …fails to clarify the pattern of social relationships as it exists at any given moment of time and tends to oversimplify what is essentially a complex of social variables…It frustrates the use of the yardstick of time to the study of social processes, and views societal structure in static rather than in dynamic terms. (Brooks 1946:211)

That is, the wooden nature of Warner's caste schematic (Figure 1 above) is structured for an analysis of a snapshot of a divided society, rather than the process that creates and sustains (or undermines) those divisions. Warner describes how the pieces of his caste schematic might move, but not how they might change or be replaced.

A further concern with the conventional usage of "caste" is how to best manage the comparative nature of its arguments. Cox's (1948) critique of Park draws attention to a crucial, and persistent, mistake in American interpretations of caste in India: Park writes that "a permanent caste system in India seems to have its origin in the obvious diversity of racial types in the Indian population" (quoted in Cox [1948:454-455]). This assumption made by Park betrays a particular understanding of race that emerged in the contemporary American context, but for which there was no historical evidence in India. A related criticism concerning the importance of well-defined historical context, found in Brooks (1946) and referenced in the introduction to this chapter, draws attention to the importance of a given spatial context in producing systems of social relations. Carby's (2021) critique of Wilkerson (2020) highlights a complementary concern. In relying on the idea of caste as a national system that fulfills a similar, but somehow different, role from race, Wilkerson fails to properly interrogate what caste is and how it might a distinctly useful concept. The conception of caste employed, Carby argues, is overly rigid compared to the American source material on which she draws. These concerns about Wilkerson's approach are rooted in the selective nature of her comparative cases; by limiting her analysis to India, Nazi-era Germany, and the American South, Wilkerson implicitly ignores the analytical leverage that including the experiences of Black and African peoples in

other parts of the Americas would have provided. Berreman (1960) attempts to resolve problems with the comparative approach, noting that while caste can be defined in ways that are both too broad and too specific, more nuanced approaches are attainable.

Concerns about rigidity also apply to the notion that caste status and race were fixed categories, assumptions that stemmed from the idea of race as an inherited biological construct. Scholars of race were already challenging this assumption; decades before the caste studies associated with Warner, Du Bois had already noted that race was not an objective biological reality (Du Bois, 1928).

Systematic critiques of the original caste school came from Oliver Cox (1944, 1948). Cox approached the question of race relations from a materialist perspective, a departure from the cultural and psychological framework of earlier work (Thomas, 2014). Cox identifies racial animus as an example of "the phenomenon of capitalist exploitation and its complementary social attitude" (1948:321); that is, a set of social practices that are materially beneficial for the superordinate group. Presaging his later writings on racism and the world system (1976), Cox locates the genesis of racism in the beginnings of the colonial era, when European colonizers needed a rapid and expansive source of labor to transform land into wealth:

> Sometimes, probably because of its very obviousness, it is not realized that the slave trade was simply a way of recruiting labor for the purposes of exploitation of the great natural resources of America…This, then is the beginning of modern racial relations. *It was not an abstract, immemorial feeling of mutual antipathy between groups, but rather a practical exploitative relationship* with this socio-attitudinal facilitation - at that time only nascent racial prejudice. (1949:331-332, emphasis added).

Identifying the exploitation of "virgin" land as the first cause of racism is a useful frame for understanding the rise of American racism as originating from material rather than psychological or cultural concerns: people were enslaved primarily to subdue and cultivate the fertile land of the Deep South, not because of interpersonal animus. In highlighting the material

consequences of the racial divide in the United States, Cox also develops his main critique of the caste theory: it downplays the role of economic exploitation in favor of cultural and psychological explanations, thereby overlooking the material incentive Whites have to prevent modifications to the system.

Performance Circuits

In order to provide a reassessment of caste as it applies to American race relations, the remainder of this chapter leverages insights from economic sociology to provide a new interpretation of the caste school of race relations in the United States. Broadly defined, economic sociology offers up a criticism of mainstream economics and its reliance on models divorced from analyses of non-economic social life. Economic sociology's original critique of mainstream economics was accomplished through Granovetter's (1985) introduction of "embeddedness," the notion that economic activity occurs within a social context which must itself be analyzed. This chapter draws primarily on the relational economic sociology pioneered by Zelizer (2012) and her students. Critics from the relational school of economic sociology note that the embeddedness approach still isolates the "economic" from the "social," and that a more thorough use of economic sociology leverages the relational nature of economic life; the relevant unit of analysis is not the individual actor but rather the relationships between actors. At the core of Zelizer's argument is the insight that

> …in all economic action people engage in the process of differentiating meaningful social relations. For each distinct category of social relations, people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation. (2012:146)

The relational approach requires a shift in the analytical focus of economic life. Rather than proceeding from the individual, analysis of negotiated interpersonal transactions provides the foundation for understanding social and economic processes. For a more complete summary of the development of relational economic sociology, see Zelizer (2012), Garcia (2014), Stoltz (2018), and Bandelj (2020).

In particular, I draw on Wherry's (2012) formulation of the "performance circuit" to elaborate an interpretation of caste which bridges its social functions and economic foundation. Wherry builds on the Zelizerian notion of circuits of commerce in which networks of people are connected by a complex set of social and economic relationships, leverage these relationships to conduct economic life, rely on shared systems of accounting and moral evaluations to standardize transactions, and cooperate to erect symbolic boundaries around the circuit though these transactions (Zelizer 2004). Wherry extends this framework by highlighting the collective evaluative frames, sets of rituals and other actions with shared meanings, and the props, exchange media, and other tangible objects through which the social meaning of a transaction unfolds (Wherry 2012). The performance circuit framework is an analytical approach to understanding the roles, scripts, and dramaturgical rules that make economic life in a given social environment possible. Wherry cites, as an example, a process through which a gemstone buyer established a relationship with a supplier: years of initial meetings, preliminary rejections, attempts to re-establish a relationship, and finally acceptance and partnership. Wherry notes how this three-year process is marked by dramaturgical elements of a courtship: "dating," consideration, and finally "marriage" (Wherry 2012:207). In doing so, Wherry's analysis sheds light on the social meanings that make this particular commercial relationship successful and durable. Beyond this example, the performance circuit framework has been variously used to

explain art markets (Komarova 2015), informal food coops (Fitzmaurice & Schor 2019), informal credit at corner stores (Puchalski 2016), and lending amongst friends and family networks (Wherry et al. 2019). The performance circuit framework is particularly useful when interpreted as a case of what Collins refers to as "situational stratification" (Collins 2000, 2003), the interactional dimension of social stratification through which stratification is experienced, negotiated, and reinforced. Collins argues that social strata are not discrete layers in a hierarchy but rather are "overlapping transactional circuits of vastly different scope and content" (2000:24) in which the social *meaning* of a social strata are established. That is, castes are not meaningful because of their distribution or relative size and location in society, but in the types of interactions they produce.

Adopting this analytical approach to reevaluate the caste school extends the relational economic sociology literature, which has only rarely engaged with race and ethnicity. The chapter fills this gap in the literature and applies the performance circuit framework in a context that foregrounds power relations as integral to understanding economic life. Thus, the application of relational economic sociology in this chapter not only illuminates how economic life makes social meaning, but also how it makes and reinforces social inequalities. The economy of the Deep South in the early 20th century was structured through "circuits of commerce" (Zelizer 2004) modeled after the antebellum plantation economy (Mandle 1979). The American caste system in this time and space can be understood as a performance circuit insofar as its constituent economic interactions (a) were structured by elaborate social rules for economic and labor transactions that reinforced racial and class roles, (b) served to erect and sustain symbolic boundaries around the Black-White context of the rural, agricultural south that separated it from the rest of the United States, and which (c) can be described in terms of the specific roles, scripts,

and audiences associated with each transaction in this space. The attention to power used in this analysis echoes Roscigno's (2011) call to examine power as a relational force constituted from interpersonal interactions in which structure and culture are leveraged to reproduce and legitimize social inequalities. In viewing caste as being constituted in these interactions and performances, the chapter challenges the idea of caste as an externally imposed structure which constrains White and Black communities alike. The Jim Crow-era American caste system as a performance circuit operated to ossify race relations and embed within them systems of economic exploitation to the benefit of the White, dominating caste.

Caste as a Performance Circuit

In an attempt to define caste in such a way as to avoid the criticisms posed to the first wave of caste and community studies, Berreman (1960) argued for a definition of caste as a "hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent" (1960:120). Berreman echoes many of the earlier writers in the caste school in placing a primacy on endogamy and the supposed permeance of caste status, but offers up a subsidiary dimension of caste that he argues is a common, but not essential, features of caste:

> Interdependence of the subdivisions, restricted contacts among them, occupational specialization, and/or a degree of cultural distinctiveness might be added as criteria, although they appear to be correlates rather than defining characteristics. (1960:120-121)

Despite the implication that these performative aspects of caste are secondary to the idea of caste as an inherited identity, Berreman frequently cites these relational components of caste to explore the differences between how caste works in practice as opposed to its straightforward theoretical boundaries. Caste is preserved through a mixture of deference and sanctions, rationalized with a mixture of ideological and pseudoscientific explanations, and maintained through a mixture of cultural tools including "folklore, proverbs, and jokes" (1960:124). This

performative and cultural "toolkit" dimension of caste echoes earlier work by Gallagher (1938) on the American caste system, in which he describes a relational understanding of caste where "by the attitudes of mingled fear, hostility, deprecation, discrimination, amused patronage, friendly domination, and rigid authoritarianism, the white caste generates opposite and complementary attitudes in the Negro caste" (1938:109). The affective and performative dimensions may not lie at the core of how caste is described in theory, but they sustain the continuance of caste divisions in practice.

To the people of the Deep South during the peak years of Jim Crow, the rules and norms of the caste system, at least for the White elite, were beyond notice, much less criticism. Powdermaker describes White respondents who "take [race relations norms] so thoroughly for granted as hardly to be aware of them" (1939:43). In such a setting, even routine features of social interaction can be interpreted as pieces of a larger web of scripted performative interaction. Gupta (2005) offers a definition of caste in the Indian context that echoes the concept of the performance circuit in this way:

> …what makes caste stand apart from other forms of stratification is that in this case there are elaborate and ritualized rules that ordain not just how distinctions should be maintained, but also prescribe sanctions should the norms be violated. It is this obsessive attention to the slightest variation in ritual ranking that marks out caste from other forms of stratification. (409)

These "elaborate and ritualized rules" and the sanctions for violating them are a key feature of the caste system in the United States that distinguishes it from *racial* stratification. Caste is further distinguished from other extensive system of ritual and social roles by the extent to which it governs aspects of daily life. Caste not only governs how one might interact with a politician or employer, but how one is expected to move in a department store or where to stand on a sidewalk. Moreover, the rules, roles, and rituals of the caste system require participation across

caste lines in order to have any social meaning, thus highlighting the importance of a relational analysis.

Economic life in the Deep South is sustained through chains and circuits of interpersonal transactions, decisions, and conversations that aggregate into larger circuits of commerce. In the Deep South context, this structure of economic life was an exploitative relationship between a dominate (White) caste and a dominated (Black) caste. I deploy the concept of the performance circuit to help reimagine caste as the social rituals that legitimize exploitative labor relationships, economic transactions, and other stratifying elements of socio-economic life. These performance tools are leveraged by White elites to further the caste system in three ways: reinforcing the relationship between occupation and social standing, entrenching the divide between Black and White communities, and creating precarious mobility for limited members of the Black, dominated caste. In order to document these functions, I highlight evidence used by writers in the caste school (Dollard [1937] and Davis, Gardner, & Gardner [1941]), as well as scholars who were at least partially skeptical of the caste argument that emanated from the Warner School (Raper [1936], Powdermaker [1939] and Johnson [1936]). This literature was published in the years before the mechanization of agriculture accelerated and in the early days of the Great Migration, the movement of Black Americans out of the South between 1916 and the 1970s. Accordingly, the material recorded in these studies captures the last days of the caste system as it operated in the post-Reconstruction era before being reshaped by mechanization and outmigration.

Intertwining Social and Occupational Roles

The association between caste status and occupation is one of the most distinctive features of caste, but this association extends into ostensibly unrelated social norms. How are

these lines and associations framed and delineated? In focusing on rules surrounding sexual relationships, Powdermaker, Dollard, and the other early caste theorists described a small part of a larger pattern of racialized social roles. Their peers' own work patterns revealed how occupation deferred to caste, as is illuminated by the work necessary to produce Davis, Gardner, and Gardner's study of Natchez (1941). Allison Davis, the lead investigator for the project, was a Black man. The optics of a young White couple working for a Black man would have rendered the project infeasible. Gardner's reflections on this dynamic are recounted in the introduction to their study:

> Gardner recalled the awkwardness of being forced to play "the white man's role, giving the attendant instructions, and even requesting keys to the restrooms for the Davises to use" while driving in the south with the Davises…Gardner recalled, "Although we considered Allison Davis the senior member of the team, *we had to play the proper Negro-white roles*, explaining that he was working for me. (1941:xx, emphasis added)

Such roles made research collaboration difficult; the team resorted to mailing each other notes and meeting on isolated country roads to avoid visible transgressions of the social system they came South to study.

Powdermaker (1939) documents a similar relationship between social customs and economic transactions. She notes the complex rules surrounding professional and personal titles as an illustrative example: Whites would never address Black men or women as "Mr." or "Mrs.," defaulting instead to diminutive and insulting forms of address, irrespective of age differences or class position. The one exception to this norm was for Black professionals who served Black clients. In an interaction with a White person, a Black teacher in a Black school might be addressed as "Professor," and a Black health care worker might be called "Doctor," but neither would ever be called Mr. or Mrs. In this way, Whites could acknowledge a limited degree of occupational mobility *within* the Black caste without implying social equality. An anecdote from

one of Powdermaker's interviews highlights how the use (and misuse) of professional titles operated to reinforce racial hierarchies:

> A moderately prosperous man in his late fifties is a highly respected member of the Negro group. As presiding elder in his church on Sunday, wearing gloves and a neatly pressed suit, he presents a most dignified appearance. On Monday, going to work, he is stopped by a young white woman who is having tire trouble. Both have lived in the same town all their lives and she knows his name quite well. She addresses him only as "Boy," repeating the word sharply as she orders his moves in rendering her this unpaid service (1939:44-45).

In her survey of White college students in her field site, Powdermaker documents a range of attitudes among this group that further support the existence of intertwined occupational and social roles: 97% agree that Black people are "all right as long as they stay in their places" (381), and 78% believe that "place" is in manual work (382).

Caste in this context functioned to maintain a sense of stability in both occupational and social spheres. This union of social and occupational norms was present in post-Civil War tobacco work as documented in Johnson (1936):

> To preserve proper relations it is deemed most important to the white workers that Negro workers "keep their place." This refers not merely to the Negro's place in the occupational hierarchy but to the necessity of maintaining the social and ceremonial distance between which local custom prescribes. This refers not merely to the Negros place in tie occupational hierarchy but to the necessity of maintaining the social and ceremonial distance between which local custom prescribes. At a Durham plant a white worker objected to the fact that white and Negro packers worked together on the same task: "You see, the southern man knows how to get along with the n-----s. If they don't stay in their place you take a club and kill 'em. Of course they shouldn't work together in this way. (61)

Johnson's analysis of the linkages between social and occupational roles includes examples of the rhetorical and performative tools that Whites used to legitimate and perpetuate the system:

> Another white worker, a union member, further revealed the caste motive in the present racial attitude of some white workers when he said: "I wouldn't work with n-----rs on the same kind of work. I don't think a n----r ought to make as much as a white man. It just won't do. Give a n----r a little money and he's a 'big Ike' right then. He'd want to come

> to the same cafes you do. You can't reason with a n-----r when he's got a little bit of money in his pocket. (61)

In predicting the consequences of occupational equality, the example that comes to mind for this worker is a minor social equality: sitting and eating in the same café. The broad assessments of caste discussed above reflected a similar mindset in the concern that social equality might result in sexual equality, but this particular example reveals how deeply intertwined occupational and social norms could become in a caste system.

The paternalism described by Dollard (1937) in his analysis of the economic "gains" of the caste system is largely a consequence of the system of sharecropping and tenant farming that dominated agricultural life: White landowners controlled where and when their Black tenants lived, provided them with an in-kind "furnish" rather than cash, and avoided paying in cash at the end of the year by manipulating This type of relationship extended beyond the farm: Raper (1936) documents the elaborate rules for Black clients in professional spaces, and Powdermaker (1939) describes how the roles of Black women were embedded in their occupational opportunities in White households. Drawing on the same rhetorical toolkit used by Johnson (1936), Davis, Gardner, and Gardner provide an overall assessment of how all the institutions of the Deep South – the schools, the churches, the workplace – operate to "keep the Negro in his place" (54). This pattern reveals a system of rules and regulations that far exceeds restrictions on sanctioned sexual relationships – the racial rules of the Deep South reflected an iterative relationship between the jobs available to members of a racial group and the social spaces that someone traverses as part of that occupation.

While the union of social norms and occupational roles was strong, it was not unmovable. Powdermaker (1939) describes how the norms could evolve in the face of economic strain:

> The depression has wrought a definite change in the policy of most white shops toward the other race. Under stress of hard times, the shopkeepers made an effort to attract Negro trade as they had never done before. Negro customers were no longer kept waiting indefinitely for attention. In many cases they were permitted to try on garments rather than, as before, being required to buy shoes, gloves, hats, without first finding out whether they were the right size or shape. Once such concessions have been granted, they cannot be easily withdrawn.

This example of the rules surrounding clothes purchasing highlights the utility of the performance circuit frame in describing caste in both static and dynamic analyses. The economic transaction in the clothes shop example is straightforward, but the ritual performance surrounding highlights the strength or weakness of caste hierarchy: how the products can be handled, and the degree of attention provided by shopkeepers are structured by both social norms and economic macroconditions.

Entrenched Tension

Performing caste both reinforces racial division while allowing participants to avoid moments of conflict. References to these roles and restrictions are implicit throughout the work of the scholars who produced community studies in the South – Dollard, for example, notes a dilemma he faced when meeting Black respondents at his rented home in Indianola. Shaking the hand of a Black man in public would have scandalized his White neighbors, but openly refusing to shake hands would have insulted his Black colleagues (Dollard's solution was to keep his hands in his pockets). The handshake affair was part of an even more transgressive moment: Dollard's Black friend had knocked on the front, rather than rear, door of his boarding house, an incident in which Dollard "unwittingly aided in imposing a humiliation on [his] hosts" (1937:7). This event represented a transgression of larger social norms; in her study of the same community as Dollard, Powdermaker documented that these rules about shaking hands and using

the correct door were widespread (1939:47). Restricting basic courtesies such as handshakes reinforced the sense of division at the interactional level.

This sense of division was motivated by larger socioeconomic concerns. A key argument in Du Bois' analysis of Reconstruction (1935) is the work by White elites to foment conflict between Black workers and the White working class. In his analysis of the tobacco industry's caste system, Johnson notes how one function of this caste system was to solidify such racial divisions through the performative aspects of caste:

> …traditions supported by the familiar race fictions and enforced by racial etiquette have continued to maintain the moral isolation of the races. It is the undercurrent of hostility which this isolation of the two groups inevitably fosters and the festering suspicions, which are more or less justified by the use which can be made of this internal conflict by the industry itself, that keep these two groups actively and impotently in conflict. (1936:59)

This attention to "fictions" and "etiquettes" presages the performance circuit framework introduced above; the narrative frames and attendant rituals and norms that shape the racial caste system in this occupational context nurture divisions which in turn prevent class solidarity.

At the core of Powdermaker's (1939) analysis of race and class relations in Mississippi is the recognition that social mores were changing but that those changes were generating friction, in the short term producing heightened senses of entrenched division. An overwhelming percentage of the White college students she surveyed believed that their Black neighbors would never reach the same levels of cultural and intellectual development as Whites, nor did they believe that social equality would ever be possible. A majority even believed that the best long-term solution to tense race relations was the eventual separation of Black and White communities into wholly separated cultures.

How do these interactional norms and rules lead to entrenched social divisions? Theoretical insights from Durkheim on the division of labor identify one potential mechanism.

Durkheim (1893) inverts many theories of the division of labor in society by positing that the specialization of labor reflects a desire to decrease competition with one's neighbors and increase a sense of social cohesion; as tasks become more and more complex and individualized, the population places greater trust in the abilities of others to meet and fulfill society's needs. A society's capacity to permit this level of trust reflects its ability to transition from what Durkheim calls mechanical solidarity (in which people are unified by participation in a common set of rules and requirements) to organic solidarity (in which people act individually for the good of the larger social "organism").

Put simply, social cohesion leads to job differentiation. The key element to this successful transition is trust – trust that others can competently provide goods and services so that we do not have to provide them ourselves. Features of the plantation system that dominated the Deep South highlight why such a transition was unlikely: the paternalism of White elites, the deep antipathy towards cross-racial social interaction (much less social or political equality), and intense (even religious) conviction that the existing social order was just all point to a social order incapable of making the leap from mechanical to organic solidarity. Thus, racial animus produces an economic and occupational system that resists individuation or self-determination, keeping people "in their place."

Precarious Mobility

A final way in which the caste system reinforces itself through chains of performance is in creating precarious and limited opportunities for economic mobility for select members of dominated groups. In the most oppressive of caste systems, mobility is accomplished through overt performances of deference; strict adherence to relational roles allows for limited economic

advancement. Berreman (1960) describes this trend as it appeared in both India and the American South:

> An untouchable in this village who covered up his bitter resentment by playing the buffoon received favors denied to his more sullen caste fellows. The irresponsible, simple-minded untouchable is a widespread stereotype and one which he, like the Negro, has found useful. Similarly, sullen resignation, with the attendant stereotype of lazy shiftlessness, is a common response, typified in the southern Negro axiom 'Do what the man says." This, too, helps him avoid trouble, although it does little for the individual's self-respect. (126)

For those who sought to be genuinely mobile – to rise through the class ranks of their caste – the most widely available opportunity in the Jim Crow Deep South was farming. The majority of Black farmworkers were sharecroppers or tenant farmers, but limited numbers were able to acquire farmland of their own. However, the process of becoming a landowning farmer required accepting that advancement was contingent on acceptance of relative caste positions. As Raper (1936) noted in his study of Georgia farming communities, purchasing land required being "acceptable" in the eyes of the local elites. The norms and boundaries of what constituted acceptability offer a glimpse into how the caste system operated in this context:

> Being acceptable here is no empty phrase. It means that he and his family are industrious and that his credit is good. It means that he is considered safe by local white people - he knows 'his place' and he stays in it…the definition of 'his place' hedges the Negro landowner about by restrictions similar to those which define and enforce the chronic dependency of the landless Negroes: *The Negro landowner is an independent Negro farmer rather than an independent farmer.* The economic and cultural advantages which the Negro can secure through the ownership of land are limited by local racial dogmas, which insist upon the Negro's submerged status and upon his acceptance of it. (Raper 1936:122, emphasis added)

Thus mobility in this context was constrained by the structural limits imposed by the White caste and precarious by virtue of its reliance on the continued performance of caste roles.

The precariousness of mobility (and the constraints on mobility for working classes) is particularly visible as local economic circuits integrate new technologies. Johnson's analysis

how the mechanization of the tobacco industry created new jobs which were accompanied by an increased share of White labor. Ironically, the weakening of the "caste sentiment" caused by this change in the labor force decreased Black access to the higher-status jobs they had once held (Johnson, 1936:58). Johnson's (1936) analysis of industrialization in tobacco manufacturing documents the inverse relationship between rigidity of the caste system's rituals and the level of technological advancement:

> The more highly developed the establishment, the more complex the race relations, because of the difficulty of enforcing the racial etiquette in each new situation created by internal physical adjustments. In the smaller and industrially less elaborated establishments, racial sentiments are less disturbed by technological and organizational changes. (62)

In Dollard's (1937) analysis of the caste system in an agricultural county in Mississippi, technological transformation poses a similar threat to the stability of that caste system:

> There is the question, of course, of the increased use of mechanical power which may replace both Negro and White tenant. On some plantations, tractors are being used increasingly. There is also the threat of a machine for picking cotton. This is the crucial threat since it is the picking of the cotton rather than the planting or cultivating of it which makes the masses of Negroes indispensable. If this invention should prove practicable and be widely adopted, the South would be faced with a radically new problem as regards the Negro. We might expect then an efflorescence of fantasies of colonizing the Negroes in Africa, or of putting them in a separate state (131).

Here, Dollard speculates that technological change will not force a relaxing of caste norms, but a shift to a new mindset entirely: one of expulsion or more severe spatial segregation.

The precarity associated with Black mobility is well documented beyond the Deep South. Powdermaker concludes that the small Black middle class was increasingly ambivalent about challenging White supremacy as they learned to adopt cultural practices for their own protection. Frazier (1957) assessed the black "bourgeoise" in much harsher terms decades later, arguing that the small Black middle class lacked ties to either White middle class society or the Black folk

tradition. Wilson's (1987) seminal work on the Black underclass underscores how this class division reshaped the nature of the Black-White racial divide by arguing that the geographic separation of the middle class and "underclass" had generated new forms of racialized disadvantage (1987). Later work on the Black middle class (e.g., Patillo 1999) further documented the vulnerability inherent in a racially segregated class system.

Conclusion

The caste concept of race relations, despite the limitations of its earlier formulations, plays an important role in the arc of the sociology of race in the United States as a challenge to the assumptions of other models. As McKee (1993) notes, much of early American sociological analysis of race assumed that "the race problem" would simply get better over time through the transformative effects of industrialization and urbanization. The modern sociology that emerged from the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and other continental European thinkers took an approach that privileged the analysis of class over race. This emphasis on class within early American sociology reflects the importance of nationalism and nation building to scholars like Simmel and Weber who were working amidst the transformation of continental European states in the late 19th century. While these scholars noted the historic importance of ethnic divisions, the transition from feudal to industrial society in Europe inspired macro-level models in which race and ethnicity were assumed to be of declining significance (Frazier 1947, Blauner 1972:3). As a result, much of the writing about race and ethnicity in the United States reflected a similar assumption about race: while problems may exist, racial and ethnic divisions are temporary features of a modernizing social system. This modernization approach belies the important social and political roles embedded in the concept of race, an oversight that can be addressed with insights from the caste perspective.

A prevailing assumption of the earlier caste literature is that it reflects a property of the individual: people belong to a caste. This chapter proposes a shift in defining caste as a social force that only exists in the context of intergroup interactions; caste is created when people interact across stipulated caste lines. The function of caste is to preserve the stability of labor relations in a stagnant economy to the benefit of the dominant caste and to give structure to the circuits of commerce within that economy. Analyzed as an economic system, caste operates as a "performance circuit" in which socio-economic interacts operate to blur the boundary between occupational and social norms, entrench racial divisions, and ensure that economic mobility for the dominated class is precarious.

While this chapter has used agriculture as a case study, the Black-White racial order described here could be detected in other occupational sectors and geographies. The framework developed in this chapter can also be transposed onto different time periods. Future work ought to consider how the concept of the performance circuit, particularly as it interacts with the concept of situational stratification, can be leveraged to analyze other caste and caste-like systems of social stratification. Social immobility, in terms of income and occupational prestige, remains entrenched and spatially clustered in the communities studied by these scholars; uncovering the forces that maintain that continuity offers important contributions to the sociology of race in the United States.

References

Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Revised edition. New York: New Press.

Bandelj, Nina. 2012. "Relational Work and Economic Sociology." *Politics & Society* 40(2):175–201. doi: 10.1177/0032329212441597.

Bandelj, Nina. 2015. "Thinking about Social Relations in Economy as Relational Work." Pp. 227–51 in *Re-Imagining Economic Sociology*, edited by P. Aspers and N. Dodd. Oxford University Press.

Bandelj, Nina. 2020. "Relational Work in the Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46(1):251–72. doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054719.

Berreman, Gerald D. 1960. "Caste in India and the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 66(2):120–27. doi: 10.1086/222839.

Béteille, André. 1996. *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. 2nd ed. Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Blackmon, Douglas A. 2009. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. 1st Anchor Books ed. New York: Anchor Books.

Blauner, Bob. 1972. *Racial Oppression in America*. New York: Harper & Row.

Brook, Daniel. 2019. *The Accident of Color: A Story of Race in Reconstruction*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Brooks, M. R. 1946. "American Class and Caste: An Appraisal." *Social Forces* 25(2):207–11. doi: 10.2307/2571562.

Carby, Hazel V. 2021. “The Limits of Caste.” *London Review of Books*. Retrieved February 24, 2021 (https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n02/hazel-v.-carby/the-limits-of-caste).

Collins, Randall. 2000. “Situational Stratification: A Micro-Macro Theory of Inequality.” *Sociological Theory* 18(1):17–43. doi: 10.1111/0735-2751.00086.

Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Cox, Oliver C. 1944. “The Racial Theories of Robert E. Park and Ruth Benedict.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 13(4):452. doi: 10.2307/2292493.

Cox, Oliver C. 1970. *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*. New York London: Modern Reader Paperbacks.

Cox, Oliver C. 1976. *Race Relations: Elements and Social Dynamics*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Crespino, Joseph. 2009. *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Davis, Allison, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner. 2009. *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press.

Dollard, John. 1937. *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 2014. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880.* Oxford University Press.

Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. 1928. “Race Relations in the United States.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140(1):6–10. doi: 10.1177/000271622814000103.

Durkheim, Émile. 2014. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York, N.Y.: Free Press.

Fitzmaurice, Connor, and Juliet B. Schor. 2019. “Homemade Matters: Logics of Opposition in a Failed Food Swap.” *Social Problems* 66(1):144–61. doi: 10.1093/socpro/spx046.

Frazier, E. Franklin. 1947. “Sociological Theory and Race Relations.” *American Sociological Review* 12(3):265. doi: 10.2307/2086515.

Frazier, Edward F. 1995. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. New York: Collier Books.

Gallagher, Buell G. 1938. *American Caste and the Negro College*.

García, Alfredo. 2014. “Relational Work in Economic Sociology: A Review and Extension.” *Sociology Compass* 8(6):639–47. doi: 10.1111/soc4.12181.

Granovetter, Mark. 1985. “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness.” *American Journal of Sociology* 91(3):481–510. doi: 10.1086/228311.

Grigoryeva, Angelina, and Martin Ruef. 2015. “The Historical Demography of Racial Segregation.” *American Sociological Review* 80(4):814–42. doi: 10.1177/0003122415589170.

Gupta, Dipankar. 2005. “CASTE AND POLITICS: Identity Over System.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34(1):409–27. doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.34.081804.120649.

Hargis, Peggy G. (1998). Beyond the marginality thesis: The acquisition and loss of land by African Americans in Georgia, 1880-1930. *Agricultural history*, *72*(2), 241-262.

Hohle, Randolph. 2012. “The Color of Neoliberalism: The ‘Modern Southern Businessman’ and Postwar Alabama’s Challenge to Racial Desegregation: The Color of Neoliberalism.” *Sociological Forum* 27(1):142–62. doi: 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2011.01305.x.

Johnson, Charles S. 1936. “The Conflict of Caste and Class in an American Industry.” *American Journal of Sociology* 42(1):55–65. doi: 10.1086/217330.

Komarova, Nataliya. 2015. “The Meanings of Discounts in Contemporary Art Markets: The Case of India.” *Cultural Sociology* 9(4):567–82. doi: 10.1177/1749975515584081.

Kruse, Kevin Michael. 2007. *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*.

Mandle, Jay R. 1979. *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War*. Durham, D.C.

McKee, James B. 1993. *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective*. Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press.

Moye, J. Todd. 2004. *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Park, Robert E. 1928. “The Bases of Race Prejudice.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140(1):11–20. doi: 10.1177/000271622814000104.

Park, Robert E., and Ernest W. Burgess. 1921. *Introduction to the Science of Sociology: Including the Original Index to Basic Sociological Concepts*. x``: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. 2000. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Powdermaker, Hortense. 1993. *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Puchalski, Vance Alan. 2016. “Credit at the Corner Store: An Analysis of Resource Exchange among Detroit-Area Urban Poor.” *Sociological Forum* 31(4):1040–62. doi: 10.1111/socf.12295.

Raper, Arthur Franklin. 2005. *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties*. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press.

Roscigno, V. J. 2011. “Power, Revisited.” *Social Forces* 90(2):349–74. doi: 10.1093/sf/sor034.

Stoltz, Dustin S. 2018. “Relations and Relationships: Clarifying the Terms of the ‘New’ Relational Economic Sociology.” *The American Sociologist* 49(1):64–79. doi: 10.1007/s12108-017-9336-2.

Thomas, Deborah A. 2014. “Cox’s America: Caste, Race, and the Problem of Culture.” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Latino-Américaines et Caraïbes* 39(3):364–81. doi: 10.1080/08263663.2014.1013286.

Thomas, James M. 2014. “Affect and the Sociology of Race: A Program for Critical Inquiry.” *Ethnicities* 14(1):72–90. doi: 10.1177/1468796813497003.

Thompson, Edgar T. 2010. *The Plantation*. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, Published in Cooperation with the Institute for Southern Studies of the University of South Carolina.

Ward, Jason Morgan. 2011. *Defending White Democracy the Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.

Warner, W. Lloyd. 1936. “American Caste and Class.” *American Journal of Sociology* 42(2):234–37. doi: 10.1086/217391.

Wherry, Frederick F. 2012. “Performance Circuits in the Marketplace.” *Politics & Society* 40(2):203–21. doi: 10.1177/0032329212441598.

Wherry, Frederick F., Kristin S. Seefeldt, and Anthony S. Alvarez. 2019. “To Lend or Not to Lend to Friends and Kin: Awkwardness, Obfuscation, and Negative Reciprocity.” *Social Forces*. doi: 10.1093/sf/soy127.

Wilkerson, Isabel. 2020. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House.

Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Woods, Clyde Adrian. 2000. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. London: Verso.

Zelizer, Viviana A. 2004. “Circuits of Commerce.” Pp. 122–44 in *Self, Social Structure, and Beliefs: Explorations in Sociology*, edited by G. T. Marx, J. Alexander, and C. Williams.

Zelizer, Viviana A. 2012. “How I Became a Relational Economic Sociologist and What Does That Mean?” *Politics & Society* 40(2):145–74. doi: 10.1177/0032329212441591.

Chapter 3: Slow Expulsion: The Great Migration and the Weakening of Southern Black Communities

When Reverend Wilson was a child growing up in the little hamlet of Cairo in southern Sunflower County, he would often walk down to the pond in the woods behind his house to talk. He delivered sermons, lectures, arguments, and other orations to the trees and any ducks that happened to wander by. When he was a teenager, he was entrusted with locking up the Missionary Baptist church down the road after Sunday services and often left a side door open so he could slip in during the week to practice his sermons. Wilson was raised by a single mother born into a sharecropping family who spent her working years taking in laundry and cooking for the White families in town. The community of Cairo has since dwindled to a few dozen people – its post office closed more than 100 years ago and the only store in the area closed in 1997. The inhabitants of the now-closed United Methodist church's cemetery outnumber the town's living residents by an order of magnitude. The children of Cairo have spread out across the country, but Rev. Wilson settled just up the road in Magnolia, the county seat and home to about 9,000 people. After college at an HBCU in the state capital and a decade-long career in TV broadcasting, Wilson enrolled in a Reformed seminary and pursued ordination in the Missionary Baptist church, a historically Black denomination. He's since assembled a busy portfolio of church related work – on Wednesday mornings he convenes a bingo and Bible study for elderly women in Indianola. Saturdays he works with a few dozen children who live in the apartment complex on the south side of town (the same complex that his elderly mother retired to). He alternates between two small churches about an hour away on Sundays, doing his best to keep the dwindling congregations active. In each space, his sonorous bass voice fills the room whether he's opening a Bible study with a few stanzas of "The Old Rugged Cross" or warming up a crowd with a well-executed joke.

While Rev. Wilson has found important ministries to make use of his gifts, his complex routine – hours of driving and shifting between youth minister, bingo caller, and fundraiser - means that he's stretching himself to his limits to keep these institutions operating. Central Delta county, like much of rural America, has persistently lost population since World War II and this population loss is forcing rural institutions to do more with less. The Wednesday bingos are one of the only spaces for social life for elderly Black residents, and the Saturday children's programs are the only consistent activity for low income children. While the persistent depopulation that has affected most of rural America is often described as the consequence of structural transformations to the economy, the exodus of rural Black families from the Deep South, and the Mississippi Delta in particular, is part of the more complicated story of the Great Migration. The narrative of the Great Migration is often told in simple terms – the mechanization of agriculture reduced the demand for manual labor and Northern cities offered better opportunities and a reprieve from the oppressive conditions of the Jim Crow South. Rev. Wilson's family story is caught up in this process – he is the only one of his seven siblings to have remained in the South while the rest of family relocated to Chicago and California.

This chapter engages with the historical record of the Great Migration to explore the motivations for its intensity and persistence. The conventional narrative of structural unemployment in the wake of technological changes leaves several questions unanswered. Why did the rural South, especially Mississippi, fail to provide alternative forms of employment through industrialization? What did Southern White elites and local White leaders think about this outmigration? How did the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the prospect of an enfranchised Black constituency motivate the actions of White elites? By drawing on archival evidence from Mississippi during this time period, this chapter builds the case for a different take

on the Great Migration: rather than being simply a process of Black Americans looking for better work elsewhere, it was also part of a concerted effort on the part of local White elites to weaken Black organized life by pushing Black families out. This chapter makes the case that White power structures in the Deep South have consistently sought to control the spatial mobility of Black families. While in earlier eras this control meant tying families to plantations through slavery or sharecropping, this mindset has evolved into one that prioritizes the expulsion of potentially "troublesome" surplus workers as the need for Black labor has declined. The result is a severely depopulated region deprived of the organized Black political and social life that might have flourished there.

This chapter proceeds as follows: it begins with a review of the current literature on the Great Migration, particularly with respect to the ambiguous effects it had on Black migrants. After introducing the data sets used for this part of the dissertation, the chapter builds its central argument. First it analyzes the long history of the ideology used to support expulsion and the resettlement of Black Americans outside of the South. It assesses the way this ideology was formalized and refined during the Jim Crow period. The chapter then considers how this ideology was put into practice, both in the conversations among White elites and in the organized forms of resistance mounted by the Citizens' Councils in Mississippi. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the broader implications that this ideology has for both geographic and social mobility.

The Ambiguous Effects of the Great Migration

Depopulation – the persistent loss of population without obvious prospects for growth – has been a hallmark of demographic change in rural America. After post-War peaks in the 1950s, nearly half of the counties in the United States have persistently lost population due to

outmigration and falling fertility rates. Accounts of this population shift often focus on macro-level variables such as automation and natural decreases in fertility as incomes rise (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). The impact of automation on rural populations and agriculture is significant; an oft-quoted truism is that one tractor could perform the labor of hundreds of manual workers. The mechanization of agriculture accelerated after World War II-era metal shortages ended, resulting in the abrupt displacement of millions of agricultural workers. These transformations had dramatic impacts on the lives of Black Southerners. Historian Donald Holley rosily describes the mechanization of agriculture in the United States as a second emancipation: "The transition from handpicking to machine picking resulted in enormous improvements in the lives of everyone who depended on cotton for a living" (2001: xiii). This perspective overlooks the extent to which the social structures in place were ill-prepared to accommodate displaced agricultural workers.

Quantitative studies in demography and sociology provide a less optimistic evaluation and have found little evidence that migration improved rural Black migrants' outcomes. Analysis by Eichenlaub, Tolnay, and Alexander (2010) find no evidence that migrants from the South fared better in terms of income, educational attainment, or employment than African Americans who remained in the South or who migrated within the South. These patterns are found across a range of migration destinations. Tolnay and Eichenlaub (2006) find no advantage for migrants who move to the West rather than the industrial Northeast. Conditions for Black Americans were not improved by increased shares of African Americans in urban populations; community size had no impact on occupational outcome (Tolnay 2001), and the earliest cohorts of migrants were relegated to the "worst" neighborhoods in destination cities (Tolnay, Crowder, and Adelman 2000). Finally, Black American migration to Northern cities is associated with an increase in racial disparities in incarceration rates; Black and immigrant incarceration rates increased during

the Great Migration, net of any observed increases in crime (Muller 2012). Outcomes for the second generation of emigrants from the South are similarly ambiguous. Despite conventional understandings of migration as a means to improve opportunities for children, Alexander et al. (2017) find only modest gains for the children of migrants relative to their peers in the South. The lack of convincing evidence for positive economic outcomes associated with the Great Migration is compounded by a corresponding lack of clear analysis of associated social outcomes within the social sciences (Tolnay 2003).

The disjoint between expected migration behavior and migration outcomes between the North and South still exists (Flippen 2013), suggesting a larger theoretical puzzle. The hypothesized motivations for migration, internal or international, presume that people move to improve their or their family's socio-economic standing. The empirical evidence discussed above suggests that the outmigration of African Americans from the rural South improved neither the socioeconomic outcomes of migrants nor the communities they left behind. Threats of impending violence, such as those described in Wilkerson (2010) point to a potential external driver of outmigration: the implicit desires of the rural South's White power elite. Mechanization threatened to create a class of unemployed and underemployed agricultural workers just as frustration with Jim Crow was coming to head and the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to take form.

Data and Analytic Strategy

This chapter makes extensive use of several historical archives. The main archive used in the study is the constituent correspondence files of US Senator James Eastland held at the University of Mississippi. Eastland was a resident of the county and an influential Senator during his tenure from the 1930s to the 1970s. These files contain letters sent by Mississippians, many

of whom were writing with concerns about the changing civil rights landscape and prospective social changes. The correspondence files also include pamphlets and book recommendations that identify the key texts that these leaders and letter-writers used to shape their ideology. Because these letters were initially written as private correspondence, they provide unique insights into how local elites and average White citizens were discussing these issues and possible forms of organized resistance. This archive is supplemented with additional archives related to the Citizens' Councils stored at the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, Delta State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi.

Senator Eastland represented the State of Mississippi from 1941 to 1978, a period which included the tail end of the New Deal, World War II, the height of the Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement, the passage of the Great Society legislation, and the Vietnam War. Eastland quickly rose to prominence in the Senate, serving as chair of the Judiciary Committee and playing influential roles in the crafting of agricultural legislation. During his time in the Senate, Eastland also owned and operated a large plantation in Central Delta county. His plantation business profited from the labor of sharecroppers who were gradually replaced by tractors and other machinery. Eastland's tenure saw the rapid decline of the population of Central Delta county, represented in Figures 1 and 2 below. For decades, Central Delta county has suffered population loss (and the rest of Mississippi has seen only modest growth). Eastland's position both within the Senate and as the wealthiest person in Central Delta point to the importance of Central Delta within this larger social context. Another prominent set of actors during this time period that is frequently mentioned in these archives were the Citizens' Councils (often referred to as the "White" Citizens Councils in correspondence). The Councils were

ostensibly private associations of White community leaders who organized local chapters and worked to prevent integration in public and social spaces.

The archival data is analyzed using the framework proposed by Stoler (2010) in which archives of imperial or colonial societies are interpreted not as objective documentation of historical fact but rather as a record of how power elites made sense of the changing nature of their power. By adopting this focus on ideology and the discourses that shape it, this chapter engages with recent scholarship on the period following Reconstruction that explores how imagery, rhetoric, and representation helped shape the ideological foundations and institutionalization of Jim Crow (Gates, 2019). In doing so, it helps explain how narratives of population redistribution, expatriation, and expulsion contributed to the larger project of White supremacy, which Gates identifies as an ideology which "evolved in order to maintain the country's racial hierarchy in the face of emancipation and black citizenship" (2019, 37). Narratives of control over Black lives and where Black Americans live became an important part of this ideology.

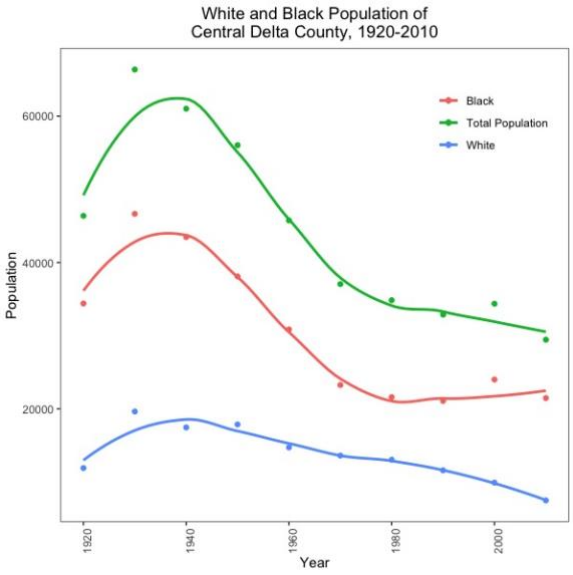


Figure 3: Population Growth Trends

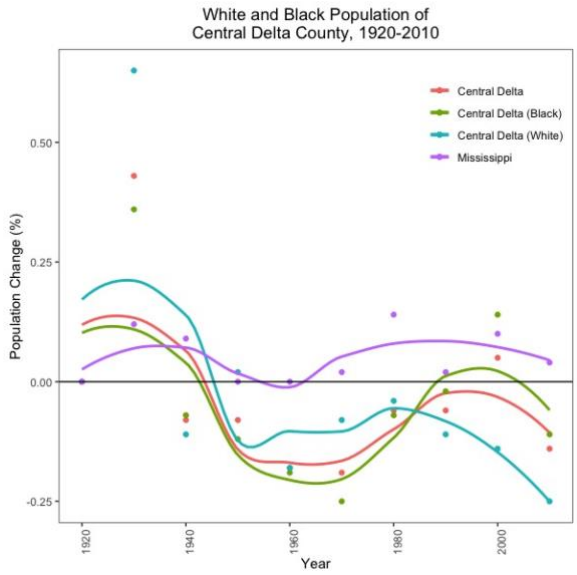


Figure 4: Population Change

The Long History of the Expulsion Mindset

Ideas for the proposed expulsion of Black Americans from the United States predate the Civil War. In 1814, five years after the end of his presidency, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to fellow Virginian and planter Edward Coles. In the letter Jefferson, who himself still owned slaves, wrote with a grim pessimism that he did not see a natural resolution to slavery in the near future:

> I had always hoped that the younger generation, receiving their early impressions after the flame of liberty had been kindled in every breast, and had become as it were the vital spirit of every American, that the generous temperament of youth, analogous to the motion of their blood, and above the suggestions of avarice, would have sympathised with oppression wherever found, and proved their love of liberty beyond their own share of it. but my intercourse with them, since my return, has not been sufficient to ascertain that they had made towards this point the progress I had hoped. [sic]

"Yet," Jefferson went on to say, "the hour of emancipation is advancing in the march of time." Jefferson envisioned a solution just as gradual as the shift in generational attitudes that he had once hoped for: slaves would be emancipated at a certain age, education, and expatriated. This approach, he believed, "would give time for a gradual extinction of that species of labor and substitution of another, and lessen the severity of the shock which an operation so fundamental cannot fail to produce." Emancipation and coexistence as equal citizens were out of the question:

> the idea of emancipating the whole at once, the old as well as the young, and retaining them here, is of those only who have not the guide of either knolege or experience of the subject. for, men, probably of any colour, but of this color we know, brought up from their infancy without necessity for thought or forecast, are by their habits rendered as incapable as children of taking care of themselves, and are extinguished promptly wherever industry is necessary for raising the young. in the mean time they are pests in

> society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them. their amalgamation with the other colour produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent. [sic]

It is unclear how expatriation was to work in practice, or what part of the world the emancipated would call home: Jefferson's goal was to both end the odious legacy of slavery (in which he was a constant participant) while retaining the United States for Whites alone.

Decades later, another President found himself proposing similar, albeit more concrete, ideas. Abraham Lincoln, whose image today is favorably linked to the Emancipation Proclamation, was working on plans to expatriate Black slaves as colonists as he drafted the document that would free them. Lincoln, with the enthusiastic support of Congress, pursued concrete plans to resettle freedmen in Panama, off the coast of Haiti, or somewhere further South. Wealthy Americans who owned land in Panama received huge sums of money to prepare a colony – these plans were suspended once it became clear that this money had gone to pay private debts. The proposed colonization of an island off the coast of Haiti went further; more than five hundred freed Black Americans were sent there. The colony failed in less than a year and the 350 survivors returned to Washington. Many of the men promptly joined the Union Army (Vorenberg, 1990). Historians argue that Lincoln never had strong feelings about the mass colonization of freed slaves; instead, he pushed for colonization as a means to ameliorate anti-emancipation sentiment. The prospect of ending slavery was made palatable to the Union's White elite by conjoining the idea with plans for their eventual removal. The reasons for Lincoln's waning interest in colonization – perhaps because of freed slaves' contributions to the war effort or the practical challenges of colonization – are unclear, as much of the later records of Lincoln's emigration office have been lost (Magness, 2011). The centrality of expulsion as a means of achieving some measure of racial justice, either through a crude "expatriation" back to

Africa or through state-sponsored colonies far from the mainland, was an integral part of the mindset the White elites throughout the 19th century.

This mindset shows up in early studies of Sunflower County. Powdermaker (1939) and Dollard (1937), social scientists who studied Sunflower in the 1930s, briefly noted the pending arrival of mechanization; both works were published at the end of American agriculture's reliance on manual labor. Dollard's predictions foreshadow the pattern of outmigration that would take place in the decades following his study. Dollard's comments on this issue are reproduced in their entirety as they capture both the scale of the problem of mechanization and the profound inability of Jim Crow-era White analysts to conceive of a future in which Black Americans could remain in the South as anything other than manual laborers:

> There is question, of course, of the increased use of mechanical power which may replace both Negro and White tenant. On some plantations, tractors are being used increasingly. There is also the threat of a machine for picking cotton. This is the crucial threat since it is the picking of the cotton rather than the planting or cultivating of it which makes the masses of Negroes indispensable. If this invention should prove practicable and be wildly adopted, the South would be faced with a radically new problem as regards the Negro. *We might expect then an efflorescence of fantasies of colonizing the Negroes in Africa, or of putting them in a separate state*. The colonization fantasy occurred occasionally in the minds of [Sunflower County residents]. Another possibility, of course, is the more even distribution of Negroes throughout the country, should they be needed again in the high-speed industrial machine of the North. While this would solve some of the problems of the South, it would certainly raise new ones in the North and make the American race problem a national instead of regional issue (131, emphasis added).

While Dollard looks to structural shifts awaiting Central Delta, Powdermaker looks back at the status quo's roots in slavery; her analysis highlights the durability of the plantation mode of production and hints at the social tension mechanization would bring:

> "After freedom" there was still cotton to be planted, cultivated, and picked. There were still plantations. And there was a set of *mores* so strongly entrenched that not even a war could dislodge them. The Negro was still the worker. The White man, much poorer than before, still made the decisions. Landlords who had sufficient wealth after the Civil War to continue as planters, translated the responsibility for slaves to the responsibility for tenants. Sometimes a man's tenants were the same Negroes who had formerly been his slaves. Many slaves merely transferred their dependence from master to landlord. Money still played only a small part in their dealings. Nevertheless, the Negro was free. He had acquired the right to move, even though he has not always been able to exercise that right (80).

The seeds of an expulsion mindset where thus present in Central Delta county in the wake of Reconstruction; observers noted that Reconstruction and mechanization had created questions about the future of Black Southerners – the demand for their labor was waning, but the power relationships that constrained them were not ready to adjust to the exercise of their freedoms.

"Our Negroes": Early Years of the Great Migration and Attitudes Towards Black Labor

In the early years of the Great Migration, White employers mobilized against outmigration. Labor recruiters from the North were targeted with both harassment and legal action, and farmers frequently complained about impending labor shortages. However, these concerns were primarily a consequence of the added pressures created by World War II in the form of steel shortages (which prevented new farm machinery from being built) and the draft (which facilitated some of this outmigration). Beneath this stage of the discourse is evidence of a mindset that persisted through the post-Reconstruction period through to the present: Black

Americans were to be evaluated based on what could be extracted from their labor and were understood as assets, not fellow citizens. This social order resulted in a possessive attitude towards Black Americans – in 1943 a woman named Minnie Walker from Canton, Mississippi wrote Senator Eastland with concerns about the effects of the draft on farm labor, writing that it was "terrible down here in this county, they are taking our negroes in droves…"

The combined effects of the war and labor needs in the South show up in the early days of Eastland's correspondence. Concern about outmigration was coupled with scorn for the Black families who left (or tried to). Frank Everett, an attorney from Senator Eastland's hometown in Central Delta county, wrote the Senator in 1943 to share concerns about supposedly idle workers:

> In the south, every village, town and city is full of loafers, many of them having come in from the farms, some white and some black. There are thousands of negroes who have been rejected by the army because of infection with venereal disease. There are other thousands who are beyond the age limit for the army, but who are drawing compensation from the government and who…you cannot get one of them to hit a lick of work to save your life.

The implicit concern in Everett's letter is not just the immediate shortage of labor for local farms, but also a broader concern about the ways in which World War II and other social upheavals were weakening control over Black lives. Concerns about idle workers and alleged dependency allowances were common; in 1944 Senator Eastland responded to a letter from J. W. Morrow of Woodville, Mississippi using similar language:

> I know there are thousands of lazy Negroes who have moved to town and are loafing, living on the dependency allowances from sons in the Army. I know that these children in civil life did not contribute to the support of their parents. It would take legislation to correct this situation.

A letter from 1944, written by the president of a local Farm Bureau, pointed to other concerns about the effect of the draft and the ways in which it was accelerating urbanization faster than mechanization could compensate (Howard, 1944):

> The Labor condition on farms continues to grow worse. Usually those who go to camp, and are rejected and put in Classification 4F, almost immediately go to some city. Just had a negro boy who was turned down at Camp. He informed me that he was going to Cleveland, Ohio.

A lengthy dialogue from 1945 with the same Farm Bureau official and the War Manpower Commission summarizes the scope of the problem for one Delta county near Memphis:

> Mr. Mingee also has gotten figures from the local [Office of Price Administration] office, showing that 143 cars transport 396 workers to Memphis every day, who have industrial jobs. This report was of November, 1944. From this county there has also been an exodus of farm laborers to large industrial cities all over the U.S. About two thousand have been called into the armed forces, and that leaves us very short of essential farm labor.

Thus, the problems created by labor shortages were real, but not permanent. The agricultural south had already begun adopting tractors and other farm machinery that would reduce the need to maintain a manual labor force of tenant families. However, much of the immediate concerns were a consequence of the ways in which the draft was forcing workforce changes to happen faster than anticipated. By the late 1940s, concerns about workforce shortages disappeared from Eastland's correspondence.

This possessive attitude is present in records of Senator Eastland's personal planation. In a 1945 letter a local doctor, J. Russell, thanked the Senator for directing Black patients his way:

> In going over our records for the past year I find that we have had the pleasure of seeing quite a few tenants from your [Central Delta] farm. I want to take this opportunity to express your appreciation for your referring them to us. During the [war related] emergency we have perhaps not been able to be as thorough as we would like to be, but

> nevertheless, we have tried to keep some of the "*human farm machinery*" going [emphasis added].

Beyond the diminishment of Black workers to pieces of the Senator's farm machinery, the letter points to the parochial nature of the Senator to his tenant farmers – they were his to care for and to send to doctors of his choosing. Eastland's plantation records also capture the extent to which mechanization was transforming plantations like his. In 1945, wages for laborers represented nearly a quarter of total expenses for his farm; by 1966 that figure had fallen to 10% (Godbold 1945, Godbold 1966).

Even in the early days of the Great Migration, White elites were prepared to countenance a future without Black workers in town. A pamphlet about Indianola, Sunflower's county seat, published by the Rotary Club and prepared by the Rev. Dick Bolling had this to say about the county's Black population:

> Sunflower County has nearly 8,000 negro tenants and many hundred negroes in town. Most of them are good negroes and they succeed here. Many of them Chicago can have and we will put in their place good, reliable white men who look forward to prosperity for themselves and their children.

This passage, in a document prepared by Sunflower County's influential White leaders, encapsulates the prevailing attitude towards Black labor in the South as the Great Migration began: Black workers were a useful asset, but if they caused trouble they could be removed. Moreover, the promise of prosperity and upward mobility was reserved for the White workers who might take their place.

Jim Crow and the Adaptation of Expulsion Mindsets

In 1948 a Mississippian named John Frierson wrote a letter to Senator Eastland congratulating him on his "great work in the Senate for the state of Mississippi." He was primarily writing to recommend two books to the recently re-elected Senator:

> I am just reading a splendid book, "Whither Solid South" by Mr. Collins of Alabama, published by Pelican Publishing Company of New Orleans. This same company published another splendid book, "The Cult of Equality" by Stuart O. Landry. Both these books, especially the last one, ought to be in every public library and school library and read throughout the whole Union. The absolute refusal to face facts in the Northern people, and a whole lot of the Southern people and of the do-gooders and church members and educators, is alarming and shameful.

Senator Eastland was already well-acquainted with both works. In his response to Frierson he says "I have read both books mentioned in your letter and I think they are excellent. I know Mr. Collins well; he stops by the office frequently…I understand they are now selling pretty rapidly in the South. Landry's book was also recommended in a cyclical distributed by the Jackson Citizens Council that was included with Frierson's correspondence, and which describes a book that is "very readable, and is quite well done in a straightforward and objective manner." They go on to note that the book "is designed to offset so much misleading propaganda that is being put out on the race problem."

Senator Eastland was known to be an expert in these matters. In 1956, W.E. Belt, an attorney from Pascagoula, Mississippi, wrote about a speech he was preparing for the White Citizens Council. He said that he "would like to know if you can obtain material on the Subject of 'Origin of the races down to present' or 'Why the races have not mixed from the Origin of man to the present." In his response to Mr. Belt, Senator Eastland apologizes for not having access to "the vast bibliography to which we have access in Washington" (this letter was written from his plantation in Sunflower County) but goes on to recommend several texts from memory. Among them was a pamphlet entitled "Black Monday" written by the Senator's "good friend" Judge Tom Brady, a Brookhaven, Mississippi, judge who had written the incendiary pamphlet following the 1955 *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* decision.

Letter writers in the correspondence files of Eastland's archives frequently included pamphlets, news clippings, and self-published books or essays related to "the race problem" in the South, but these three texts were among the most comprehensive and frequently cited. Together they represent the ideology of White supremacy in the South as the country adapted to a post-World War II world.

Collins' primary concern in *Whither Solid South: A Study in Politics and Race Relations* (1947) *is* the preservation of the South's political dominance in the federal government. Collins was concerned about political trends that he (correctly) predicted would lead to a reversal in the Republican and Democratic parties' attitudes towards race:

> I have pointed out the logic of the conversion of the present Republican-Southern Democratic Coalition into a new conservative political party. If that cannot be done it would be better for the South to fight independently in the Electoral College than to continue to keep political company with the left-wing New Dealers who are at heart the South's most bitter enemies (ix).

The South's purpose, in Collins' view, ought to be to maintain a strong political coalition capable of preserving the South's ossified racial caste system. Segregated education systems represented a core part of this agenda. Much of the book is a case study of British colonial rule in Kenya and South Africa, where Collins finds good models for segregated and caste-centric education. Writing about South Africa, he finds an education system in which the "long-term trend of educational philosophy in the Union of both primary and higher education for the Negro is to encourage his training in every field of learning, but to confine him in his activities to the bounds of his own race in the reservations" (47). Kenya offered a similar system of education stratified by race and class:

> The best Negro education given in Kenya is in the native industrial training depot where they are trained to be employed by white people. There is, of course, no comparison

> between the native and the white schools. The British colonial everywhere is educated to meet the standards of the ruling class (47).

This emphasis on workforce training came with it a natural concern: up until this point Black Americans had been employed to plant, chop, and harvest cotton, but mechanization was rapidly making their work more efficient (and thus reduced the number of employees required).

Another prominent reading recommendation in Eastland's correspondence is O. Stuart Landry's *The Cult of Equality* (1945). Much of the book is a treatise on what Landry perceives to be the improper ratification of the 14th Amendment (and thus, the lack of legitimacy behind the principle of equality before the law). While much of the book is an attempt to undermine the notion of "social equality," Landry shares the same fear commonly found in such works, racial "amalgamation" and the end of the White race:

> Instead of a white skin, soft silken hair, finely chiseled nose, expressive mouth, and a brow like Hyperion's, our man of the future will be a blend of the physical characteristics of the races of today…A poet of a thousand years hence will not be able to write to his Blumine about her pink cheeks and rosy lips. The most glorious animal the world has ever seen with all its beauty of person and its superior mentality will have passed away (2).

The other races, for their part, have little to gain from social equality in Landry's view, largely because they neither desire nor appreciate what that might mean; "Mongolians, East Asians, Malaysians, Polynesians, Africans, and other dark-skinned peoples do not know anything about the doctrine of equality and could care less" (4).

Landry recognized that the movement towards racial equality would not be impeded by rhetoric such as his and sketches several solutions to the race problem he perceived. Despite Lincoln's earlier failures with emigration, Landry envisions it as not only desirable but feasible: he proposes that Black Americans take their American education to West Africa or Brazil to better societies there. Landry calculates that there had been more than 13 million migrants from

Europe to the United States in recent decades. If such a degree of immigration is possible, he wonders, surely the same degree of emigration can be achieved (323). This proposed redistribution of Black Americans could take other forms – Landry proposes that some of the more sparsely populated states in the American Southwest could be set aside for the Black population, avoiding the complexities of international emigration while still achieving the spatial segregation that he found desirable. The status quo in the South presents a third solution: the construction of a parallel society evocative of the caste system in India or the co-existence of the Basques alongside the French and Spanish (333). This last proposal most directly resembles the reality created by modern White supremacy, as patterns of residential segregation and other disparities continue to reproduce racial inequality, but each of Landry's ideas is reflected in the correspondence Eastland received from everyday White Mississippians.

Each of these texts lays out strong objections to political or social equality for Black Americans rooted in a combination of bad anthropology, tortured interpretations of the 14th amendment, and economic self-interest. At the heart of each text is the belief that racial coexistence was impossible, and that racial "amalgamation" would be the inevitable consequence of attempts at equality. Each author noted the coming collapse of the system of agriculture that for centuries had been used to subjugate Black farm workers, highlighting what was, in their view, a sense of urgency. While mechanization promised higher profits and a more efficient use of capital, the end of plantation-based manual labor created new opportunities for reformers to act and for federal intervention (Woods, 1998:268), thus creating new challenges for the White supremacist power structure.

The Popular Solution: Expulsion in the Public Discourse

These conversations expanded beyond Senators and the para-academic press. In 1944 an anonymous letter writer wrote to Eastland musing about the massive re-shuffling of European populations as World War II came to a close. The writer asks why a similar movement should not take happen in the United States:

> A migration of 4 or 5 millions of negroes to the Republic of Liberia should take place. All persons migrating should be of reproducing age: below 50 years of age and family men would receive first preference.

Kenneth Price, an attorney from McComb, Mississippi, wrote in 1945 with some historical precedent for this forced migration to Liberia. During the course of his private research he came across an "Act to Empower the Board of Police of Pike County [Mississippi] to Remove the Lundy Free Negroes living in Said County to Liberia" from 1854. This forced expatriation back to Africa (and Liberia in particular) had thus long been on the minds of local White elites, even if Africa itself was not a realistic destination. Price went on to urge the Senator to "do something affirmative instead of following blindly the pattern of the past."

By 1949 Southern Whites had stumbled onto an ostensibly more realistic idea: encouraging, or forcing, Black Americans to move to Northern States. In 1949, Senator Russell from Alabama introduced a bill to defray expenses in "assisting negroes to migrate from the South to above the Mason-Dixon line." Walter Sillers, an attorney from Clarksdale, Mississippi and an influential member of the state legislature, wrote one of many such letters to Russell to congratulate him on this idea and copied Eastland. In a separate note to Eastland, Sillers encouraged the Senators to work together to get the bill through Congress. Unsurprisingly, the bill failed and Sillers followed up with Eastland:

> I was in hopes there would be some chance of the Russell Bill passing because it would

> accomplish a great deal for us as a counter measure against the vicious program against the South which has been prompted and spearheaded by negroes and other minority groups and communistic influences.

This suspicion of communists and "other minority groups" was widespread. Later in 1949, a Mississippian named George W. Armstrong wrote with concerns about the increased number of Jews migrating to the United States who purportedly brought socialism and communism with them. They, along with the Black Americans they worked with, presumably had aims to overthrow the American way of life and the country should "either deport them or disenfranchise them." Senator Eastland responded favorably the next month, saying that "the Negro should be settled in his own country and permitted to work out his own destiny."

A long, handwritten letter from Rupert Smith of Aberdeen, Mississippi sent to Senator Eastland in 1955 outlined an even more elaborate plan:

> I propose that the states buy from the fund you propose for education of other regions fleets of super-buses. These busses should have a catchy slogan or name such as "Know Mississippi Better Buses" or "Freedom Train" or "Underground Railroad." Free, warm meals, free transportation, lodging and subsistence for a period of three-weeks while the negro gets on the un-employment rolls in the State of Minnesota or other. Free movement of house-hold goods to be provided by a fleet of trucks. A tent area in cheap land areas just outside of Minneapolis should be provided…The only stipulation would be the negro promise not to return to his home state or other southern state (3).

Loren O'Neal of Saucier, Mississippi wrote in 1956 with a ideas for a more national plan: Congress would pass a law requiring that Black Americans be re-distributed across the country in a proportional manner according to the states' White populations, thus making the issue a "National instead of Southern" question.

This conversation included some of the most radical opponents of the Civil Rights Movement. Byron de la Beckwith, the Greenwood, Mississippi, native who assassinated Medgar

Evers in 1963, wrote Senator Eastland seven years earlier to encourage him to vote for another attempt to fund expatriation of Black Americans to Africa, a bill proposed by Senator Langer of North Dakota. Eastland responded promptly, signing his letter "with personal regard and best wishes I am your friend…"

Organized Propaganda and Attempts at Expulsion

One day in late 1960**,** Representative George Andrews, Democrat of Alabama, came on the Citizens Council Radio Forum (which described itself as "an American perspective with a Southern accent") to talk about a piece of legislation he had introduced to Congress to create a Human Resettlement Commission. The Commission was yet another attempt to federalize the movement of Black Americans out of the South, in this case to a non-Southern state of their choosing. The Commission would be tasked with doing the following:

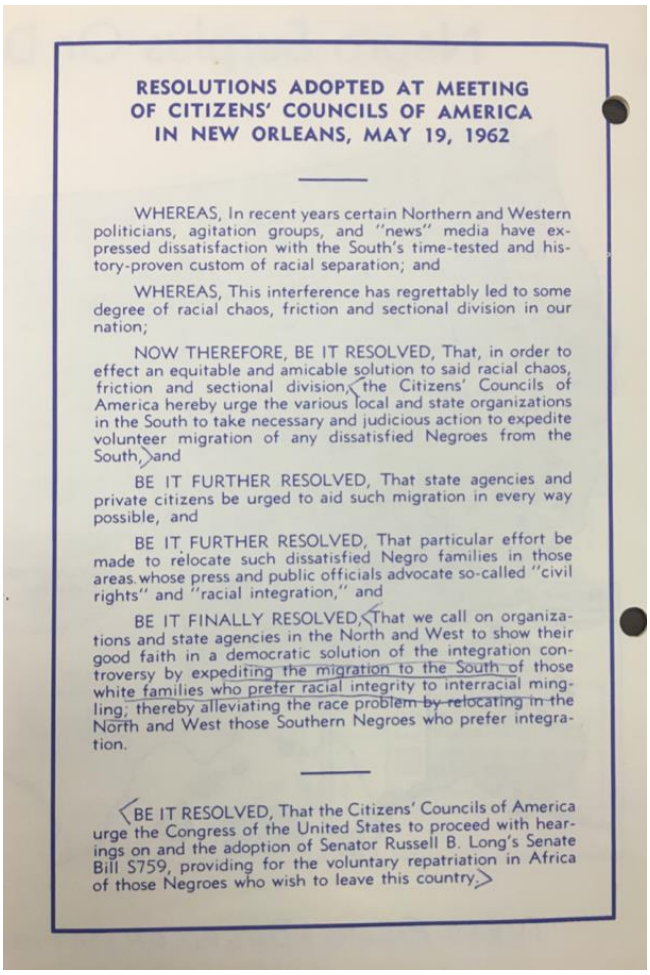
> It provides…that any Negro who appeared before the commission and satisfied the commission, first, that he was a worker, that he would carry his own weight, that he'd make a living and wouldn't become a charge on any community into which he moved, and second, that he was unhappy with local laws, customs, and traditions that prevailed in the state where he then resided would be eligible for a long term, low interest rate government loan in an amount sufficient to enable him to move himself and the members of his family and his household goods to any state of his choice.

Andrews' bill, like the failed proposals from Senators Russell and Langford, never made it out of committee, much less into law, but the Citizens Council's involvement in promoting the legislation is significant. The Councils were founded in Central Delta county, Mississippi, immediately after the *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision found segregated schools unconstitutional. They were meant to represent an ostensibly moderate alternative to openly violent reactionaries like the Ku Klux Klan and they quickly spread across the South. Local Councils undertook a robust agenda to counter school and social integration

including organizing boycotts (and responses to Black-led boycotts) and chartering White-only private schools ("segregation academies") in church basements. Removal of Black Americans from the South quickly became a part of this agenda. The Councils released a pamphlet after their national convention in 1962 outlining their position on the migration of Black Americans:

> As far as the White Southerner is concerned our large Negro population has become an unbearable economic and political liability. The future looks dark indeed when one contemplates the years of political, economic and social racial struggle that lie ahead. Logic and reason should indicate that voluntary migration and resettlement is the best solution to the race problem in the United States.

The pamphlet was accompanied by a resolution adopted at the 1962 national convention in New Orleans which called for the adoption of the legislation proposed by Senator Langer mentioned above (See Figure 3). The pamphlet also included a map (widely reproduced in Southern newspapers) that showed the purported "surpluses" and "deficits" of Black Americans in each state (see Figure 4). While the Citizens Councils never saw national legislation passed, they did enact limited efforts to facilitate Black outmigration on their own. A page from US News and World Report that was mailed to Senator Eastland details the efforts of the New Orleans Citizens Council to provide one-way bus tickets to Chicago and small stipends to a few dozen Black families.



RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED AT MEETING
OF CITIZENS' COUNCILS OF AMERICA
IN NEW ORLEANS, MAY 19, 1962

WHEREAS, In recent years certain Northern and Western politicians, agitation groups, and "news" media have expressed dissatisfaction with the South's time-tested and history-proven custom of racial separation; and

WHEREAS, This interference has regrettably led to some degree of racial chaos, friction and sectional division in our nation;

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That, in order to effect an equitable and amicable solution to said racial chaos, friction and sectional division, the Citizens' Councils of America hereby urge the various local and state organizations in the South to take necessary and judicious action to expedite volunteer migration of any dissatisfied Negroes from the South, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That state agencies and private citizens be urged to aid such migration in every way possible, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That particular effort be made to relocate such dissatisfied Negro families in those areas whose press and public officials advocate so-called "civil rights" and "racial integration," and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, That we call on organizations and state agencies in the North and West to show their good faith in a democratic solution of the integration controversy by expediting the migration to the South of those white families who prefer racial integrity to interracial mingling, thereby alleviating the race problem by relocating in the North and West those Southern Negroes who prefer integration.

BE IT RESOLVED, That the Citizens' Councils of America urge the Congress of the United States to proceed with hearings on and the adoption of Senator Russell B. Long's Senate Bill S759, providing for the voluntary repatriation in Africa of those Negroes who wish to leave this country.

Figure 5: Citizens' Council Resolution on Migration

This phenomenon expanded what became known as the "reverse freedom rides." Unnamed donors to the Citizens Council contributed $20,000 to fund the project. Early reporting in the *New York Times* recounted the story of one family who had successfully relocated to New York. Louis Boyd, along with his wife and eight children, received bus tickets and $40 to cover incidentals along the way; Boyd soon found a steady job as a janitor that paid $100 a week. National leaders at the NAACP and CORE, along with Northern political leaders, denounced the scheme as cynical and hypocritical, warning that other potential "reverse freedom riders" shouldn't expect to find similar success ("Negro Ride Plan," April 1962). Indeed, Boyd's own success soured quickly after the company he worked for folded in less than a month ("Negro

Sent here Given Bad Check," May 1962).[3] By June, more than 120 had taken the Citizens Council up on their offer and accepted tickets to California, Massachusetts, Little Rock, Chicago (Robertson, 1962) and Cleveland ("Negro on Way to Cleveland, 1962). The reverse freedom rides never amounted to a serious exodus; many of those who accepted the free bus tickets found their way back to the South within a few years (Webb, 2004). The Citizens Council pivoted their messaging surrounding the initiative, claiming that their intention had always been to show Black Southerners that life would not be any better for them elsewhere (Robertson, 1962).

The Citizens Councils worked locally as well. In 1965 the national organization (based in Greenwood, Mississippi) distributed a document to local chapters entitled "Community Plan to Counteract Racial Agitators." It advised a range of strategies, including the formation of alternative police forces, ignoring demonstrations and boycotts, reporting the identities of so-called agitators to the police, and organizing voter registration drives among the White community. It also included a recommendation to encourage Black Southerners to move to Northern or Western states. The document borrows language from the national resolution and frames this as part of a long-term tactic:

> "Immediate steps combined with long-range plans should be made to encourage voluntary migration from the South. Our disproportionate Negro population has become an unbearable economic and political liability. Because of our large Negro population, the future looks dark indeed…"

[3] The owner of the company, Harvey Brudner, had been confined to a mental hospital in Washington, D.C., after demanding that a Secret Service agent take him to meet the President. "I am the most informed scientist in the United States. I can save the world," he is quoted as saying.

Boyd's life story is entangled with many of the processes highlighted in this chapter. He had been unable to work for years because of chronic pneumonia. Once he had recovered, he attempted to regain his longshoremen job at the New Orleans Port, only to mind that automation had eliminated hundreds of positions there in his absence (Webb, 2004).

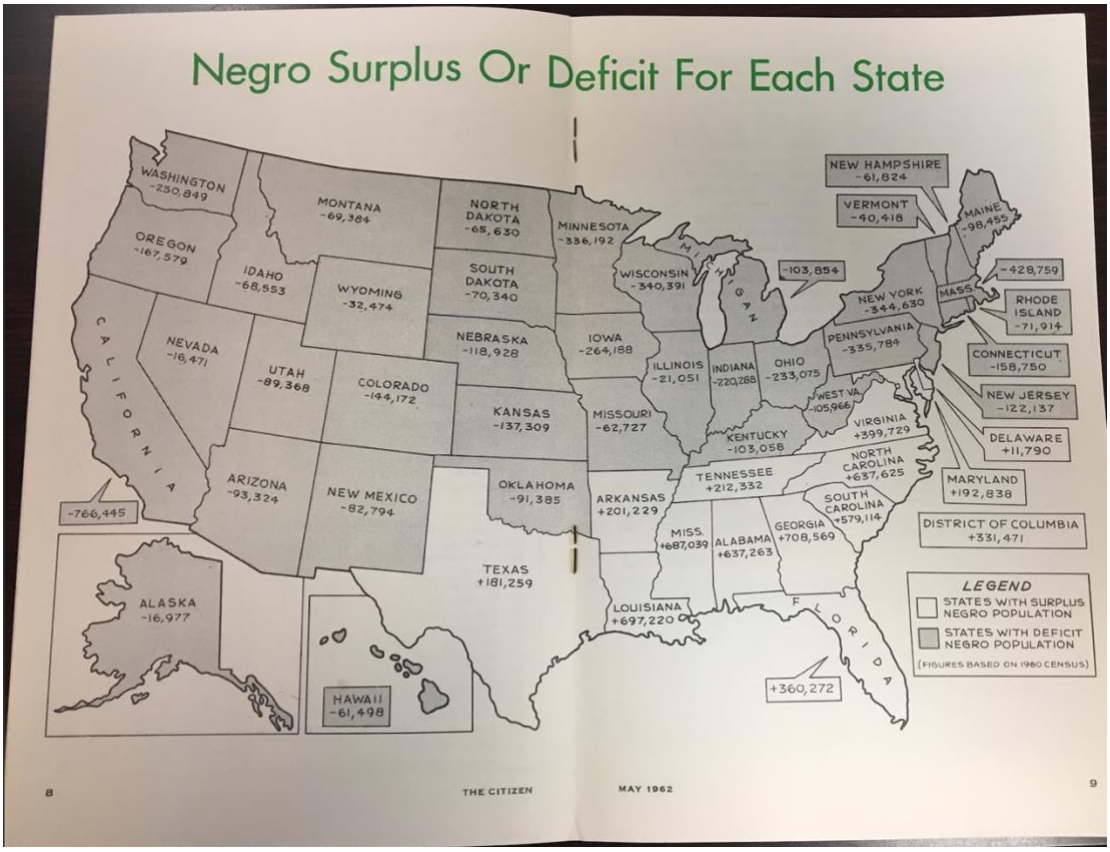


Figure 6: Citizens Council Infographic

The Citizens Councils also adopted tactics designed to make Black Southerners feel generally unwelcome, using language of expatriation and removal from the South as imagery. Books of startlingly racist "tickets to Africa" were available for purchase for members of the Councils to hand out or otherwise distribute (see Figure 5).



Figure 7: "Boat Ticket to Africa"

While direct links between such imagery and individual migration decisions were minimal, groups like the Citizens' Councils were certainly excited about its progression. The

May 1962 edition of *The Citizen*, the official publication of the Citizens' Councils, was devoted to the topic of Black migration and urbanization. The edition was included in a fundraising letter to Senator Eastland that began on an optimistic note: "The fight will be long, but it be won by a united, organized South."

The Great Migration and Fears of an Organized Black Electorate

Despite more than a century of talk of expatriation to Africa or the North or anywhere else but the South, the main motivation for this ideological project was concern about what might happen closer to home. These narratives were not concerned with migration as the *sine qua non* of White supremacy but rather with attempts to find a new social order to replace the feudal plantation model. The narrative of expulsion documented above, beyond making Black Southerners feel unwelcome, was part of a larger campaign to prevent the formation of an organized Black electorate after Reconstruction.

This bitterness towards Reconstruction and fear of an organized Black electorate shows up in the Eastland's correspondence. Both the Eastland and Sillers archives include several reports about the distribution of Black populations by county along with concerns about how they might reshape politics if the 15th Amendment were properly enforced. The possibility of such a Black electorate was a frequent concern. In a 1946 correspondence with Alec Fitz-Hugh, an attorney from Vicksburg, Mississippi, regarding the 1946 Democratic primary for Georgia's gubernatorial election, Eastland notes:

> In Georgia over a third of those who voted for Carmichael were Negroes. He also had the active support of the CIO, and this organizations has thousands of members in the State of Georgia. In fact, the bulk of the vote came from the CIO and Negroes...most of the better elements in Georgia supported Talmadge as they did not desire to see the Negroes and the CIO take over the state.

The near defeat of Talmadge, who lost the popular vote in that election but secured the Democratic nomination through political maneuvering and obscure loopholes, was worrying to Eastland and politically connected White Mississippians. In a later correspondence to the same Vicksburg attorney, Eastland writes:

> My idea when showing you the article was to show what happens when Negroes and tightly organized groups seek to control. In Georgia the CIO and Negro organizations passed out thousands of ballots already marked for a straight ticket to their membership, who placed them in the ballot box. Of course, this is a defect in the law. It is also a grave mistake to permit Negroes to vote.

Whether or not the actions of people like Eastland or groups like the Citizens Councils had any direct effect on the speed of the Great Migration, the Great Migration clearly reshaped the potential electoral landscape in the South. At the height of Reconstruction, many Southern states had Black majorities. By the end of Senator Eastland's tenure a century later, the South was ruled by solid White conservative majorities.

While maintaining political and economic domination was a clear motivation for elites like Eastland, a deeper anxiety about social integration was at the core of this narrative. This concern is reflected in the texts by Collins, Landry, and Brady discussed above but also shows up in letters. A Methodist minister from Wiggins, Mississippi wrote to Senator Eastland in 1945 to condemn him for opposing fair employment legislation that would have integrated some workplaces. Rejecting his concerns, Eastland replied:

> Political equality in time will lead to social equality, and I know that if Negroes are permitted to vote in the South, they will repeal our segregation laws and use the power of the ballot box to promote social equality with the White race.

Social equality would, in the minds of White supremacists, inevitably lead to interracial relationships and the decline of the White race demographically as well as politically. A 1956

letter from a W. I. Denson in Wiggins, Mississippi, tied school integration to eventual intermarriage, writing:

> To throw them together in the schools wouldnt work here. Some say children marry their playmates, so if they played together they would marry. that is worse that paganism. And to use some of [Governor Theodore] Bilbos language any low down dirty yellow livered, contemptible, with malace aforethought sex perverted white man who advocates marriage between the white and black races should be shot like the snake he is. Looks like the president would have enough intelligence to know where this is leading. Cant you go talk to him and put him wise as to what he is leading our country into. Any man who advocates mixing the races in the schools ought to have to sleep for three Mo. with a stinging cotton chopping or wood cutting negro [sic].

In 1957 a Jackson, Mississippi woman named Chastity Kempinska wrote in with her concerns about the growing integration of Southern cities. The fear was personal to her:

> Can you imagine what will happen if my beautiful sixteen year old daughter is subjected to the black environment which will infect every phase of her future? God forbid. If it wasn't for my faith that it cannot happen, I would go insane.

The idea of White women interacting with Black men has been the motive for centuries of violence, both interpersonal and structural. This narrative of racial purity and the "amalgamation" of Whites into "inferior" races shows up in justifications for the post-Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan, the lynching of Emmett Till, and other instances of Southern White terror, but that discourse has moved beyond the Black and White dynamics of the South. Fears of a "Great Replacement" motivated the alt-right march in Charlottesville where protestors chanted "The Jews will not replace us." It showed up in the manifesto of the domestic terrorists who targeted Latinx Americans at an El Paso Walmart and the manifesto of the New Zealand mosque shooter. Much of the racial terror that has plagued the United States and the West can be traced to a White anxiety about having to coexist with others as equals.

Segregation Today, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever

Imagining a counterfactual in which the Great Migration never happened and Southern Black Americans were allowed to take part in building a post-tractor South is difficult, but the handful of cities that welcomed Black entrepreneurs and organizers offer some insights. Cities like Hattiesburg, about an hour north of Mississippi's Gulf Coast, offer a possible example (Sturkey, 2019). The city grew rapidly after Reconstruction. Unencumbered by a legacy of plantation agriculture, the new city leaned heavily into timber, manufacturing, and its status as a rail hub and embraced new models for growth. The city attracted Black families from the rural towns and hamlets around South Mississippi. While Black families in towns like Hattiesburg endured more than their share of oppression and racial violence, the ability for Black communities to organize, grow, and work within a post-agricultural economy allowed for the growth of Black organizations that tempered some of the effects of Jim Crow. Meanwhile, towns in places like the Mississippi Delta that have persistently lost population have had to do more with less. Even this optimistic assessment of Hattiesburg is an outlier within Mississippi. In his analysis of Mississippi's "closed society," historian James Silver (1963) assesses the enduring role that depopulation plays in the state's political calculus. Mississippi lost two seats in the House of Representatives during the time period considered in this chapter, largely because of the loss of what Silver identifies as the "most ambitious, the ablest, and the most adaptable to change of all Mississippians" (81). By driving out those who might have been motivated to push for change, Mississippi's power structure has tightened its grip on a dying state.

Rev. Wilson, for his part, is doing all he could to keep Indianola and Sunflower County working as usual despite its terminal rates of outmigration. Between programs for children and seniors, two churches an hour away, and finding donors to keep all this afloat, he spends hours

each day driving around. I met with him a few weeks ago at the Wendy's in Indianola around 3:30 in the afternoon. He had been in Jackson all day for meetings and hadn't had time for breakfast or lunch. After catching up a bit about the summer programs we had respectively worked on the month prior, he leaned back in his chair and started talking about the long day and career he'd had – talking to me but also talking out loud to himself. "If I can make it another five years that would be 25 years in ministry – on top of the ten works I worked at the TV station… if I can make it five more years I think that's when I'll retire." Rev. Wilson had been on the front lines of holding a broken community together – broken not only by race and class but also by geography. In a better world his brothers and sisters might have stayed closer to home, pursuing careers and raising families in a community that welcomed their aspirations. Instead he was left alone to take care of his aging mother and instill a bit of hope in the children, seniors, and parishioners that he'd chosen as his local family. Today Rev. Wilson's booming voice was muted, and he hadn't found the time to work in one his classic jokes – instead he just looked tired. "Twenty-five years…don't you think that would be enough?"

References

Alexander, J., Leibbrand C., Massey C., & Tolnay, S. “Second-generation outcomes of the Great Migration.” *Demography*. 54(6): 2249–2271.

Anonymous. (n.d.). [“Boat ticket to Africa”]. Citizens’ Council Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Special Collections (Box 3, Folder 7).

Anonymous. (1945). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 33, Folder 3). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Annis, J. L. (2016). *Big Jim Eastland: The godfather of Mississippi*. Jackson, MS: The University of Mississippi Press.

Armstrong, G.W. (1949). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 35, Folder 2). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Andrews, G. (1960). [Radio Interview]. Citizens’ Council Radio Forum Collection (Tape #5804), Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries, Starkville, MS.

Belt, W.E. (1956). [Correspondence with Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 35, Folder 2). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Bolling, D. (n.d.). [Pamphlet on the county prepared by Rotary Club]. Indianola Collection, Historical Archives (Box Title – Indianola). Indianola Public Library, Indianola, MS.

Collins, C. W. (1947). *Wither solid South: A study in politics and race relations*. New Orleans: Pelican Press.

Citizens' Council. (1962). [Pamphlet on migration]. Walter Sillers, Jr. Collection, Delta State University Archives and Special Collections (M004, Box 81, Folder 5), Delta State University, Cleveland, MS.

Citizens' Council. (1962, May). *The Citizen.* Citizens' Council Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Special Collections (Box 1, Folder 29).

Citizens' Council. (1965). [Community action plan.] Citizens' Council Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Special Collections (Box 1, Folder 29).

De la Beckwith, B. (1956). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 36, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Denson, W.I. (1956). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 35, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Dollard, J. (1988 [1937]). *Caste and class in a southern town*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. (2007). *Black reconstruction in America: An essay toward a history of the part which Black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dunning, W. A. (1901, October). "The Undoing of Reconstruction." *The Atlantic*. Accessed at https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1901/10/the-undoing-of-reconstruction/429219/.

Eastland, J. (1944). [Response letter to J. W. Morrow]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 3, Folder 16). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Eastland, J. (1944). [Response letter to J. Frierson]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 33, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Eichenlaub, S., Tolnay, S., & Alexander, J. (2010). "Moving out but not up: Economic outcomes in the Great Migration." *American Sociological Review*, *75*(1), 101-125.

Everett, F. (1943). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 2, Folder 17). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Fitz-Hugh, A. (1946). [Correspondence with Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 32, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Flippen, C. (2013). "Relative Deprivation and Internal Migration in the United States: A Comparison of Black and White Men." *American Journal of Sociology*. 118(5):1161-1198.

Foner, E. (1988). *Reconstruction: America's unfinished revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Harper.

Frierson, J. (1948). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 33, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Gates, H. L. (2019). *Stony the road: Reconstruction, white supremacy, and the rise of Jim Crow*. New York: Penguin Press.

Godbold, W.J. (1945). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 3, Box 1, Folder 51). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Godbold, W.J. (1966). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 3, Box 1, Folder 74). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Holley, D. (2001). *The second great emancipation: The mechanical cotton picker, Black migration, and how they shaped the modern South.* Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press.

Howard, J. P. (1944). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 2, Folder 17). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Howard, J. P. (1945). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 4, Folder 2). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Johnson, K. M., & Lichter, D. T. (2019). Rural Depopulation: Growth and decline processes over the past century. *Rural Sociology*, *84*(1), 3-27.

Kempinska, C. (1957). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 37, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Muller, C. (2012). “Northward migration and the rise of Racial Disparity in American Incarceration, 1880–1950.” *American Journal of Sociology*, *118*(2), 281-326.

O’Neal, L. (1956). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 35, Folder 2). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Pierce, P.E. (1945). [Correspondence with Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 31, Folder 11). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Powdermaker, H. (1993 [1939]). *After freedom: A cultural study of the Deep South*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Price, K. G. (1945). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 30, Folder 12). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Russell, J. (1945). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 3, Box 1, Folder 61). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Sillers, W. (1949). [Letter to Senator Russell and Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 33, Folder 3). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Smith, R. (1949). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 35, Folder 1). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Stoler, A. L. (2010). *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sturkey, W. (2019). *Hattiesburg: An American city in black and white*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tolnay, S. (2001). "African Americans and immigrants in northern cities: The effects of relative group size on occupation standing in 1920." *Social Forces, 80*(2):573-604.

Tolnay, S., Crowder, K., & Adelman, R. (2000). "'Narrow and filthy alleys of the city'?: The residential settlement patterns of Black Southern migrants to the North." *Social Forces, 78*(3), 989-1015.

Tolnay, S. & Eichenlaub, S. (2006). "Southerners in the West: The relative well-being of direct and onward migrants." *Social Forces*. 84(3), 1639-1663.

US News and World Report. (n.d.). "Migration of Negroes – Here is the real story." Walter Sillers, Jr. Collection, Delta State University Archives and Special Collections (M004, Box 81, Folder 5), Delta State University, Cleveland, MS.

Walker, M. (1943). [Letter to Jim Eastland]. James O. Eastland Collection, Archives and Special Collections (Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 2, Folder 17). J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Wilkerson, I. (2011). *The warmth of other suns: The epic story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House.

Woods, Clyde. (1998). *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. New York: Verso.

Chapter 4: Moving Out to Move Up: Higher Education as a Mobility Pathway in the Rural South

Nancy and Linda are sisters in their 70s from the Northeast, but they spent several formative summers working with Freedom Summer, a voter registration and civil rights campaign in the Mississippi Delta. Linda first came to Sunflower County in June 1964 when the main task of the initiative was to work with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to organize voter registration drives. Voter registration for Black Mississippians at that time was close to impossible. Linda remembers hearing about James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, the three civil rights workers who had recently been murdered in rural Mississippi. Linda and her peers were being trained in Oxford, Ohio by the Student Non-violence Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality when that happened, so their training had to adjust to account for the very real threat that they faced.

Linda met Fannie Lou Hamer at the training and wanted to go to the Mississippi Delta as a result; she thought she was the greatest woman she had ever met and wanted to spend more time around her. Before this summer, organizers had not made much progress in the region. Linda recalls the old voting application – it was notoriously hard because applicants had to complete arbitrary questions meant to weed out Black applicants. For example, the last few questions required applicants to write, from memory, a passage of the Mississippi Constitution, interpret it, and explain what it meant to be a good citizen. The answers were then judged by the (White) registrar and there was no opportunity for appeal. Linda worked with people who had attempted to register dozens of time. What stayed with her the rest of her life was the perseverance, courage, and dedication of the Black community in the Mississippi Delta.

"I would like to say, 'and everything then was wonderful!' but it wasn't – there's still a lot to do." And I look to you folks to do that." The folks that Linda referred to were the several

dozen young men and women seated before her, public school students in Sunflower County, Mississippi, who gather each day at the Leadership Institute, an afterschool and summer program that provides academic support, arts enrichment, and college admissions counseling to students in the county. Despite the progress that the region had made since Linda's time as an organizer, Sunflower County remains one of the poorest counties in the United States and has some of the lowest rates of educational attainment and upward mobility nationwide. The county was also the site of bitter struggles during the Civil Rights Movement. In spite of the structural barriers they face, many middle school and high school students in the county's underserved public schools see themselves as college-bound and cultivate aspirations of upward mobility. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter explores the experiences of a cohort of these students to highlight the ways in which college is not a "magic bullet," even for students who have already opted into the idea of higher education as a path to a better life. These students face significant barriers in their path to college and beyond. These barriers highlight important deficiencies in the reliance on higher education as the predominate pathway out of poverty. This chapter's chief argument is that for rural youth, especially rural youth of color, enrolling in college and finding employment that uses that education requires a permanent transition from one opportunity structure to another, a transition which is not often expected of students from more privileged backgrounds. By opportunity structure, I refer to the linkages between educational opportunities and occupational hierarchies that are in turn embedded in a given spatial context. A student in New York City, for example, could complete her education in the city and find a job that rewards her educational attainment all while remaining close to her home neighborhood. Even a geographically mobile student from such a background is not required to make a permanent shift – a student from New York who studies finance in California and finds

their first job in Chicago can easily imagining returning home one day. For disadvantaged *rural* students, the permanence of this transition incurs significant economic, social, and emotional costs on students from disadvantaged rural backgrounds, costs which inhibit upward mobility even for academically strong students with upward aspirations. Students who opt to bear these costs also face marginalization as they traverse through elite spaces.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the current literature on the key theoretical and empirical insights that serve as this chapter's foundation. I then describe the field site and my ethnographic engagement within it. The chapter then builds the empirical argument in four parts. First, I discuss the opportunity structure of Sunflower County and why upward mobility might require a permanent departure from it. Second, I explore ways in which the difficulty of imagining or envisioning mobility within this opportunity structure inhibit effective planning for upward aspirants. Third, I examine the emotional and social costs that this transition incurs for students committed to leaving. Finally, I describe the intersectional challenges that rural youth of color experience when they enter into elite, predominately white spaces. The chapter concludes with a discussion of implications for policy and theorizing on social mobility.

Race, Space, and Mobility

Social and economic mobility in the United States are entangled with the spatial context in which people complete their education and transition to adulthood and work. Recent scholarship on mobility has confirmed that mobility has been on the decline as inequalities in American society widen. In rural America, this decline is part of a long process of economic transformation that has privileged mechanized labor, shedding countless jobs in the process. At the same time, the local institutions which structure mobility opportunities have failed to provide

new avenues for employment that permit upward mobility. These conditions are particularly acute in Deep South communities like Sunflower County, where decades of racial animus and plantation economies have been significant influences on place-based institutions at the center of this process. In their work on Sunflower County, social psychologist John Dollard (1937) and cultural anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (1939) document rigid class systems that are further separated by race. The persistence of this class and caste system necessitates an analysis of mobility and its interaction with local institutions.

The Spatial Concentration of Immobility

Inequality in the US has increased in recent decades while rates of social and economic mobility have decreased. This rise in social immobility is spatially clustered – large sections of the Deep South, Appalachia, and other regions marked by persistent poverty have some of the lowest rates of upward mobility for children born in poverty. Analysis by Chetty and Hendren (2018a) find that children from a place like the Mississippi Delta who are born into the bottom income quintile have around a 5% chance of making it to the top quintile. For the vast majority of children in these counties, breaking into the upper ranks of the middle class is less likely than dropping out of high school or experiencing incarceration. Chetty and Hendren (2018b) identify neighborhood and county casual effects in these processes, suggesting that endogenous properties of the neighborhood and community are major drivers of this form of inequality. Neighborhood effects are not the only mechanism at work. Chetty et al. (2018) note that these patterns of mobility also intersect with racial and ethnic inequalities; Black Americans have lower rates of upward mobility and higher rates of downward mobility than White Americans, even for children growing up in the same neighborhood. Historically, work on poverty and mobility has concentrated on descriptions of urban poverty, largely due to the influence of

Wilson's (1987) pathbreaking work on the urban underclass. While recent literature in the social sciences and popular press has brought renewed attention to question of inequality, mobility, and poverty in rural America, much of this work has concentrated on the de-industrialized regions of the Rust Belt and the Upper Midwest (Vance, 2016; Cramer 2016). Race and inequality in the rural South remain understudied.

Broader research on mobility (measured in terms of intergenerational income growth and occupational status attainment) confirms that this social rigidity is widespread. In their classic work on stratification and the American occupation structure, Blau and Duncan (1967, 405) note that the cumulative disadvantages faced by Black Americans places additional constraints on opportunities for advancement. These effects are true even when comparing White and Black children who grow up in the same neighborhoods. These findings have been consistent for later cohorts, especially among Black Americans who live in highly segregated contexts (Hout, 1984; Ruef & Grigoryeva, 2018). Recent work by Chetty et al. (2018) find that Black Americans have lower rates of intergenerational mobility than other racial or ethnic groups. Importantly, they also find that family and individual level factors such as family structure, education, net worth, and measured ability do not account for these racial differences, pointing to social structure and community-level factors as plausible explanations. These disadvantages have deep roots; analysis by O'Connell (2012) finds that contemporary rates of inequality, poverty, and mobility are associated with the concentration of slave populations in 1860.

Automation and Depopulation

Depopulation – the persistent loss of population without obvious prospects for growth – has been a hallmark of demographic change in rural America. After post-War peaks in the 1950s, nearly half of counties in the United States have persistently lost population due to outmigration

and falling fertility rates. Accounts of this population shift often focus on structural variables such as automation and natural decreases in fertility as incomes rise (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). The impact of automation on rural populations and agriculture is significant; an oft-quoted truism is that one tractor could perform the labor of hundreds of manual workers. The mechanization of agriculture accelerated after World War II-era metal shortages ended, resulting in the abrupt displacement of millions of agricultural workers. These structural transformations had dramatic impacts on the lives of Black Southerners. Historian Donald Holley rosily describes the mechanization of agriculture in the United States as a second emancipation: "The transition from handpicking to machine picking resulted in enormous improvements in the lives of everyone who depended on cotton for a living" (2001: xiii). This optimism ignores the extent to which the social structures in place were ill-prepared to accommodate displaced agricultural workers.

Both Powdermaker (1939) and Dollard (1937), the two social scientists who studied Sunflower County in the 1930s, briefly noted the pending arrival of mechanization; both works were published at the end of American agriculture's reliance on manual labor. Dollard's predictions foreshadow the pattern of outmigration that would take place in the decades following his study (Dollard's comments on this issue are reproduced in their entirety as they capture both the scale of the problem of mechanization and the profound inability of Jim Crow-era White analysts to conceive of a future in which Black Americans could remain in the South as anything other than manual laborers):

> There is question, of course, of the increased use of mechanical power which may replace both Negro and White tenant. On some plantations, tractors are being used

> increasingly. There is also the threat of a machine for picking cotton. This is the crucial threat since it is the picking of the cotton rather than the planting or cultivating of it which makes the masses of Negroes indispensable. If this invention should prove practicable and be wildly adopted, the South would be faced with a radically new problem as regards the Negro. We might expect then an efflorescence of fantasies of colonizing the Negroes in Africa, or of putting them in a separate state. The colonization fantasy occurred occasionally in the minds of [Sunflower County residents]. Another possibility, of course, is the more even distribution of Negroes throughout the country, should they be needed again in the high-speed industrial machine of the North. While this would solve some of the problems of the South, it would certainly raise new ones in the North and make the American race problem a national instead of regional issue (131).

While Dollard looks to structural shifts awaiting Sunflower County, Powdermaker looks back at the status quo's roots in slavery; her analysis highlights the durability of the plantation mode of production and hints at the social tension mechanization would bring:

> "After freedom" there was still cotton to be planted, cultivated, and picked. There were still plantations. And there was a set of *mores* so strongly entrenched that not even a war could dislodge them. The Negro was still the worker. The White man, much poorer than before, still made the decisions. Landlords who had sufficient wealth after the Civil War to continue as planters, translated the responsibility for slaves to the responsibility for tenants. Sometimes a man's

> tenants were the same Negroes who had formerly been his slaves. Many slaves merely transferred their dependence from master to landlord. Money still played only a small part in their dealings. Nevertheless, the Negro was free. He had acquired the right to move, even though he has not always been able to exercise that right (80).

An important implication of this study is that large scale automation has already had profound impacts on American society and patterns of inequality. As concerns over deindustrialization and automation begin to reshape the Rust Belt and urban areas, understanding the consequences of rural automation will have important implications for inequality in the United States. In addition, the processes of automation and population decline have had dramatic impact on both the trajectories of Black Americans who opted into urbanization and the communities they left behind. These impacts are explored in detail below.

Social and Geographic Mobility

The Great Migration, the movement of Black Americans from the South to the rest of the country that began in the 1920s, is the most significant and transformative event in the reshaping of the rural South's population and community structure. While the Great Migration is often framed as the movement of Black Americans to communities of greater opportunity, analysis of migrants' outcomes yields mixed evidence. Quantitative studies in demography and sociology provide a less optimistic evaluation and have found little evidence that migration improved rural Black migrants' socio-economic outcomes. Analysis by Eichenlaub, Tolnay, and Alexander (2010) find no evidence that migrants from the South fared better in terms of income,

educational attainment, or employment than Black Americans who remained in the South or who migrated within the South. These patterns are found across a range of migration destinations. Tolnay and Eichenlaub (2006) find no advantage for migrants who move to the West rather than the industrial Northeast. Conditions for Black Americans were not improved by increased shares of Black Americans in urban populations; community size had no impact on occupational outcome (Tolnay, 2001), and the earliest cohorts of migrants were relegated to the "worst" neighborhoods in destination cities (Tolnay, Crowder, & Adelman, 2000). Finally, Black American migration to Northern cities is associated with an increase in racial disparities in incarceration rates; Black and immigrant incarceration rates increased during the Great Migration, net of any observed increases in crime (Muller, 2012).

Outcomes for the second generation of emigrants from the South are similarly ambiguous. Despite conventional understandings of migration as a means to improve opportunities for children, Alexander et al. (2017) find only modest gains for the children of migrants relative to their peers in the South. The lack of convincing evidence for positive economic outcomes associated with the Great Migration is compounded by a corresponding lack of clear analysis of social outcomes within the social sciences (Tolnay, 2003). Threats of impending violence, such as those described in Wilkerson (2010) point to a potential external driver of outmigration: the implicit desires of the rural South's White power elite. Mechanization threatened to create a class of unemployed and underemployed agricultural workers just as frustration with Jim Crow was coming to head and the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to take form. The puzzle reflected in the above literature suggests that the Great Migration and subsequent barriers to the South's economic and social development can be understood as an attempt by rural White power elites to maintain control over the rural South.

In short, geographic mobility has rarely been an effective solution for Black Americans in the rural South seeking to find better economic opportunities elsewhere; these trends have persisted to the present. Black Americans, and Black men in particular, have the lowest returns from internal migration in the United States (Leibbrand, 2020).

Education in an Immobile Context

Education ought to be the central institution through which mobility is facilitated – William Winter, a moderate governor of Mississippi in the 1980s, has remarked that the only road out of poverty goes by the schoolhouse (Weber, 2015). However, scholars of education have long noted that schools often serve other functions. They have been identified as reproducing the existing structure of the labor market in a capitalist framework (Bowles & Gintis, 1972), socializing students to inhabit their parents' class position and social norms (Willis, 1977), and producing "worker-learners" who defer to authority once they enter the labor market (Golann, 2015). Despite the limiting role that schools play in social reproduction, educational attainment remains the strongest predictor of earnings and quality of life for adults. The role of educational institutions in places like Sunflower County is thus of utmost important to addressing patterns of persistent poverty and immobility.

The schools in places like Sunflower County, however, have rarely provided opportunities for upward mobility. Dollard's analysis of education in Sunflower County highlights their role in providing stratified education: a liberal-arts curriculum for White residents and a vocational education for Black residents (1937:191). Powdermaker noted that even the few Black Southerners who were able to succeed in education and graduate from college felt a greater sense of alienation; their educational achievements highlighted the structural discrimination they faced without providing a means to ameliorate or sidestep those

barriers (1939:307). Contemporary schools in Sunflower County, which are discussed in more detail below, continued to suffer from underinvestment, disinvestment, and competition from private schools founded in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. These "segregation academies," many of which received public funds in their first few years of operation, have led to the complete re-segregation of education in Sunflower County today (Bolton, 2005; Crespino, 2007; Carr, 2012).

Children growing up in Sunflower County are faced with bleak prospects: the economy of the county has failed to provide adequate jobs for working- and middle-class Black residents for decades, forcing students to choose between stagnation or having to uproot themselves and seek better fortunes elsewhere.

The Case

This project draws on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Sunflower County, a county located in the Mississippi Delta region. The region has long been plagued by persistent poverty, depopulation, and a lack of economic progress as the region's dominant agricultural industry mechanized and shed the majority of jobs that it offered. Sunflower County has a population of around 25,000 according to 2017 ACS estimates. About 10,000 live in the largest town and county seat. The majority of the remaining population are clustered in a half dozen small towns that orbit the county seat, with an additional few thousand living in unincorporated parts of the county. The population of Sunflower County has fallen by more than half since its high in the 1930s when the population reached nearly 70,000. The county's population is 70% black and 25% white non-Hispanic with a small number of Asian and Hispanic families.

A third of Sunflower County residents live in poverty, and half of that number live in deep poverty (household incomes less than half of the federal poverty line). Children who grow

up in poverty there have a difficult time improving their socio-economic condition as adults; the county has some of the lowest economic mobility rates in the country (Chetty & Hendren, 2018). Historically, agriculture was the primary source of employment and the driver of the regional economy. An influential US Senator who served from the 1940s through the 1970s owned a 10,000-acre plantation in the middle of the county; at one time the plantation employed hundreds of tenant farmers, dozens of managers, and two doctors. Today, the town that includes the plantation has roughly 100 people (the son of this Senator quipped that they try to round up at least 100 people every Census to prevent the town from losing its charter). Today the county has almost no manufacturing jobs. A lawnmower plant closed in the 1990s and the largest manufacturer today is a small brick factory. Aside from hospitals, schools, and public administration, the largest employer in the county is a warehouse for a chain of dollar stores.

The pressure to get to a college – any college – is strong for students at the Leadership Institute. Their academic profiles and ACT scores are comparable to the rest of their peers. Most students have Bs and Cs in class, with a smattering of A and B students and students struggling to pass classes. The highest ACT score in the group is a 26, but some of the sophomores and juniors in the program are working to get their scores up from 13 or 14 (the national average is 20.8 and the state average is 18.6. Public universities in Mississippi will admit students with a 16 and a high GPA, though for most students an 18 is the minimum score in practice). Many students in such an environment are statistically unlikely to attend college, even if they can boost their scores over the threshold. Ironically, students who are otherwise unlikely to attend college but that *do* enroll disproportionately benefit from a college degree in terms of income (Brand & Xie, 2010).

For the past two years I have worked with the Institute as a chess coach, literacy class instructor, substitute bus driver, and general volunteer for the organization. During the summer I taught a sociology class on site; students received credit from a nearby liberal arts college. I chaperoned visits to more than a dozen colleges and universities around the country, including small historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), large public universities, and small, private predominantly white institutions (PWIs). As part of my involvement with the Leadership Institute, I have developed close relationships with around a dozen high school students who are regular attendees. I have been able to get to know their families, help with college and summer program applications, attend church and family events, and generally pass time with them as a friend and mentor. While the Leadership Institute is open to any student in the area, all of the students who participate are eligible for Pell Grants. These students are already committed to the idea of college as a pathway out of poverty; thus, their experiences represent the 'best case' scenario for students from Sunflower County who proactively want to move up the economic ladder. In addition to this core group of students, I also conducted in-depth interviews with staff and alumni of the Institute to provide additional insights into the experiences of high school graduates and college students from Sunflower County.

The Opportunity Structure of Sunflower County

Rain, hail, snow, fog. These are all examples of _____ on earth.

A. Water

B. Soil

C. Air

D. Sun

Midway through the fall semester Jeremy hunched over a Chromebook at the Leadership Institute working on homework for his 9th grade earth sciences class. Most of the homework assigned by the school district in Sunflower County (a recent consolidation of the county seat's city district and the county district) takes place online on a website called USA Test Prep. The name and the medium are indicative of what happens at Jeremy and his classmate's school – curricula are overwhelmingly focused on standardized testing and rely on material prepared by third parties. Nearby school districts suffer from chronic teacher shortages, and some schools in the Delta have shifted to online instruction for core classes like math and English – classrooms of students follow along with a teacher on a TV screen who is simultaneously lecturing to hundreds of students in similarly under resourced schools (Wright & Davis, 2019).

Technology has not universally worked to mitigate the problems caused by funding shortages and teacher vacancies – at the table next to Jeremy, Kimberly and Brayley are talking about how much they hate spending time in the gym of their small-town high school. Whenever the school cannot find a substitute teacher for one of their classes, the class spends that period in the gym instead. Brayley spent a whole week of biology in the gym recently (public school students in Mississippi are required to pass a state test in biology in order to graduate). The gym is not a comfortable place, much less an appropriate place for students to self-study. The bright lights give Kimberley migraines, and Brayley was recently assaulted by other students. A coach saw the fight and suggested that Brayley hang out in the teachers' lounge instead.

Previous work on poverty and mobility in rural America has typically conceptualized the "opportunity structure" of a rural place to encompass the network of job opportunities, its attendant opportunities for income gain, and the ways in which these features respond to broader economic restructuring (Tickameyer and Duncan, 1990:68). A more nuanced analysis of the

opportunity structure in Sunflower County identifies the importance of expanding that conceptualization to not only the education opportunities of a place, but the social context in which they are embedded as well. The educational system not only provides the human capital necessary to be matched with and succeed in an employment opportunity but also the cultural and social capital required to navigate changing economic conditions. The social context in which these institutions are embedded play a key role in helping young people identify goals for themselves and articulate how those goals might be achieved.

Down the road in the county seat, the county's larger high school struggles with similar issues. The school consists of several buildings connected by covered walkways, and flooding is a common problem. During the Delta's frequent heavy rains, the walkways (and even some of the classrooms) become waterlogged and unusable. One day last spring I sat with Amanda and Cierra, two seniors at the school, as they showed me a Snapchat that had been circulating among their friend group – someone had added a graphic of a surfboard under images of students wading through the waters to get to their next class. The school's Advanced Placement Environmental Science class, intended to offer college-level work, recently spent a few days of class time digging a drainage ditch to combat the flooding.

The conditions of the schools in Sunflower County also struggle from competition with a pair of private schools founded in the 1960s as "segregation academies" (Carr 2012; Champagne 1973). These predominately white, exclusive schools have resulted in a net decline in funding to the public schools because of lost enrollment and a general antipathy towards public education from the county's small but wealthy White population. The segregation academies are also reflective of a deeper social segregation in the county – the county was the site of some of the Civil Rights Era's most violent resistance by white conservatives (Asch 2011; Crespino 2009;

Moye 2006). Towns in Sunflower County are still segregated, often by literal train tracks, and opportunities for cross-racial social interaction are nearly non-existent. This history of segregation and White supremacy has resulted in form of rural poverty and immobility markedly different from rural poverty in majority White contexts. The legacy of the plantation system created a persistent norm of rural poverty for those who did not migrate out to urban centers (Tickameyer & Duncan, 1990: 72) and in which local institutions where calibrated to preserve a racial order in which Black Americans were kept subordinate to White landowners (Stein 1960:153).

On New Year's Eve, a balmy Tuesday with temperatures reaching the high 60s, I drove Cierra and Amanda to meet some of their friends from the Leadership Institute for lunch at a Mexican restaurant (the only restaurant in town). Cierra and Amanda are both ambitious and have an astute sense of what the world outside of Sunflower County has to offer them. When I first met Cierra and Amanda, they were sitting together at the Leadership Institute, getting settled in for the first day of a new semester. Amanda was holding a book of lectures by Michel Foucault – she had read *Discipline and Punish* while taking a college class that previous summer and the instructor had given it to her as a gift. Cierra was gushing about BTS, a K-pop group she had discovered while at a summer camp at a prestigious boarding school in New England – she had had roommates from around the world who had turned her on to a broader range of culture and lifestyles than she had ever been exposed to in Sunflower County. Both are seniors at the city high school and are actively working on college applications – Amanda hopes to attend a prestigious HBCU (historically Black college or university) in Atlanta and Cierra has her eye on a regional university a few hours south. As we drove to lunch that day, I asked them what "success" might mean to them and to other students at their school.

Amanda: We've got a lack of opportunities, first of all. We don't see people being, like, socially mobile, doing big things.

Cierra: Yeah like, being successful. There's a mixed perception of – like, 'What is success?'

Author: Ok, so who are the most successful adults who live here?

Amanda: Oh, the Byalls.

Cierra: Byalls.

The Byalls own a chain of funeral homes around the Mississippi Delta and are the wealthiest Black family in town. Like many rural areas, it has become increasingly difficult for residents of Sunflower County to find jobs that meet the basic needs of their families (Thiede, Lichter, & Slack, 2018). These disadvantages are compounded by the declining quality of rural education, which works with fewer resources than suburban and urban education systems (Roscigno & Crowle, 2001). There are relatively few jobs in the county that require a college degree – my respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the only graduates in their lives were their teachers. Only two respondents had college-educated parents; one was a teacher and the other had a job at a nearby hospital that does not require her degree. While the economy of the Delta is primarily understood in terms of agriculture, farming offers almost no employment opportunities aside from occasional seasonal work driving trucks. Fewer than 2% of the county's population is employed by farms, most of them White. While the wealthiest people in the county

are the planters, the mechanization of agriculture and the emergence of large, corporate farming operations has relegated agriculture to a source of passive income for a handful of families that have inherited plantation estates. Most people in the county's only interaction with farming occurs when the pesticides sprayed by crop-dusters each spring drift over the two-lane highways that bisect fields of corn, cotton, and rice. Thus, occasional success stories like a family-owned funeral empire are often the most visible signs of "success" for students in the region.

An analysis of the weak opportunity structure for young people in Sunflower County emerged at a recent community meeting that was organized in response to a spate of murders that had occurred during the Christmas holiday. Despite the county's relatively small population, its homicide rate is comparable to Memphis, Jackson, and other nearby cities. The meeting took place in the packed community space of a local museum, and comments from the public largely centered on one topic – the lack of opportunities for young people. There's nothing for kids to do after school, no opportunities for young adults once they leave high school. Young people, especially young men, are often attracted instead to cadet branches of big city gangs that have taken root in the county. The sheriff, a well-respected Black man and the county's top criminal justice official, leaned back in his chair as he took all the comments in. "There's that African proverb about taking a village to raise a child," he said in his closing comments, "and we've got to learn to be a village again."

Imagining Mobility

On Christmas Eve, a week before I had lunch with Cierra and Amanda, I dropped by the apartment where Deshawn lives with his parents, four siblings, a second cousin that he calls "grandma," and an uncle. The apartment is cramped – it has just two bedrooms that are occupied by Deshawn's grandma and uncle, leaving his immediate family of seven to spread out in the

small living room. His mom and stepdad share an air mattress with their youngest son while Deshawn, his older brother, and two younger sisters find space on the three couches that surround the mattress. The apartment has only recently become this cramped – Deshawn's youngest sibling has a medical condition that required him to live in a children's hospital in a major city about two hours away, so he and Deshawn's parents had moved there for about a year. No one in the recently re-united family was working – Deshawn's parents had left behind decent jobs once their son was healthy enough to move back to Sunflower County, and Deshawn's grandmother had recently stopped working after her job cleaning at a local hospital started causing too much back pain. The only indication that it was nearly Christmas was a small Nativity set on the bookshelf in the living room. Deshawn's youngest brother sat on the linoleum tile floor playing with the superhero action figures he'd received from nurses at the children's hospital while the rest of the kids watched their dad play an NBA videogame on their small TV.

I took Deshawn to a Subway down the road for lunch to catch up and talk about his involvement with the Leadership Institute – like many young men in his cohort he had stopped coming in favor of sports. As an eighth grader, Deshawn is just starting to get a sense of what it might take to go to college and what might come next. As we sat in a booth by the window, he talked about what he might want to study – music. He's a talented freestyler and drummer for his church, but when pressed about possible career goals one day he demurs, not drawing a connection between studying and working in music. I asked what sort of job he might like to have one day, and he glanced out the window to the combination gas station and KFC across the street. "Work in a store, I guess," he said as he gestured to the gas station.

One of the greatest constraints that the local opportunity structure imposes college aspirants and others who want to imagine themselves as upwardly mobile are the available

reference points that inform their ambitions and make them feel possible. The students at the Leadership Institute (and in public schools in Sunflower County more generally) belong a group that Jack (2016) terms the "doubly disadvantaged" – students who suffer from both family poverty and poorly supported schools. This compounded disadvantage is an important dimension of their trajectories since it influences the intangible resources they need to transition to a new opportunity structure. Almost none of the parents or caregivers interviewed for this study had attended college – a handful had attended a few semesters of community college or completed one or two years at a local public HBCU. Not having parents or other adult influences with college experience plays a significant part in defining the aspirations of the students at the leadership institute. For families in rural communities, the combination of parent and teacher expectations and parent discussions of college are key predictors of students' own aspirations for their future (Byun et al, 2012). In Sunflower County, these expectations are inflected by the low rates of educational attainment of previous cohorts.

One of the factors that might prevent an otherwise qualified student from Sunflower County from attending college is the opaque admissions process. Early in the fall I sat with Amanda, a strong student and astute writer, and worked through a strategy for the essay she needed to write for schools that accepted the Common Application. The application essay genre is foreign to her – the idea of having a "hook," of crafting a compelling and empathetic narrative of her life and reflecting on her personal growth seem orthogonal to her immediate goals to double major in computer science and political science. In recent years, private consulting companies that charge thousands of dollars for application essay consulting have emerged to work with wealthy students (Quintana & McCoy, 2019), but students like Amanda struggle with the mechanics of a process that will have considerable influence over their life trajectory.

Mundane paperwork like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is also a barrier to students unfamiliar with this process. Kasey, the college advisor for the Leadership Institute, set aside a full afternoon in mid-October to fill out the FAFSA with the program's high school seniors. Taesha, a senior, came to the program that afternoon thinking that she had already completed it, when in reality all she had done was create an account. The other seniors struggled to get past that point – no one's parent or legal guardians had been able to come, and no one had the numerous tax documents, Social Security numbers, and other bits of paperwork necessary to fill out the required forms to make college remotely affordable.

Students' ambitions are often influenced by other key figures in their lives. Frank, a high school senior, struggles in school after spending his sophomore year in the hospital fighting cancer. He spent much of last fall working with Kasey, the college coach at the Leadership Institute, to develop realistic goals for after graduation. In a draft application he's decided to indicate an interest in psychology, despite having no experience with the field:

Kasey: Why do you want to study psychology?

Frank: I want to work with kids.

Kasey: Ok, so what does that have to do with psychology? You could put down that you want to be a social worker. Or what about a pediatric nurse?

Frank stares silently at the computer in front of him. He made a 14 on the ACT so his only viable options at this stage are two nearby community colleges and a private HBCU two hours away

that doesn't require test scores. He enjoys the idea of nursing – when he was actively fighting his cancer, he liked his nurses a lot and saw them working with other kids. We talk about the pathway for nurses, but the alphabet soup of credentials quickly overwhelms him – CNA, LPN, RN, NP, PA. We try to emphasize that it's a good ladder to get on and that he can get off whenever he wants, but it's a lot of information for him to internalize. Someone makes a joke about male nurses, so I try to redirect the conversation – what about working with the elderly? Would that appeal to him? His grandfather can't walk now so he has nurses that help with day to day tasks – this provided another personal connection with someone who works in nursing.

Taesha, a senior at a different high school in the area was working on her applications with similar influences in mind. When she was in middle school a hip injury caused her to spend a semester at home, working with tutors from the school and a physical therapist. Her experience with physical therapy turned her on to a new career option, and she was actively applying to HBCUs that have physical therapy graduate programs. For most of the students in Sunflower County, the only college graduates in their lives are their teachers. While teaching is a stable and reliable job for many, funding shortages and the expanding role of Teach For America have diminished the image of teaching as a permanent job for locals. These challenges are compounded by Mississippi's chronically low salaries for full-time public-school teachers – teachers in the three adjacent states enjoy starting salaries thousands of dollars higher than their Mississippi counterparts. Taesha, whose mother is a middle school teacher, will qualify for a Pell Grant when she starts college next fall.

Other influences are not as helpful. Deshawn, the eighth grader who imagines himself "working at a store" one day, was one of the rising stars of the chess team at the Leadership Institute as a seventh grader. Initially a shy young man with a thick country accent, Deshawn

quickly caught on to the rules of the game and by the end of the year was teaching his friends how to play. He attended tournaments throughout the state and while he never won more than one or two matches, travelling and competing alongside more advanced students was transformative in terms of boosting his confidence and helping him articulate goals for himself. By the first few weeks of eighth grade, however, he had all but disappeared from the Leadership Institute because he had joined his school's basketball and football teams. School sports are a major competitor for the attention of the students (particularly the young men) at the Leadership Institute, and the costs often outweigh the benefits. One of Deshawn's chess teammates, ninth grader Jackson, had quit the Leadership Institute all together to prioritize making the varsity football team. Jackson's good friend RJ, another ninth grader, only continued to show up at the Leadership Institute because his mother makes him come.

Working with RJ can be a struggle. He attends a small, predominately white private school because he was expelled from the public middle school close to his house. He frequently comes to the Leadership Institute without homework and has decided to stop doing any work assigned by the Institute because of his commitments to football. "I'm not gonna be here when y'all do stuff anyway because of football. You'll be lucky if I'm here one day a week." The competition between sports and academics – both of which offer nominal promises of status attainment and success – is best embodied by a tenth grader named Jerrell. Jerrell made the front page of the county's weekly paper after making a 27 on the ACT – a score that would guarantee him admission and a healthy scholarship to any of the public universities in the state. Getting a score above 30 – a score which would make him competitive for most schools in the county - in the next few years would certainly be attainable. However, Jerrell is also a talented football player; the same newspaper story also highlighted his achievements as a wide receiver. His

commitments to football have been a source of contention with the staff of the Leadership Institute, who see his academic promise as a more reliable source of future opportunity.

On one of the handful of afternoons that he was able to come to the Leadership Institute after football season started, Kasey, the college advisor, caught him in the hallway. The other students at the Institute had been abuzz with stories from the past week's game between Sunflower County's two public high schools, a fierce rivalry. Jerrell had done well in the game but had also suffered a concussion and was benched for the next two weeks. With stories about chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in the news, the long-term implications of Jerrell's commitments to school and sports were a contentious subject:

> Kasey: Do you have recruiters looking out for you? Do you think you're good enough to play Division I? The NFL? What happens if that doesn't work out?
>
> Jerrell: I can do both [football and the Leadership Institute]…
>
> Kasey: Who's looking out for you at this point? Who's looking out for you?

Jerrell, RJ, Jackson, and Deshawn's decisions to prioritize football over academics, despite the risk of physical injury and brain damage, are indicative of what Wiley (1967) termed the "mobility trap." Mobility traps refer to situations in which strategies for upward mobility within a given social strata have the corollary effect of limiting upward mobility within broader society. This original formulation of the mobility trap was conceived as a feature of ethnic enclaves – prioritizing Mandarin proficiency and familiarly with traditional Chinese customs, for example, would facilitate status attainment within Chinatown, but the opportunity cost of doing so might

limit opportunities to attend a university in an English-language context. For students in Sunflower County, the "traps" are not the result of ethnic enclaves or racial segregation per se, but rather the ways in which the local opportunity structure has become detached from the wider economy. Sports offers reliable stories of upward mobility and improved social status for students from under-resourced schools, though in practice actual opportunities for upward mobility through athletic scholarships are vanishingly rare. Students are more likely to suffer concussions or other injuries, all while forgoing the chance to develop academic skills that have a more natural alignment with conventional pathways out of poverty.

For the children of Sunflower County, role models who can transmit the right cultural capital and help them navigate through the process of upward mobility are essential as they try to make their way out of a weakening opportunity structure. Sheena, an official with the school district and member of the Leadership Institute's advisory board, had a difficult childhood in Sunflower County. When Sheena was in high school, she did not have adults helping her navigate the transition to adulthood. She didn't take the ACT until mid-12th grade and did poorly because she hadn't been prepared. As a young single mother at the end of high school, she barely qualified for the local community college, flunked college algebra twice, and forgot about an online class she was taking. "Not having a mentor, not having anyone to, you know, guide me, I gave up and dropped out." She had her first child right out of high school and was pregnant when college started.

She talks about a teacher that used to take her home in twelfth grade. When the teacher saw the ramshackle house where she lived alone with her infant daughter, she asked in disbelief – "do you live here?" The next day the teacher asked if she'd filled out any scholarships and Sheena didn't even know what that meant. The teacher applied for a $500 PTA scholarship on

her behalf. Sheena says if she'd known about that sort of thing in 11th grade the options would have been much better – options like a Pell Grant would have covered most of the costs of community college.

A pastor at her church helped her get out of her funk and apply for an associate degree online. Then she did AmeriCorps through a local nonprofit where she met Debbie. Debbie quickly became a major figure in her life – she helped Sheena finish her BA online, then the nonprofit she worked for was able to provide support for a master's degree. She enrolled in a local public HBCU because she wanted to be on a real campus and be a part of a historically African American institution. "I went back to my little kid self – I never got a chance to experience college life." After finishing an MA in rural public policy with a 4.0 she immediately started working on her PhD because she knew she wouldn't go back if she took a break. Her PhD program in public policy is based at a different HBCU nearly two hours away – the drive was almost too much, but her supervisors at both her job and at her school provide flexibility to support her. They let her leave early, watch her youngest son, and are flexible about course requirements.

People like Debbie have played a transformative role in helping Sheena assert control of her life and build a middle-class life for her three children. "I know a lot about [Debbie], I keep up with her, she's like my mom. She was my star – she was the first person that poured into my life." Not having mentors is a common problem for the students in the school district Sheena works for. "Kids don't have enough people to motivate them to strive and do their best. The [Leadership Institute] does that with them but they only get a very small percentage of the students in our district." There's a great need for mentors like Debbie in the county. "I just needed someone to say, 'You can do this, and this is the way to do it.'" She talks about the way

that the public high school passes out scholarship information – it's not enough to just distribute that sort of information and act like that's enough. Her children have someone at home or at the Leadership Institute who can help her navigate that process, but someone with a rougher home life might as well not even get that information. Without knowing ways and strategies to move up and move out, poor children in Sunflower County get caught up in the reproduction of poverty that grips their community.

The Costs of Leaving Home

Each week the students at the Leadership Institute dedicate one of their afternoon sessions to working with Kasey, the college advisor on staff. One rainy November afternoon Kasey was running late so I kept the group occupied for a few moments by checking in with the seniors about their college application process. As Kasey walked in, I ask them how they were all feeling, to which Amanda responded, "I *wish* we'd talk about our feelings." Hearing this, Kasey paused her planned agenda on filling out the Common Application to host a short, five-minute focus group on what people in the room were worried about. By far the biggest concerns were money and convincing parents to let them consider colleges outside of the Mississippi Delta. For the most part, the seniors in the room just felt enormous pressure. Amanda, in particular, was struggling with what might happen in the next few months. She had already been accepted to a prestigious HBCU in Atlanta that was her dream school, but she was skeptical that she would qualify for their merit scholarships and her parents were adamant that Atlanta was too far away. Kasey hoped that she could convince Amanda's parents over time:

Kasey: Do I need to go talk to them? I will.

Amanda: Ms. Kasey, my mom said you can come talk if you want but she's just gonna hurt your feelings.

Students who recognize the limited opportunities available to them at home and who seek to navigate the process to get into a new opportunity structure often find themselves having to pay unexpected costs as they try to move out and up. Even the direct costs of college can feel overwhelming – Kasey is an alumna of the Atlanta HBCU that Amanda hopes to attend but had to finance her way through her undergraduate degree with student loans. While her loan payments are manageable, she and the other staff of the Leadership Institute are adamant that none of their seniors should pay for college. The stress of paying for college is felt less acutely by white students from more privileged backgrounds; even when they have to take out loans themselves, their inherited cultural capital makes it easier for them to trust that "things will work out" (McCabe & Jackson, 2019). The mental labor imposed on students like Amanda represents an added cost to her upward ambitions.

Beyond the economic calculus of higher education, the largest cost is emotional – students are navigating a process that will shape the trajectory of their adult lives, and they are surrounded by the potential consequences of not making that process work: persistent poverty, limited job opportunities, and local institutions shaped by white supremacy. A few weeks after Amanda's call to talk about feelings, I sat next to Cierra in the seniors' lounge of the Leadership Institute to check in on an essay she was writing. She turned to me to ask, "Am I a bad student?" Caught off guard, I said, "Of course not" and asked if she wanted me to look at a draft of her essay, the long essay she needed to write for the Common Application. As she struggled to look through her Google Drive for the most recent draft she burst into tears. Amanda immediately

walked over, put her arm around Cierra, and led her into the empty classroom next door. Cierra was usually the effusive, preternaturally happy counterpart to the more serious, business-minded Amanda, but the weight of the college application process was starting to catch up with her. She had her sights set on a small Appalachian college that offered full tuition scholarships to every admitted student. The Leadership Institute had had success sending students there in the past – with a Pell Grant, Cierra's cost of attendance would essentially be $0. She was one point short on the ACT for a reasonable chance of admission and had just retaken it the weekend prior. In an unfortunate irony, Cierra's organization and advance preparation had unintended consequences; she received her rejection letter from the college just days before getting her ACT score back – the score that she would have needed to be admitted. While Kasey and others encouraged her to follow up with the college, Cierra seemed ambivalent; she had heard good things about a regional university about four hours south, and it was closer to family.

Connections to family networks present another cost of pursuing upward mobility in a place like Sunflower County. Many of the students I worked with during this research expressed regret at the prospect of having to leave home permanently – there are few jobs for college graduates in Sunflower County, so pursuing upward mobility via higher education carries the implication that they will be permanently relocating to more advantaged areas away from family. This aspect of the mobility pathway often influences how students conceptualize their ambitions for the future. Shaunda is a senior and a relatively recent participant at the Leadership Institute; her grades are strong, but she only took the ACT once and never had any sort of coaching or practice. Her score, a 15, means that her only options for higher education next year are the state's community colleges unless she takes the ACT again soon. Shaunda thinks she would be a good teacher one day, and Kasey wanted her to think more aggressively about her future plans.

Shaunda's mother wants her to stay close to home and go to Sunflower County Community College, a small two-year school just down the road.

Kasey: "What is your goal Shaunda? What do you want to do?"

Long pause

Kasey: "You want to be a math teacher? What's your main reason for wanting to go to community college?"

Shaunda: "Well my mom, she be telling me she wants me close to home. My sister went to [the community college down the road] for a bit…my other sister went there too until she got kicked out for fighting.

Kasey: So, do you think it's better for you to stay close to home? Do you think home provides, like, that positive attitude where you're gonna grow and be nurtured? It's just a real, honest conversation you need to have. Being close to home for some people, it's not good. You're still gonna be at home, stuck in your same old ways, your same environment, and you don't become successful.

Shaunda: I know, like I want to stay on campus but be close to home, [my mother] like, you need to be close to home and I don't have to, you know, transportation gonna be better, I ain't gotta drive that far.

Kasey: Being close to home…girl we're gonna have to have a long talk, me and you.

Shaunda: No, you gonna have to talk to my mom, that's what you're gonna have to do.

Kasey: I will talk to your parents if that's what they want. What are you grades like?

Shaunda: All As and one B.

Kasey: You don't have to go to community college. It's for people who need the bridge…who may not be able to survive at university right off the bat. Those two years – I'm not putting this on you, but – those two years, you could end up in a relationship. You could end up married, having children – you won't want to go back to school – or you could end up pregnant, or in an accident. Anything could happen and you could be knocked off your path. All things that could be avoided if you just started at university. All those things could happen at university but at least you'd be a person – you'd be in a place, well, it's a lot. We love our parents, we do – our parents can't live for us. They can't go to work for us. We're gonna have to figure out what you want your path to be.

Kasey's ends the conversation by asking Shaunda to sketch out a six-year plan for your life – at the very least, Kasey wants Shaunda to consider a community college a little further away from home. Kasey's concerns about CDCCC, which are shared by the other staff of the Leadership Institute, do not center on issues of academic quality or prestige but its embeddedness in Sunflower County – its strongest ties are to the social networks and opportunity structure that has already failed to uplift Shaunda's mother or her sisters. This sort of cautionary tale is indicative

of the ways in which disadvantaged students are taught about college; rather than highlighting the advantages of higher education, students are subjected to dire warnings about the failure to attend (Rondini, 2018). By cultivating an attitude of fear with regards to higher education, the concrete reality of life after high school becomes difficult to imagine beyond simply "go to college." The prospect of staying closer to home, though it comes with the aforementioned warnings, is at least easier to envision. Later in the semester, Shaunda reveals another ambition of hers – to become a nurse, at least an LPN or a CNA. She confides that she wants to be able to take of her mother as she ages and sees studying nursing as a way to do that.

Stories like Amanda's, Cierra's, and Shaunda's highlight the complex social dimensions of upward mobility that students from opportunity structures like this one must grabble with. Philosopher Jennifer Morton frames these as ethical costs, insofar as they determine how people will find value and meaning in their lives (2019). The direct and economic costs of upward mobility can be reasoned away; the opportunity costs of four years of school and a moderate amount of debt are offset by higher wages down the road. However, the economic logic of upward mobility cannot as easily account for the social and emotional costs that come with migrating from one milieu to another. Families like Shaunda's have close-knit ties that enable them to make ends meet – extended families in these contexts are often important sources of financial and emotional support (Stack 1974). These ethical costs are disproportionately borne by students from disadvantaged backgrounds – upward mobility would put them in an economic strata and cultural context that comes with social distance from the life they left behind.

The Experience of Rural Black Aspirers in Elite Spaces

Students like those at the Leadership Institute are in a difficult situation. They have bought into the idea of higher education and want to be upwardly mobile but recognize that the

opportunity structure in which they are embedded has little to offer them. They have navigated the opaque process of making higher education work and started to grapple with the unseen costs that their more privileged peers will avoid. However, even students from places like Sunflower County that take steps to move up the social ladder often end up in spaces that do not fully welcome them because of their racial and rural identities.

These negative experiences often begin close to home. Taesha, the aspiring physical therapist, lives in a small town in Sunflower County but was able to transfer to a larger, better high school in the next county over. Her new high school is across the street from a regional university, and the student body has much more to offer than the smaller high school she's zoned for, but the transition has not always been easy. The high school is the product of the consolidation of two high schools that were forced to merge as part of a decades-long school integration court case; prior to Taesha's tenth grade year, the city had one all-black high school and one that was half white and half black. While Taesha enjoys being able to take advanced classes like Biology II and Sports Medicine, she acknowledges that the rapid integration has created some tension. "Yeah I've heard some slick comments, I have," she reports. The older teachers are "stuck in their ways" and do not like that there are so many black kids at 'their school.' For example, she feels that the librarian is overly suspicious of and strict with the black students.

Asher, who lives down the road from Taesha and also transferred to the same high school, had a much worse experience:

> I was in gym and this white boy came up to me and said, 'what's up my n---a' and I said 'don't call me that again,' but he did. I said, 'really, stop calling me that,' and I thought I

was gonna have to do something. He said it again and tried to fight me – he called me it with the 'er.' He knew he was being mean, he was trying to start something.

His teachers had sort of a clumsy view of the word – they treated Black students and White students using the word as equivalent forms of cursing. He was there for the second year they were integrated and could see the tension; a lot of the teachers didn't like the 'new' kids and thought they were ruining its reputation. While there he didn't make any white friends and decided by Christmas break that he wanted to transfer back to Sunflower County. Even though his original high school did not have nearly as many academic opportunities, he appreciates the community feel at the smaller, all-black high school.

Students at the Leadership Institute try to make up the gap in academic preparation and cultural capital by enrolling in competitive summer programs around the country – in recent years students have spent parts of their summer at Ivy League schools and elite boarding high schools in the Northeast. These experiences present a stark contrast with the learning environment that Sunflower County students are acquainted with – the Gothic architecture and cloistered campuses evoke comparisons with Harry Potter. Sunflower County students carry with them both rural and black identities which often provoke uncomfortable reactions from their more privileged classmates. In many cases, these encounters are not motivated by explicit racial animus, but White students in elite settings often project assumptions about class onto their non-white peers (Warnock, 2019). Cierra and Amanda recalled a couple moments from their past summers that reminded them how Mississippi is perceived:

Cierra: Oh my God, at Andover – there was that dude…

Amanda: What was his name, “Brick”?

Cierra: Brick. He kinda looked like [one of our teachers here] …. He was riding his bike, and he was
like, they don’t have bikes in Mississippi, do they?

Amanda: I don’t know what his point was.

Cierra: But people out there, they’d make comments like ‘oh, I never met somebody…’

Amanda: It was like curiosity

Cierra: Until I got to one of my first classes at Yale, there was a dude named Ethan, and he was like really political, and he liked to talk about – when I said I was from Mississippi, he went and did all this reading and…this was when the same sex marriage thing was going on and he said “Oh well you can discriminate against people there, you can deny people services still. That’s so backwards.” He was a talker. He was oozing confidence.

Encounters like this routinely create burdens for students of color alone – elite college campuses routinely fail to foster cross-racial interactions that are meaningful for white students, allowing them to persist in individualistic thinking about the world and its purported meritocracies (Byrd,

2017). Learning to work with students like Ethan and Brick is an added challenge of being in an elite space which comes with the added pressure of adopting a "cleft habitus" (Lee & Kramer, 2013). As they struggled to adopt to a new set of norms and expectations at places like Yale and Andover, they also had to preserve the sense of identity that they derived from their lives in Sunflower County. In the long run, learning to transition to a new "context-specific habitus" (Cornelissen 2016) diminishes the ability of students like Amanda and Cierra to serve as role models and mentors

Asher, the tenth grade who tried to transfer to a larger high school, had a more negative experience at a program at a prestigious boarding school in Massachusetts:

> Me and couple guys, we were celebrating somebody's birthday and we went to a restaurant that was downtown, we had to walk there. One of the guys had a couple friends that they invited out and they kept calling me a n----r and we had to fight. I didn't get caught.

The summer was uncomfortable for financial reasons as well. The Leadership Institute ensured that all its students had scholarships for these programs and covered transportation costs, but students are responsible for their own incidental expenses. Asher brought $120 in cash for the summer to cover incidental meals and souvenirs, but no one told him that he was responsible for buying textbooks. The book required for his psychology class alone cost more than $100, leaving him cash strapped for the six weeks he was there. Too embarrassed to tell his friends and the staff at the Leadership Institute that he was short on money, he told them instead that he had lost his wallet in the airport but had found it at the lost and found on his way home. A few months

later, he was surprised with a bill for $80 for the laundry service he had used at during the summer program; no one had told him it was not covered by his scholarship.

Despite not yet enrolling in college (and indeed, despite taking the steps to make that transition more likely), students like Taesha, Cierra, Amanda, and Asher have already encountered the ways in which their rural and black identities are a source of marginalization in elite spaces.

Discussion and Implications

Tamika works at the Leadership Institute as a part time intern. She is originally from Sunflower County and participated in the Leadership Institute for five years. Her journey through the Sunflower County opportunity structure, to college, then back again after just one year is illustrative of the ways in which upward mobility from a low-mobility context is so difficult.

A tall, athletically built 20-year-old woman, Tamika wears her hair pushed back from her face with a headband. She wears glasses and has a sly sense of humor. She lives with her parents – she's the baby of the family with three older siblings in their 30s. High school was a hard time in terms of trying to find herself. She identifies as queer, but her parents don't know and would react poorly if they find out. In general, she doesn't like labels – "I'm just Tamika and I like what I like." She sees herself in many of the middle school students at the Leadership Institute – she was shy and anxious about figuring things out: "That timid personality that they have – I used to have that at that age." When she was younger, she was afraid that what she said could get back to the wrong people. "Now I'm a little spicy. I'm glad I came back to the Leadership Institute so I could see how they bloom."

She started attending a small religious school that was all Black after a childhood friend transferred and mentioned it to her mom. Her mom talked it up to her and made it sound like it

would be this big, amazing place. In reality it was essentially a one room schoolhouse where students worked in cubicles on the computer for most of their classes. “It’s that religious parent type of strict,” she recalls. There were probably 50 students in K-12. It was cheap – maybe $250 for a semester. It wasn’t a great school:

> Tamika: As far as Bible-wise, I could probably tell you any common thing that comes from the Bible. But as far as all the other basic subjects that you might need for life, I didn’t get that there. Which is why I’m thankful for the Leadership Institute because what I lacked from school, I got there.

Recalling the college application process, Tamika remarks, “Oh man…it was... [laughs]…it was rocky.” She wanted to go to the same tuition-free Appalachian college that Cierra hoped to – “I wanted to go there so bad. It was everything I ever wanted in school.” She also applied for a predominately white, and considerably more expensive, liberal arts college in Mississippi. Her parents didn’t want her to go a school that was that far even though it was her first choice (and, moreover, the Appalachian school would have been free – there would be no cost for books, room, board, and a modest stipend for daily expenses). She had a secret girlfriend at the time that was going to the in-state liberal arts college, so the bargain she made with her parents was to go to the in-state school if they agreed to pay.

Her first few months at there were great in terms of grades and fitting in – she made friends quickly. However, she and her then-girlfriend was cheating non-stop and they broke up after trying an open relationship. Her grades started declining and “I really feel like that’s when my depression started kicking in.” She was formally diagnosed with depression about a year ago but at the time she thought it was normal for her to feel this way. Fitting in at a predominately white institute was also a challenge - “I’m a very open-minded person, a very friendly person, so

I felt like I fit in." There were many traditions and eccentricates of the school that forced her to think about the way that people treated her subconsciously. For example, there was a table in the cafeteria that she and her friends thought of as the "Confederate table" where all the members of a notoriously racist fraternity sat together. Her friends were afraid to even sit near them.

She was planning to major in sociology but had to withdraw after her first year for financial reasons. She was trying to work to pay off a bursar bill with a job in the cafeteria, and her grades were declining even though she had never struggled with school before. "I didn't want to get out of bed sometimes because I was afraid the professors would look at me in class." She went to a counselor that suggested she withdraw for medical reasons. She owes the school another $4,000 (they sent it to a collections agency) plus nearly $20,000 in student loans. Tamika's one-year job with the Leadership Institute will offset some of that debt, but she's still trying to make long term plans. "As far as staying in Mississippi, I don't think I could do it."

Many of the challenges discussed above would be familiar to college aspirants in suburban or urban contexts – college is expensive, good jobs are often far from home, and elite environments can be difficult for students from marginalized backgrounds. What makes this case representative of a uniquely rural issues is the ways in which these challenges intersect. The opportunity structure available to students at Sunflower County's public schools offers a weak network of low-wage, service sector jobs with little room for advancement. While the non-profit sector offers limited resources to students who decide to prioritize higher education and socio-economic advancement, such students still have to grapple with an opaque admissions process and unsupportive schools (and oftentimes, parents who are unable to provide advice or support). Choosing to move up also means moving out – none of the students in this study could imagine being able to find a good job close to home. The emotional costs of breaking ties with friends,

family, and community are uniquely concentrated in rural spaces that can only sustain limited opportunities for socioeconomic advancement. Crucially, the costs of missteps or half-completed steps can be dire – Tamika gave higher education a chance and a year into her journey was left with nearly $30,000 in debt and mental health issues for which she cannot afford treatment.

There are alternatives to the difficult process that Tamika faced. Research on successful mobility from poverty contexts highlights the role of social structures that help students imagine a more concrete future – these "identity projects" allow students to structure the day-to-day work of human capital acquisition and upward mobility around something that resonates with their own sense of identity (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2016). While nonprofit organizations like the Leadership Institute can offer this sort of identity project work, larger institutions can also provide the sort of structured and detailed pathways that an ease the transition from one opportunity structure to another (Strumbos, Linderman, & Hicks, 2018). The special challenge facing rural communities is the ways in which individual success paradoxically exacerbates the problem at a community level. Research on rural students from the Midwest identify ways in which schools can play a role in their own decline – by prioritizing students with potential to succeed elsewhere, communities export their most talented young people while neglecting those who might succeed at home (Carr and Kefalas, 2009).

Conclusion

In her ethnography of Sunflower County from the 1930s, Hortense Powdermaker described a process of acculturation whereby the higher Black families moved up in the local status hierarchy, the more dissatisfied they were with the inequalities around them – their tentative advancement within Sunflower County revealed just how limited their opportunity structure was. In the 1930s the limits on upward mobility were the product of explicit racist

ideology and the economics of the plantation – by the 2020s, the white supremacist dynamics of Sunflower County had become more subtle and the mechanization of agriculture had eliminated the plantation as a large-scale employer, but the upwardly-aspiring people of the county still have ample reason to be dissatisfied with the opportunities around them. The limitations felt by residents of Sunflower County are indicative of structural problems facing rural communities elsewhere, particularly rural communities of color which face the compounded challenges of economic stagnation and racial discrimination. Despite the structural weaknesses of these places, they are still home for the people who live there. The presumption that, for these people, socioeconomic mobility must accompany geographic mobility comes with unspoken emotional and social costs that policymakers ought not ignore.

References

Alexander, J., Leibbrand C., Massey C., & Tolnay, S. “Second-generation outcomes of the Great Migration.” *Demography*. 54(6): 2249–2271.

Asch, C. M. (2011). *The senator and the sharecropper: The freedom struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer*. Univ of North Carolina Press.

Blau, P. M., & Duncan, O. D. (1967). The American occupational structure. Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Bolton, C. C. (2005). *The hardest deal of all: The battle over school integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1972). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Haymarket Books.

Brand, J. E., & Xie, Y. (2010). Who benefits most from college? Evidence for negative selection in heterogeneous economic returns to higher education. *American sociological review*, *75*(2), 273-302.

Byrd, W. C. (2017). *Poison in the ivy: Race relations and the reproduction of inequality on elite college campuses.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.

Byun, S. Y., Meece, J. L., Irvin, M. J., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012). The role of social capital in educational aspirations of rural youth. *Rural Sociology*, *77*(3), 355-379.

Carr, S. (2012). In southern towns, ‘Segregation Academies’ are still going strong. *The Atlantic*.

Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. J. (2009). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Beacon Press.

Champagne, A. M. (1973). The segregation academy and the law. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *42*(1), 58-66.

Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2017). *Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility* (No. w23618). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Chetty, R., & Hendren, N. (2018a). The impacts of neighborhoods on intergenerational mobility I: Childhood exposure effects. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *133*(3), 1107-1162.

Chetty, R., & Hendren, N. (2018b). The impacts of neighborhoods on intergenerational mobility II: County-level estimates. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *133*(3), 1163-1228.

Clampet-Lundquist, S., & Massey, D. S. (2008). Neighborhood effects on economic self-sufficiency: A reconsideration of the Moving to Opportunity experiment. *American Journal of Sociology*, *114*(1), 107-143.

Cornelissen, S. (2016). Turning distaste into taste: context-specific habitus and the practical congruity of culture. *Theory and Society*, *45*(6), 501-529.

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Crespino, J. (2009). *In search of another country: Mississippi and the conservative counterrevolution* (Vol. 63). Princeton University Press.

DeLuca, S., Clampet-Lundquist, S., & Edin, K. (2016). *Coming of age in the other America*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Dollard, J. (1988 [1937]). *Caste and class in a southern town*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Eichenlaub, S., Tolnay, S., & Alexander, J. (2010). Moving out but not up: Economic outcomes in the Great Migration. *American Sociological Review*, *75*(1),101-125.

Golann, J. W. (2015). The paradox of success at a no-excuses school. *Sociology of Education, 88*(2), 103-119.

Granovetter, M. "The strength of weak ties." *American Journal of Sociology, 78*(6), 1360-1380.

Holley, D. (2001). *The second great emancipation: The mechanical cotton picker, Black migration, and how they shaped the modern South.* Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press.

Hout, M. (1984). Occupational mobility of Black men: 1962 to 1973. *American Sociological Review, 49*(3), 308-322.

Jack, A. (2016). (No) Harm in asking: Class, acquired cultural capital, and academic engagement at an elite university. *Sociology of Education, 89*(1), 1-19.

Johnson, K. M., & Lichter, D. T. (2019). Rural Depopulation: Growth and decline processes over the past century. *Rural Sociology*, *84*(1), 3-27.

Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. New York: Broadway Books.

Lee, E. M., & Kramer, R. (2013). Out with the old, in with the new? Habitus and social mobility at selective colleges. *Sociology of Education, 86*(1), 18-35.

Leibbrand, C. (2020). Unequal Opportunity? Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Disparities in the Returns to Internal US Migration. *Social Currents, 7*(1), 46-70.

McCabe, J., & Jackson, B. A. (2016). Pathways to financing college: Race and class in students' narratives of paying for school. *Social Currents*, *3*(4), 367-385.

Morton, J.M. (2019). *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.

Moye, J. T. (2006). *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986*. Univ of North Carolina Press.

Muller, C. (2012). "Northward migration and the rise of racial disparity in American incarceration, 1880–1950." *American Journal of Sociology, 118*(2), 281-326.

O'Connell, H. A. (2012). The impact of slavery on racial inequality in poverty in the contemporary US South. *Social Forces*, *90*(3), 713-734.

Powdermaker, H. (1993 [1939]). *After freedom: A cultural study of the Deep South*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Quintana, C., & McCoy, K. (2019, December 9). This Harvard grad has made millions on U.S. college admissions for international students. Retrieved January 26, 2020, from https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2019/12/08/college-admissions-scandal-ivy-league-harvard-crimson-education-jamie-beaton/3919491002/

Rondini, A.C. (2018). "Cautionary tales": Low-income first-generation college students, educational mobility, and familial meaning-making processes. In A.C. Rondini, B.N. Richards, & N.P. Simon (Eds.), *Clearing the path for first generation college students: Qualitative and intersectional studies of educational mobility* (19-50). Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Roscigno, V. J., & Crowle, M. L. (2001). Rurality, institutional disadvantage, and achievement/attainment. *Rural Sociology*, *66*(2), 268-292.

Ruef, M., & Grigoryeva, A. (2018). Jim Crow, ethnic enclaves, and status attainment: Occupational mobility among US Blacks, 1880–1940. *American Journal of Sociology, 124*(3), 814-859.

Sampson, R. J. (2012). *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stack, C. (1973). *All our kin*. New York: Basic Books.

Stack, C. (1996). *Call to home: African-Americans reclaim the rural South*. New York: Basic Books.

Stein, M. R. (1960). *The eclipse of community: An interpretation of American studies*. Princeton University Press.

Strumbos, D., Linderman, D., & Hicks, C. C. (2018). Postsecondary Pathways Out of Poverty: City University of New York Accelerated Study in Associate Programs and the Case for National Policy. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, *4*(3), 100-117.

Thiede, B. C., Lichter, D. T., & Slack, T. (2018). Working, but poor: The good life in rural America?. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *59*, 183-193.

Tickamyer, A. R., & Duncan, C. M. (1990). Poverty and opportunity structure in rural America. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *16*(1), 67-86.

Tolnay, S. (2001). "African Americans and immigrants in northern cities: The effects of relative group size on occupation standing in 1920." *Social Forces*, *80*(2):573-604.

Tolnay, S. (2003). "The African American 'Great Migration' and beyond." *Annual Review of Sociology, 29*, 209-232.

Tolnay, S., Crowder, K., & Adelman, R. (2000). "'Narrow and filthy alleys of the city'?: The residential settlement patterns of Black Southern migrants to the North." *Social Forces, 78*(3), 989-1015.

Tolnay, S. & Eichenlaub, S. (2006). “Southerners in the West: The relative well-being of direct and onward migrants.” *Social Forces*. 84(3), 1639-1663.

Tomaskovic-Devey, D., & Roscigno, V. J. (1996). Racial economic subordination and white gain in the US South. *American Sociological Review*, *61*(4), 565-589.

Vance, J. D. (2016). *Hillbilly elegy: A memoir of a family and culture in crisis*. New York: Harper.

Warnock, D.M. (2019). Race-based assumptions of social class identity and their consequences at a predominately white (and wealthy) institution. In W. B. Byrd, R. J. Brunn-Bevel, & S.M. Ovink (Eds.), *Intersectionality and higher education: Identity and inequality on college campuses* (58 - 72). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.

Weber, E. T. (2015). *Uniting Mississippi: Democracy and Leadership in the South*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Routledge.

Wiley, N. F. (1967). The ethnic mobility trap and stratification theory. *Social Problems, 15*(2), 147-159.

Wilkerson, I. (2011). *The warmth of other suns: The epic story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wright, A., & Davis, K. (2019, May 1). Teacher shortages force districts to use online education programs. Retrieved January 26, 2020, from https://mississippitoday.org/2019/02/20/teacher-shortages-force-districts-to-use-online-education-programs/#

Chapter 5: Learning in the Time of COVID

Towards the end of September 2020, about two weeks after starting his 8th grade year online, Craig sat down at his family's small kitchen table and propped his phone upright against the glass of milk he had had with breakfast and logged into his English class. His teacher planned to start class with a short "do now" assignment. The class would watch a quick video about Madame CJ Walker, the 19th century Black entrepreneur and the United States' first female self-made millionaire, and answer a few questions to review their previous lesson on inferences and the use of evidence. The lesson had an awkward start – both the teacher's and the students' internet connections were unreliable, and it quickly became clear that students were neither seeing nor hearing the YouTube clip on their respective devices. Craig's teacher abandoned the video after three minutes and instead announced that she would post a discussion question to the message board of Canvas, the learning management system that the Sunflower County School District had recently adopted. She asked students to spend a few minutes typing a short response to her question about types of evidence, but after another few minutes of silence Craig spoke up: "Ms. Johnson, I don't see anything." Nor had any of the other students in his class. Rather than commit more time to wrangling with the multitude of platforms and devices she was working with, Craig's teacher decided to skip the activity altogether and move on to her lecture for the day. Craig reached over, muted his phone's microphone, and picked up the audio recorder I had given him at the beginning of the fall semester and said, "Well, that is a little bit about how my classes are going this year."

The pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 (henceforth "COVID-19" or "the coronavirus") brought much of the world to a halt in the spring of 2020, including nearly all in-person instruction at schools in the United States. The public health impacts have been severe, with

millions of reported cases and hundreds of thousands of deaths before the first vaccines were approved for use in the United States. The social impacts have been significant as well, with rising unemployment and social isolation accompanying many of the lockdowns and restrictions implemented by state and local governments. Many of these social problems have reinforced, exacerbated, and revealed underlying social inequities, with relatively disadvantaged communities bearing disproportionately severe impacts (Ahmed et al. 2020; Laurencin & McClinton 2020; van Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin 2020). Impacts on education have been particularly significant. The role of education in facilitating upward mobility and producing social stratification is well-established (e.g., Bourdieu 2010, Bowles & Gintis 1976) and this stratifying process intersects with race and spatial inequalities. Black students have long had to navigate under-resourced institutions in communities subject to disinvestment. These challenges are particularly acute in rural communities of the Deep South, where *de jure* segregation, *de facto* segregation, the rise of segregation academies (Champagne 1973), and the persistent pressure of population loss and economic stagnation have created conditions of persistent, racialized deep poverty. The closure of public schools in March 2020 and the transition to online learning for the 2020-2021 school year in Sunflower County intensified the challenges that Black students face. These challenges point to a larger social problem: how do the strategies that the poor adopt when navigating stratification processes inflect, ameliorate, or exacerbate the consequences of structural disadvantage? What sort of mobility can successful strategies create?

Drawing on the case of pandemic education in a rural, predominately Black county in the Mississippi Delta, this chapter argues that poverty is reproduced at the local level through the friction generated by irreconcilable, mutually exclusive demands between the state institutions that structure the lives of the poor and poor families themselves. I draw on a situational

stratification (Collins 2000) framework to illuminate how the poor make sense of these tensions and navigate through them. I argue, broadly, that the institutions of the neoliberal bureaucratic state (state departments of education, etc.) approach governance with a market logic of *resource maximation*: resources are distributed and managed with the expectation that recipients will efficiently use those resources to achieve mandated goals. By contrast, poor communities (families and the local institutions that serve them) operate from a logic of *harm minimization*: recognizing that available resources are insufficient to meet their needs, people drawing on these situational strategies triage their needs to minimize the harm caused by scarcity. The tensions between these two sets of actors, and the underlying material reality that reproduces them, contribute to the reproduction of poverty in the United States by increasing the demands on the poor as they navigate through these challenges. The chapter leverages ethnographic data on the experiences of a cohort of Black public school students adjusting to virtual education in a Mississippi Delta community during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I begin by describing how the expectations of poor families and the state and federal governments collide in local school districts, organizations which sit at the overlap of these two competing institutional logics. After establishing the compromise policy that emerged from this tension, I turn to the experiences of a cohort Black public school students navigating online education in the COVID-19 era. I describe how student navigate around, and succeed in, a system working against them. In the final empirical section, I discuss how working to learn in this environment impacts students' plans for the future, particularly plans for higher education. The final section discusses implications for scholarly understanding of poverty and concludes.

Literature Review

The coronavirus pandemic has already had severe impacts on education in the United States, much of them occurring in the context of enduring inequalities. An immediate concern with the transition to online education, for example, is the deep inequity in technology access and broadband infrastructure (Puckett & Rafalow, 2020). Even under optimal circumstances, projections anticipate widespread learning loss as a result of the transition to online learning, increased impacts of unstable home environments, and downstream consequences for social mobility and productivity (Di Pietro et al. 2020). Projections for the United States suggest that students entered the Fall 2020 semester with as little as half as much educational progress as they would have under normal circumstances, and this learning gap will likely be comparable after a year of online or hybrid education. Moreover, this learning loss is not uniform; students from more privileged homes may even come out ahead (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). As students began transitioning back to in-person learning, documenting the cumulative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning outcomes and social development will be a crucial task.

Analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on education benefits from leveraging a micro-sociological framework built on Collins' (2000) situational stratification perspective. Collins argues that stratification is not constituted from aggregate statistics and straightforward assignments of group or strata membership, writing that "amassing statistics and survey data does not convey an accurate picture of social reality unless they are interpreted in the context of their microsituational grounding" (2000:18). Collins describes circuits of interaction within social and economic strata to illuminate this approach. The ultra-wealthy, for example, are a meaningful social class by virtue of the types of transactions in which they participate; their capital allows them to trade control over segments of industrial sectors in ways that transcend normal economic consumption. The regular wealthy, upper-middle, and other classes are

distinguished by patterns of consumption, not simply their nominal amounts of wealth. Rather than interpolating assessments of lived experience based on macro-structural categories, the situational stratification approach draws attention to the aggregate consequences of micro-interactions within and across strata. This approach is closely linked to the development of relational economic sociology (e.g., Fourcade & Healy 2007; Zelizer 2010) as well as the study of racial and class stratification within education (Lareau 2003) and the formation and maintenance of racial boundaries (Smångs 2016). However, much of this work has focused on interactions *within* strata; the circuits of interaction and exchange that give strata their social meaning. This approach is also useful for analysis of interaction *across* strata as a means of understanding how social mobility is facilitated or constrained. In analyzing these cross-strata interactions, a key advantage of the situational stratification approach is its emphases on the agency of the individual; people are not passively assigned to social locations but negotiate their place within them.

This perspective helps illuminate the larger literature on racial stratification and public education in the United States South. The general role of education in producing social stratification is well documented in sociology (e.g., Blau & Duncan 1978; Willis 1977, Bourdieu 1979). A long history of social science research in the Deep South documents how racialized systems of education were constructed to socialize young people into racialized occupational hierarchies (historical case studies include, e.g., Dollard 1937; Powdermaker 1939; Davis, Gardner, & Gardner 2009 [1941]). In the contemporary South, education's impacts on racial stratification persist through both the chronic underfunding of public education in Black majority districts (e.g., Mitchell 2020 in Mississippi) and the persistence of private "segregation academies" that primarily serve white students in Black majority communities and create

unnecessary competition for local resources (Champagne 1973, Bolton 2005; Crespino 2009; Ward 2011). Even within relatively integrated public school systems, the use of "tracking," or ability grouping, contributes to entrenched stratification along race and class lines (Broussard & Joseph 1998; Sutton et al. 2018). In denser suburban and urban communities, the proliferation of school "choice" has further exacerbated student sorting and subsequent stratification (Saporito 2003; Saporito & Lareau 1999). Professions and institutions more broadly have shifted towards a neoliberal market logic (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lousbury 2015) in which assessment of institutions (and students) is measured in terms of economic performance rather than professional norms or individual self-evaluation, a trend reflected in the rise of "accountability" narratives in education politics (e.g., Ravitch 2010, 2013; Berryhill, Linney, & Fromewick 2009). The abrupt transformations to the education system caused by the COVID-19 pandemic reveal both the depth and breadth of these functions of education in a contemporary context.

More broadly, this chapter engages with the literature on poverty governance in the United States. A rich literature within sociology documents how the institutions that shape the lives the poor are more concerned with poverty *management* than poverty *alleviation* (Piven & Cloward, 1993; Soss, Fording, & Schram 2011; Seim 2017; Brady 2019). This management occurs at the grassroots, micro-interactional level as "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 2010; Marwell & Morrissey 2020) have to make rapid decisions about how to allocate and use scare state resources. This perspective on poverty governance has been used to assess emergency health care (Seim 2017), the regulation of families through child protective service agencies (Simmons 2020; Fong 2020), and the disciplining of high school students (Golann 2015; Greenberg 2021). In each of these cases, analyses of the social institutions that pattern the lives of the poor – and in particular, analyses of the interactional, micro-sociological contexts – reveal

how stratification accumulates from the sequence of interactions between state officials and the poor. The challenges posed by these structural and institutional barriers are particularly severe in rural communities of the Deep South, which have been persistently losing population (Johnson & Lichter, 2019) and which have long been governed by extractive and exploitative elites (Duncan 1999; Baker 2019).

Methods, Data, and the Case

The data used in this chapter were collected in ways that adhered to the constraints caused by public health guidelines and the necessity to minimize risk to study participants. This chapter draws on a long-term, ethnographic study of Sunflower County in the Mississippi Delta. Field work had been underway for nearly two years when the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic were first felt in Mississippi; when public schools adjourned for spring break in mid-March, they would remain closed for until after Labor Day. This larger corpus of ethnographic and interview data provides important context for understanding the experiences of the students and families analyzed here. General ethnographic fieldwork proceeded in a limited fashion after March 2020. I was able to attend virtual meetings organized by the school district, observe outdoor rallies organized by parent groups, and conduct observations while driving around town. I also maintained an active correspondence with a cohort of middle- and high-school students that I had worked with during the prior phase of fieldwork.

Beyond the contextual material described above, specific data analyzed in this chapter come from two sources. The first is a bank of recordings provided by a small group of Black middle- and high-school students in Sunflower County. These students were recruited from my prior engagement with nonprofit organizations and parent groups in the county. These students were asked to periodically record interviews with siblings, parents, or themselves regarding their

schoolwork and their more general impressions of life amidst the pandemic. While these students represent a small sample of the total students in the district, I am able to contextualize their experiences with the broader body of data described above. The second source of data is notes and recordings from frequent Zoom meetings of an educational nonprofit that I refer to as the Leadership Institute. The Leadership Institute offers afterschool and summer programming to public school students in Sunflower County, including academic programming, college counseling, ACT and SAT coaching, and extracurricular clubs. Before the pandemic forced the Leadership Institute to suspend in-person programming, I worked as a college advisor, literacy teacher, chess coach, and bus driver for the organization. After the Institute transitioned to Zoom programming, I continued to host a chess club, college prep sessions, and supervised an online study hall.

Sunflower County

This project is based in Sunflower County, a community in the heart of the Mississippi Delta region. The region is marked by persistent poverty, depopulation, and a lack of economic progress. The county's population of around 25,000 according has fallen by more than half since its peak before World War II, when the population reached nearly 70,000. Nearly three quarters of the population is Black, a fifth white non-Hispanic with a small number of Asian and Hispanic families constituting the remainder. A third of the county's families live in poverty, and one in six live in deep poverty with incomes below 50% of the federal poverty line. The county has some of the lowest economic mobility rates in the country for children born into these poor families, with fewer than 5% of children born into the bottom income quintile moving to the top of the income distribution in adulthood (Chetty & Hendren, 2018).

The school district has long struggled with enrollment declines and chronic funding shortages. Despite limited integration in the 1980s, the schools in Sunflower County are nearly completely resegregated. Nearly all White students in the County attend one of two "segregation academies," while the public schools are more than 99% Black. Schools remained closed after spring break and the school year came to an abrupt end. While students were given optional packets of readings and assignments, there were no assessments or instruction until schools reopened after Labor Day. While the school district initially planned to offer students the choice between online-only and hybrid instruction, the district later decided to offer online-only education for the fall 2020 semester.

The first case of COVID-19, the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was reported in Sunflower County on March 22, 2020, shortly after schools closed. The governor of Mississippi issued a stay-at-home for much of April and part of May, and ad hoc mask mandates were in effect in Sunflower County for most of the year. However, cases in Sunflower County accelerated during the summer of 2020 and remained high throughout the fall. At their peak, rates of new cases were more than double the rates in New York at the first peak of the pandemic in March 2020. Combating the coronavirus pandemic has had added challenges due to the rurality of Sunflower County; the county has only two small hospitals and the state of Mississippi has hired almost no contact tracers. As of March 20, 2021, a year after the first case was reported, nearly 90 residents of Sunflower County had died of COVID-19 and more than 10% of the population had a confirmed infection.

No Good Options

One of the first sets of actors to mobilize ahead of the 2020-2021 school year was parents. In this section I describe how parents and parent groups used a strategy in which they

did not challenge the *facts*, but rather the *prioritization*, of different needs in their interactions with the school district. In doing so, they do not try to override the authority or expertise of the state but rather offer a different framing appropriate to local needs. I analyze these interactions through the situational stratification framework described above; while Black parents in communities like Sunflower County are structurally disadvantaged relative to the state education bureaucracy, their agency at the micro-sociological level influences the specific contours of the education their children experience (Collins 2000:20).

The school district in Sunflower County ended its 2019-2020 school year abruptly and immediately confronted the difficult questions of when and how to reopen schools. By the beginning of the summer it was clear that the pandemic would persist through the new school year, which typically begins in early August. Decision makers at the district had to balance three competing demands: minimizing the risk to students, faculty, and staff; meeting the instructional needs of students in the district; and satisfying the accountability and testing requirements imposed by the state's conservative government. The decision-making process that unfolded is emblematic of the larger challenges of poverty governance faced by communities like Sunflower County. The district proposed, announced, and revised its plans over the next six months in a process in which there were no good options. Having "no good options" does not mean that there is not a *best* option. Instead, to have no good options refers to a situation in which none of the available options can be agreed upon as the appropriate choice, even the option that respective parties are themselves supporting. The resulting unresolvable tension is a significant source of conflict at the local level and produces disparate outcomes across communities.

"Hell, they disadvantaged now*!*

On July 16, 2020 (when the daily case rate for Sunflower County was 86 per 100k), the superintendent and school board of Sunflower County Consolidated School District convened a meeting on Facebook Live and Zoom that drew nearly 500 viewers. The purpose of the meeting was to announce and explain the district's reopening plan. Parents would have two options. In the first, students could participate in a hybrid model of instruction in which they attended school in person two days a week and would attend remotely on the alternating two days. Fridays would be reserved for students who required additional or intensive support. The second option was an online-only plan. However, the terms of this online option were stark: parents would have to provide their own technology, and students would not be able to have any one-on-one interaction with their teachers. Commenters on Facebook quickly deduced that the online-only option was designed to be punitive and pressure parents to accept the hybrid model. As the superintendent explained the process for choosing an enrollment option, one parent commented "Our children are doomed!!"

Noting the concerns appearing in the stream of comments on Facebook, the superintendent tried to contextualize the hybrid model as a way to prevent students from being unduly disadvantaged (a parent immediately commented, "Hell they disadvantaged now!"). The bulk of parents' concerns centered on an apparent mismatch between the purported amount of money that the district received through the CARES Act (and related legislation) and the scope of the districts reopening plans. Commenters quickly drew comparisons with what they had heard about other districts:

> *Now all other districts took the millions of dollars in Grant's funded & provided each child with what was needed to succeed.*

Others noted that the district had not accounted for the limitations of each school's physical plant:

They don't even have desk at [Rural] Elementary they sit at the table

Yet others noted the mismatch between the school's relatively permissive plan and the ways in which local governments were curtailing public life:

The [police department] is charging a thousand dollars fine for not wearing a mask but want to send our kids back to school in this environment

Finally, parents expressed concerns that the hybrid model barely offered any meaningful protection from infection; students would have their temperature taken only after they arrived at school, and there was no accounting for the likelihood of asymptomatic cases.

What if they don't have a fever but still sick then what

As a parent even though they are trying to send kids in groups they still can catch the virus quicker at school than home. I saw Trump stated he would cut school funding if they didnt open school. It's not up to him he is apart of them

On balance, the reaction to the school district's initial plan demonstrates the extent to which the district had to reconcile mutually exclusive options. The plan was announced at the peak of the coronavirus's first wave in the Mississippi Delta and parents' primary concerns were that the risk of infection - both to their children and within their children's family networks - had not been properly minimized. This original plan for reopening was conceived largely in private as the school district struggled to integrate new federal funding streams and public health concerns into their decision making, but parents continued to feel as if their priorities had been marginalized.

So why use our kids as a guinea pig?

The immediate lack of trust between parents and the district became a major barrier to arriving at a mutually agreeable plan. A week after the Facebook and Zoom meeting, a statewide group of parents and activists announced plans for an outdoor protest in a downtown park in Sunflower County's county seat. The event was announced via Facebook:

> *Join concerned parents as we rally together in support of the safety of our students and our communities. We will have several parent speakers from the Delta as well as representatives from the Refuse to Return national campaign.*
>
> *If you believe that it is not safe for your student to return to school, and do not see how to protect them or your family - join us. We are coming to together to make our voices heard and support each other.*

The protest attracted around 30 people at its peak, a third of whom were activists associated with statewide and national campaigns urging caution in school reopening plans. The day of the protest was hot - around 95 degrees with a few scattered clouds. As the protesters arrived and began to set up speakers, a parent from the northern tip of the county showed everyone a list of supplies that her students were required to bring to school as a "donation": hand sanitizer, child-sized face masks, and disinfectant wipes. Each of these things had been sold out of the local Walmart for months and were hard to come by, as another parent noted:

> *"Go in the grocery store, a little can of Lysol - $9.99. A little bottle of hand sanitizer - $9.99. How's a parent of two kids, how they gonna purchase that? You got the CARE money, that's what it's supposed to be used for."*

The protest officially began when a local TV reporter and cameraperson arrived. The first parent to speak was Yolie, a tall Black woman in her 40s with two children and a granddaughter in the county schools. Yolie had recently quit her job as a security guard at a regional distribution

center after an outbreak of Covid-19 had gone unreported. She spoke to the reporter quickly and forcefully:

> *"They don't need to be going back truthfully. All other 49 states know, that Mississippi going back anyway – so if we go back, our kids catch it, what are they going to do? They gonna shut down everything. So why use our kids as a guinea pig? If y'all gonna wait till after Labor Day, why can't we wait till after Labor Day?" [She notes that state and local offices won't even let people inside, so why would schools? She tears up and has to stop the interview before too long.] "I just pray that…they do what they need to do..you don't mind, I'm gonna get off here, I just…I'm gonna get off."*

The next to speak is Evana, a recent graduate and former student at a Sunflower County school:

> *"We can't even get Germex – and my mom work at Walmart…I was using the same books that my cousin was using and she graduated ten years before I did."[Notes that the kids she tutored in a wealthy college town had laptops, even the first graders, and got them right away.] "It hurts me to think that [school board members] don't care. They child is in private school."*

A follow up protest was scheduled for the next week on the lawn in front of the district's headquarters, a squat brown building next to the highway on the northside of town. Representatives of the school district had not attended the first protest, nor were they alerted that this protest was set to take place, but the superintendent agreed to come and hear their planned remarks. Evana, the local graduate who spoke at the previous event, listed four demands to the district, summarized in the field note below:

1. Delay reopening by two weeks or until there are 14 days of no new cases
2. Continue to pay hourly and salaried workers, regardless of if there are students on campus

3. Come up with a more equitable plan – don't penalize people for choosing the virtual only option, and think about the lack of access to the internet and/or extracurricular activities. ("It's not fair. It's not fair. It's. Not. Fair," she noted.)
4. Invest in health and nutrition – each school should have a nurse, nutritionist, counselor, and therapists. "It's more than a pandemic, it's already been a pandemic. We're already sick, we're already tired."

The demands for equity in internet access and the hiring of counselors and nutritionists tied concerns surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic to larger structural issues that have plagued the district for decades. While the superintendent was sympathetic to the protestors larger concerns, she expressed frustration with the forum. She started her response by saying, "so thank you all for caring about our children, about our staff, about our community. But I want to start by saying I'm trying not to be offended." She went to note that some of their demands were simply unrealistic, while others were already being addressed behind the scenes. After the superintendent's remarks, the president of the school board (an ordained minister) took control of the meeting, knelt to the ground, and offered comments that signaled the end of district staff's participation in the meeting:

> *"And I'm telling you this – on bended knee, I'm getting on my knee! – that [Sunflower County] County Consolidated Schools…and this ain't for show, we're crossing every* t *and dotting every* i*, we want to make sure that every child, EVERY child, in this district…we're gonna give them the best service that we can provide. Thank you for coming. Father God [the board president transitions into a prayer], thank you for these young people that have the courage, not only the courage but have enough caring, to even be caring about somebody else. Father we want you to give them strength that as*

they go out, that not only do they have courage but they have patience, patience to listen to others…they're here today not because they're mad, but because they care about other people…but most of all Father, they've come, they know what they want, but help them understand that sometimes it's better to listen than to speak…in Jesus name, Amen."

The call for the organizers to listen and to have patience represented a transparent rebuke of what the organizers of the protest had staged, and the finality of the president's comments reinforced the underlying power structure at play. The school board, members of which are elected, appointed the superintendent and the superintendent ultimately answers to them first.

A Plan Revisited

In the wake of the backlash against the district's original plan, the superintendent and the school district abruptly changed course in early August. The hybrid option was eliminated, and all instruction would move to online platforms. The start of the school year was delayed by two weeks to help accommodate this change. Students would still receive meals from the district; each day a school bus would deliver a lunch and breakfast for the following day. Some sports teams were allowed to resume practice, but were soon cancelled after members of the high school football team contracted COVID-19.

The most pressing concern with the online-only plan was internet and technology access. Communities like Sunflower County have persistently suffered from inadequate infrastructure and many of the families in the district did not have laptops for their children. The district used funding from the CARES Act and related funding schemes to buy technology: elementary and middle school children would each be issued a Chrome book, high school students would receive laptops with a Windows operating system, and every family would receive a WiFi hotspot that would provide cellular internet access. However, the rollout of this plan was limited: the devices

were on backorder, and the last shipment of technology did not arrive until mid-November. In homes that could provide their own computers and internet access, students were able to proceed with online learning as planned. Other students were issued packets of worksheets each week to complete and received no synchronous instruction. The final barrier was cost: each device came with a recommended $25 insurance policy; replacement and repair costs for uninsured devices would be billed to the parents.

Over the final two months of summer, the Sunflower County Consolidated School District shifted from one option to another, with neither option receiving broad support. In attempting to balance the educational and public health needs of families in the county, the district had to resolve a problem with no good solution. Other districts in the state of Mississippi had avoided this tension; wealthier suburban districts already had substantial inventories of computers and were able to begin online instruction immediately. When the students in Sunflower County finally returned to school after a six-month break, they did so under an arrangement that everyone agreed was suboptimal.

Making It Work

The school year started later than usual on the Tuesday after Labor Day (in a typical school year, classes start in early August). Parents, students, and teachers all worked to both adapt to the requirements of this new system and began to develop strategies to work with, through, and around the barriers that this system created. In this section I describe the particular strategies employed by Black parents and Black children, calling attention to both the ways they worked together and their separate, individual agency. While the school district worked to reproduce a facsimile of a "normal" school year, parents and students enacted two. First, they prioritized the day-to-day task of "making it work," rapidly adapting to changing conditions at

home and in virtual spaces. Second, they learn to separate the *process* of education from its *goal* as a means of making sense of the priorities and decisions they chose.

A Normal Day

Damian, a 9th grader at Sunflower County's smaller county high school, lives with his mom, grandmother, grandfather, an uncle, and four siblings in a two-bedroom apartment in one of the county's small towns. His stepfather is usually there as well, but for much of the fall he was staying with his elderly mother to care for her amidst the pandemic. Juggling the kids' school and managing their house is a challenge for Damian's mom in the best of times and having her children at home only heightened those challenges. None of the adults in Damian's home was working for most of the school year. His grandparents and uncle received disability – his grandmother had worked as a janitor at the nearby hospital until chronic back pain made that impossible, and his uncle had a life-long learning disability that made work impossible. Damian's mother, Kyoto, worked briefly as a CNA at a nearby hospital but quit after arriving one day to find that she was the only person scheduled to work that shift. Damian's older brother had graduated high school the previous year, and had vague plans to move to Georgia and work with an uncle there, but at the moment was focused on his relationship with his girlfriend and found home repair jobs when he could.

Their house is cramped. Damian's mother, stepfather, and youngest brother recently moved back to Sunflower County after spending two years living near a children's hospital two hours away. Damian's youngest brother has sickle cell anemia, and while he was stable enough to move back, the pandemic brought heightened anxiety to their home. The apartment's two bedrooms are shared by Damian's grandparents, his uncle, and his older brother. The rest of the family – Damian, his mother, two younger sisters, younger brother, and occasionally his

stepfather, convert the living room into a sleeping space each night. His parents sleep on an air mattress in the middle of the room while the children sleep on couches arranged around it, though on most nights the youngest kids end up in bed with their parents.

This experience with learning to adapt helped with the transition to online learning. Early in the fall, I asked Damian to tell me what a typical day was like doing online school. The day begins early: his mom wakes everyone up at 5am so they can convert the couches and the air mattresses into workstations for the four school aged children. They spend about an hour getting ready in the apartment's sole bathroom, having breakfast, and shaking off the last bits of sleep in time for their first class around 7:30. Classes continue until a two hour break form 10:30 to 12:30 and end at 3:00 – they only receive five hours of instruction in a typical day, and start their homework shortly after classes end. Damian's mother floats between her four children, functioning as a teacher, principal, cook, and mother as need. Damian is normally a quiet, though not shy, person, and in a phone interview I asked him how he coped with all the activity and close quarters:

Author: "So if you want to go somewhere quiet, do you have somewhere you can go?"

Damian: "Yeah"

Author: "Where do you go?"

Damian: [Laughs] "The bathroom."

He tries to go bed at 10:00pm if he has something important the next day. The rest of the family are usually in bed too – mosquitos are too pervasive for people to be coming in and out of the house in the evenings.

Damian's school day embodies the types of strategies that Black students and their families leverage to make the best of a difficult situation. Despite the constraints of their home,

Damian's family is able to repurpose their living room to function as a hub for online school. This approach to managing their education is indicative of the deeper logic that structures the lives of poor families in Sunflower County; the state institutions present in their community produce pressures to conform to impossible expectations, and their constituents respond by working *around* rather that *with* these constraints.

Technology Routines and Innovations

Students in Sunflower County had to rapidly adjust to the state and federal governments' attempts to ensure technological access. The district originally planned to have a laptop and WiFi hotspot for every student by early September. The plan face obstacles almost immediately. The first concern was over a planned $25-per-device insurance fee. For a family with four children that also needed the WiFi hotspot (a family like Damian's) this would have required a significant upfront expense. The larger issue was logistical – the school district arrived at this plan relatively late in the summer, months after wealthier school districts had placed similar orders for computers and hotspots. The promised technology ultimately arrived in November, three months after the school year started and nearly six months after schools closed the previous spring. In the interim months, students who could not secure their own devices were given weekly packets of worksheets for their classes.

I met Craig, a 7th grader at one of the county's rural middle schools, as he was working on his math packet during the first week of school. Craig found the packets frustrating – he had not been in a math class for nearly six months and felt overwhelmed by being immediately placed into pre-algebra. Engagement with his teachers was limited: "They just dropped the packet off and said do it, they didn't text me or nothing about it." I spent some time working

with him on this initial packet, but the environment – outside his home, masked and six feet apart – was not conducive to much more than a casual discussion.

Author: "What is 3x + x, do you remember how to do that?"

Craig: "Yeah…but I basically forgot"

Before I left, he let me take pictures of the packets, which had been produced by a for profit company, not his teachers, and in Craig and the other students' eyes, they proved to be a poor substitute for synchronous Zoom learning.

The packets were not well received elsewhere; Damian's family was able to secure four laptops through a nonprofit in the community, but frequently ran out of data on their cell phone plan. As a result, Damian and his siblings frequently shifted between modalities, switching to packets whenever the WiFi ran out. Damian wasn't impressed with the work he was given:

Damian: "The 9th grade packet real small. My momma had told them – I think the upcoming week she gonna have to go and put some more money on the internet thing, then she said 'Let me get a packet until then.' But the packet's small. Only thing I don't like is they got me doing 10th grade work instead of 9th grade work."

Author: "For what class?"

Damian: "English, so basically I'm taking classes with 10th graders."

Later that week, Damian asked one of his younger sisters about her own experience trying to learn with these packets:

I like the packets…worse. I like communicating with my teachers instead of like doing, the packets. I like communicating, like talking to my teachers, asking them questions, telling them I don't understand something, I need help with this, with that. I like Zoom better. Because you can communicate with your teachers and tell them what you don't

understand and what you do understand what you need help with, what you don't need help with.

Zoom instruction, despite the challenges associated with managing multiple devices and platforms, allowed students to continue interacting with their teachers and friends. These interactions offered opportunities to negotiate and adapt to changing conditions in the moment; the packets put the onus on students themselves to calibrate their learning.

Craig quickly grew frustrated with the packets and opted in to doing Zoom classes over his phone, and soon ran into another challenge: The log in and password information he had been given rarely worked. His teachers told him to have his mother call the central office, who in turn told her to correspond with the teachers. Craig ultimately resolved the issue by ignoring it – sometimes he would sit next to his younger sister and listen to her math class, but strictly speaking, Craig was out of math class from March to November.

Technology was similarly challenging for Damian's family. Though he and his three siblings were able to borrow laptops from a local nonprofit, but for much of the fall semester did not have reliable internet access; the school district was not able to provide hotspots until early November. The family had to instead rely on their mother's cell phone pay-as-you-go data plan, which quickly ran out of high-speed data each month. The family adapted to the tight data ration by switching between Zoom school and packets; Damian and his younger brother would spend a few weeks attending online classes while their two sisters completed packets of worksheets. After a few weeks, the boys and girls would switch places, with Damian and his brother doing worksheets instead.

These decisions – listening in on a sister's math class, rationing access to wireless data – reveal both an awareness of the structural barriers facing these families and an adroitness in

managing them at the situational level. Damian and Craig both noted that many of their friends had essentially abandoned school for the first months of the fall semester – Craig's classes often had just two or three other students, and Damian was frequently invited to pickup basketball games throughout the school day. Choosing to make the situation work in spite of the structural forces working against them, even if the day-to-day situations felt suboptimal, reveal strategies that balance the tension between two goals. Students in Sunflower County had to both create an education practice that accounts for the constraints of the system (e.g., inconsistent access to information technology) while also maintaining a focus on longer term goals (e.g., passing state assessments and maintaining a satisfactory attendance record). Using the situational stratification framework to assess how students and parents finding this balance between two, often contraindicatory, goals highlights the active role they play in the stratification process. The role of parents in successfully navigating pandemic education is key. Lareau (2003) documents the role of parenting style in children's education, finding that lower income parents often work with parenting strategies that promote the child's natural growth through unprogrammed learning and play; in the context of Sunflower County and other under-resourced online learning environments, however, the more managed approach that Lareau finds is more common in middle class families is necessary. Without the active intervention of Craig and Damian's parents (e.g., in rationing data or calling teachers about Zoom passwords), they would have had greater difficulty designing day to day strategies that kept them on track.

Despite his challenges navigating Zoom instruction, Craig, Damian, and the others were comfortable navigating the various devices and platforms they used in the course of daily life. These students and their peers grew up as digital natives, even when they had to maintain their digital life on budget pay-as-you-go smart phones. When I talked with Damian and Craig about

their social life in the pandemic era, Damian jokingly told me that friendships just come naturally to him:

Damian: My friends just come to *me*.

Author: Like to your house?

Damian: Naw I'm just *famous*. [laughs]

But what Damian meant in practice is that he was almost always talking with a friend or classmate on Facetime or an equivalent platform and maintained a long roster of group texts. Video calls were a major part of how Craig navigated his social life. Craig was almost always looking for places to plug his phone in – he maintains a group video call with three friends nearly 24 hours a day. They are rarely actively talking with each other – instead, he told me, they just like being with each other even when they're apart. The video chat serves practical functions – the group, who are frequently up until dawn playing Fortnite, take naps throughout the day and rely on each other to wake them up in time for classes.

Damian and his classmates were similarly adroit in their use of technology. Early in the Spring 2021 semester Damian sent me a screenshot of a Facebook group he was in with around 30 of his classmates. The group functioned as a hub to share homework and test answers – in the image he shared, one student asked for the answer to an "exit ticket" assignment for their math class. In a follow up conversation, a student shared a link to a textbook publisher's website that included answers to the quizzes that a history teacher had been using. Nominally, the Facebook group was a means to facilitating cheating, but in this context, it was a response to the constraints of online learning. Students in the group frequently expressed frustration about their classes' platforms: Zoom links that had not worked, Canvas quizzes that they could not fill out from their phones, instructions to in-class assignments missed because of a distracting sibling. While

Damian and his peers could not interact in person, they were able to recreate a small-town "digital street" (Lane 2019) to provide each other with needed support. In short, while technology failed to fully replicate the learning environment of an in-personal class, students worked deftly to work with and around the constraints of online learning. The ambiguous role of technology suggests that while digital divides and unequal access to devices and stable internet created serious barriers to accessing the online learning that the school district envisioned, students navigated these situations according to a logic of harm minimization rather than allow themselves to be hemmed in by resource constraints.

Planning a Future

The previous sections describe how Black parents and students adapted strategies to account for the impossible demands of pandemic education; this section considers how having to rely on these strategies impacts the long-term plans of students and their ability to balance immediate and future challenges. The data described here suggests that while parents' and students' find success at navigating the daily challenges of online learning, these micro-sociological moments and victories occur in the context of broader social structures that had already created barriers to upward mobility; thus, the work of navigating pandemic education consumed time and resources that would have otherwise allowed these students to navigate *other* barriers to mobility aspirations. This dynamic resembles what Wiley (1967) described as the mobility trap: situations in which strategies for mobility *within* a social stratum conflicts with strategies for mobility *across* strata. A concrete example of this tension is found in Sunflower County students' attempts to make school work while still preparing for college admissions milestones.

Part of my role with the Leadership Institute this year has been to supervise a daily study session for 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students in the program. For around six weeks during the spring of 2021, I repurposed this block of time to focus instead on practicing for the ACT. The stakes for the ACT are high for these students; most will need an 18 out of 36 in order to be admitted to a four-year university. A score of 20 (combined with a 2.5 GPA) qualifies students for need-based aid from the state, and scores of 25 or higher unlock merit-based aid at the state's universities. Tests like the ACT are already implicated in widening social inequalities along race and class lines. The transition to online learning has only heightened the stratifying potential of the ACT and similar high stakes assessments as test dates were cancelled and seats in testing sites were severely limited to accommodate social distancing requirements.

Over the course of the spring semester, I worked closely with six students preparing to take the ACT in April 2021 with particular emphasis on the Science Reasoning portion of the ACT. The science section is particularly challenging for both test-takers and instructors. The ACT's other sections – English, Reading, and Math – all correspond to classes taken throughout high school and assess content mastery. Science, by contrast, tests the ability to interpret and summarize unfamiliar information in new formats – scientific figures, tables, and equations that are more complex than anything taught in Sunflower County's public school science classes. My lessons were thus intended to reduce the anxiety that students felt when confronting a challenging passage. The test is stressful under normal circumstances, and the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the tension. The testing site nearest to Sunflower County had filled up early, so the six students I was working with had to take the test at a rural high school 20 miles south of Sunflower County's county seat. I woke that day at 5am to drive the Leadership Institute's 15-passenger van from the northern tip of Sunflower County to the testing site an hour

south, picking up students along the way. After the long drive and some last minute encouragements, the six students had their temperatures checked at the door and began the four hour test.

A few weeks after the April test day, I was supervising a regular study session when LaMarcus, a 10th grade student who had taken the ACT that day sent me a message via a private Zoom chat:

> lamarcus to author: the act scores came in and I made an 11and I was 7 points away from an 18 is that really bad/horrible for high school?

I moved LaMarcus into a breakout room so the two of us could discuss his score and what it meant. He was concerned since the staff of the Leadership Institute had repeatedly emphasized the importance of making an 18, if not a 20, by the fall of their senior year of high school. I reassured him that 10th grade was still early and that he would have multiple opportunities to take it again under more comfortable conditions, but the other students who had taken the test with him expressed similar frustrations. The two seniors who had taken the test, hoping to boost their scores enough to qualify for merit aid at the universities they planned to attend, saw their scores decrease. Kyla, a 10th grader who had been improperly classified as a special needs student in middle school, texted me a screenshot of her score – a 15 – a few hours after my conversation with LaMarcus. I asked her how she felt about it over text message:

> Author: That [the release of results] was fast! How do you feel about that
>
> Kyla: Bad
>
> Author:15 is a good score for 10th grade
>
> Kyla: Always next time
>
> Author: Yep lots of time to keep learning

Kyla: Yeah

It is impossible to know how a counterfactual situation for LaMarcus, Kyla, and the others' – a test site close to home, the chance to sleep in a little longer and have a large breakfast, opportunities for weeks more of in-person ACT preparation and coaching – would have impacted their scores, but the clash between public health demands and the rigid role of the ACT in college admissions impacted these students' confidence about their futures.

Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter suggest that the transition to online education is likely to result in further stratification and widening inequities in the United States, particularly along the axes of race and spatial fault lines. However, this chapter has also shown that Black students and their parents are not passive participants in the stratifying process, nor are their experiences within those processes uniform. By analyzing student experiences from a situational stratification perspective grounded in the social context of the rural South, this chapter contributes a framework for understanding how Black students, particularly from marginalized communities, navigate forces and institutions that function to obstruct, undermine, and subvert progress towards social mobility.

The limitations of this chapter's methodology highlight several important directions for future research, chief among them a larger evaluation of COVID-19's impacts on learning outcomes. The ethnographic and micro-sociological data presented here illuminate the mechanisms and meaning-making strategies at work in this form of stratification; larger scale quantitative studies will be necessary to capture the full extent of these inequities. Communities like Sunflower County have long struggled with the pressures of systemic racism, economic exploitation and stagnation, and persistent population loss. The exigencies of the coronavirus

pandemic reveal both the depth of these challenges and the innovative strategies that the rural Black poor leverage to navigate them.

References

Ahmed, Faheem, Na'eem Ahmed, Christopher Pissarides, and Joseph Stiglitz. 2020. "Why Inequality Could Spread COVID-19." *The Lancet Public Health* 5(5):e240. doi: 10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30085-2.

Anna Hidalgo and Shamus Khan. 2020. "Blindsight Ethnography and Exceptional Moments." *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* (2):185–93. doi: 10.3240/97804.

Baker, Regina S. 2020. "Why Is the American South Poorer?" *Social Forces* 99(1):126–54. doi: 10.1093/sf/soz149.

Berryhill, Joseph, Jean Ann Linney, and Jill Fromewick. 2009. "The Effects of Educational Accountability on Teachers: Are Policies Too Stress Provoking for Their Own Good?" *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* 4(5). doi: 10.22230/ijepl.2009v4n5a99.

Blau, Peter Michael, and Otis Dudley Duncan. 1978. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: Free Press.

Bolton, Charles C. 2005. *Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980.* Jackson: Univ Pr Of Mississippi.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2010. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. 1977. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Brady, David. 2019. "Theories of the Causes of Poverty." *Annual Review of Sociology* 45(1):155–75. doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022550.

Broussard, C. A., and A. L. Joseph. 1998. “Tracking: A Form of Educational Neglect?” *Children & Schools* 20(2):110–20. doi: 10.1093/cs/20.2.110.

Champagne, Anthony M. 1973. “The Segregation Academy and the Law.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 42(1):58. doi: 10.2307/2966792.

Chetty, Raj, and Nathaniel Hendren. 2018. “The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility II: County-Level Estimates*.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133(3):1163–1228. doi: 10.1093/qje/qjy006.

Collins, Randall. 2000. “Situational Stratification: A Micro-Macro Theory of Inequality.” *Sociological Theory* 18(1):17–43. doi: 10.1111/0735-2751.00086.

Crespino, Joseph. 2009. *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Davis, Allison, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner. 2009. *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Pbk. ed. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press.

Di Pietro, Giorgio, Federico Biagi, Patricia Costa, Zbigniew Karpiński, and Jacopo Mazza. 2020. *The Likely Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Reflections Based on the Existing Literature and Recent International Datasets.* European Commission.

van Dorn, Aaron, Rebecca E. Cooney, and Miriam L. Sabin. 2020. “COVID-19 Exacerbating Inequalities in the US.” *The Lancet* 395(10232):1243–44. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30893-X.

Duncan, Cynthia M. 1999. *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Fourcade, Marion, and Kieran Healy. 2007. “Moral Views of Market Society.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33(1):285–311. doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131642.

Gary Alan Fine and Corey M. Abramson. 2020. “Ethnography in the time of Covid-19. Vectors and the vulnerable.” *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa* (2):165–74. doi: 10.3240/97802.

Golann, Joanne W. 2015. “The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School.” *Sociology of Education* 88(2):103–19. doi: 10.1177/0038040714567866.

Greenberg, Max A. 2021. “Not Seeing Like a State: Mandated Reporting, State-Adjacent Actors and the Production of Illegible Subjects.” *Social Problems* spab003. doi: 10.1093/socpro/spab003.

Johnson, Kenneth M., and Daniel T. Lichter. 2019. “Rural Depopulation: Growth and Decline Processes over the Past Century: Rural Depopulation.” *Rural Sociology* 84(1):3–27. doi: 10.1111/ruso.12266.

Kuhfeld, Megan, James Soland, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, and Jing Liu. 2020. “Projecting the Potential Impact of COVID-19 School Closures on Academic Achievement.” *Educational Researcher* 49(8):549–65. doi: 10.3102/0013189X20965918.

Lane, Jeffery. 2019. *The Digital Street*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Laurencin, Cato T., and Aneesah McClinton. 2020. “The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Call to Action to Identify and Address Racial and Ethnic Disparities.” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 7(3):398–402. doi: 10.1007/s40615-020-00756-0.

Lipsky, Michael. 2010. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. 30th anniversary expanded ed. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Marwell, Nicole P., and Shannon L. Morrissey. 2020. “Organizations and the Governance of Urban Poverty.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 46(1):233–50. doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054708.

Mitchell, Jerry. 2020. “Lawsuit Accusing Mississippi of Providing Unequal Education Can Proceed, Appeals Court Says.” *Mississippi Today*, April 6.

Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. 1993. *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. Updated ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Puckett, Cassidy, and Matt Rafalow. 2020. “COVID-19, Technology, and Implications for Educational Equity.” *ASA Footnotes* 48(3):34–35.

Ravitch, Diane. 2010. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books.

Ravitch, Diane. 2013. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools*. First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Saporito, Salvatore. 2003. “Private Choices, Public Consequences: Magnet School Choice and Segregation by Race and Poverty.” *Social Problems* 50(2):181–203. doi: 10.1525/sp.2003.50.2.181.

Saporito, Salvatore, and Annette Lareau. 1999. “School Selection as a Process: The Multiple Dimensions of Race in Framing Educational Choice.” *Social Problems* 46(3):418–39. doi: 10.2307/3097108.

Schram, S. F., R. C. Fording, and J. Soss. 2008. “Neo-Liberal Poverty Governance: Race, Place and the Punitive Turn in US Welfare Policy.” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 1(1):17–36. doi: 10.1093/cjres/rsm001.

Seim, Josh. 2017. “The Ambulance: Toward a Labor Theory of Poverty Governance.” *American Sociological Review* 82(3):451–75. doi: 10.1177/0003122417702367.

Simmons, Michaela Christy. 2020. “Becoming Wards of the State: Race, Crime, and Childhood in the Struggle for Foster Care Integration, 1920s to 1960s.” *American Sociological Review* 85(2):199–222. doi: 10.1177/0003122420911062.

Smångs, Mattias. 2016. “Doing Violence, Making Race: Southern Lynching and White Racial Group Formation.” *American Journal of Sociology* 121(5):1329–74. doi: 10.1086/684438.

Soss, Joe, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram, eds. 2011. *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press.

Sutton, April, Amy G. Langenkamp, Chandra Muller, and Kathryn S. Schiller. 2018. “Who Gets Ahead and Who Falls Behind During the Transition to High School? Academic Performance at the Intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Gender.” *Social Problems* 65(2):154–73. doi: 10.1093/socpro/spx044.

Thornton, Patricia H., William Ocasio, and Michael Lounsbury. 2015. “The Institutional Logics Perspective.” in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*, edited by R. A. Scott and S. M. Kosslyn. Wiley.

Turner, Jonathan H. 1972. “Structural Conditions of Achievement among Whites and Blacks in the Rural South.” *Social Problems* 19(4):496–508. doi: 10.2307/799927.

Ward, Jason Morgan. 2011. *Defending White Democracy the Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.

Weber, Bruce, Leif Jensen, Kathleen Miller, Jane Mosley, and Monica Fisher. 2005. "A Critical Review of Rural Poverty Literature: Is There Truly a Rural Effect?" *International Regional Science Review* 28(4):381–414. doi: 10.1177/0160017605278996.

Willis, Paul E. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Job*. Repr. Aldershot: Gower.

Zelizer, Viviana A. 2013. *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The superintendent of the Sunflower County Consolidated School District hosted a meeting at the East Sunflower Elementary School[4] on January 20, 2022, to update the community on an unexpected announcement: the small school, as well as the elementary and middle school in the town of Inverness, would be permanently closing at the end of the school year. The two schools had operated at a significant deficit for years; Dr. Miskia Davis, the superintendent, opened her presentation to the community with a picture of an elephant emblazoned with the number "$1,109,915.00." The elephant in the room, as she repeatedly referred to it, was that enrollment declines were causing the schools to hemorrhage money. The enrollment and population numbers were stark. The public schools in Sunflower County had been taken over by the state in 2014, and at that time state officials were already pressuring the district to think about school closures. In the intervening years, the county had lost 4,000 people, 800 of them public school students. East Sunflower's enrollment had fallen by more than half from 187 to just 88. Dr. Davis' combative approach to dealing with the public, which is captured in her comments quoted in Chapter 5, defined her demeanor at this meeting as well. "If you know some people who will give us this money let me know," she remarked before asking "What did you do to try and get more children to come to the school?"

The meeting, which was broadcast on Facebook Live by the county's weekly newspaper, was short and tense. Dr. Davis refused to engage with questions from the audience unless they were written on notecards. Any requests for specific numbers were deflected; the community

[4] The confusingly named *Town* of Sunflower (pop. 900) is a small town north of Indianola and is a community within Sunflower *County*.

was welcome to file a public records request or wait for school board minutes to be approved. Despite the community's reaction, Dr. Davis remained firmly pessimistic.

"We can't keep pulling water from an empty well."

***

A member of the county's Board of Supervisors organized a meeting at the Indianola courthouse the next day. Even though the students at both East Sunflower and Inverness were all Black, both meetings had attracted a (relatively) diverse audience, as the impending school closures would be a devastating blow to the community and economy. Glenn McDonald, the county supervisor who organized the meeting, set the tone for the discussion in stark terms. "You're here tonight because you feel the same way that I feel. Our schools in our small communities – where it seems like everything else has left – and if you take our schools away, you hurt our communities."

McDonald, who represents Inverness on the county Board of Supervisors, spoke broadly about the county's relationship with the district. About half of the schools' funding came from state and federal sources, with the rest, about $10 million, coming from local property taxes collected through the county government. His comments quickly drew battle lines as he suggested that the district administration staff was both top-heavy and unrepresentative of the county. "Go out there in the parking lot and see how many car tags even got Sunflower County on it, see how many tags got Bolivar County and Washington County and Humphreys County and Leflore County tags. It's mine and your $10 million that's sent outside the county where they live and don't pay no taxes in the county." He also offered a warning of what would happen

to Inverness and the town of Sunflower if the schools closed by reminding the audience what had happened to Drew, a few miles north of Ruleville:

> When they shut that school down, businesses left. Have you been to Drew lately? Drew is one of the most pitiful places that you will – some of the roads you can't go through them with a four-wheel drive truck. You know how we increase the population at our church? You put on programs for the children…so you take the school away, who wants to come to Inverness and Sunflower then? Most business, economic development-wise, the main thing they look at is your schools. Not only do you mess up the school system, you mess up the economic development.

The meeting was also streamed on Facebook. Sheena, the parent quoted in Chapter 4, was particularly distraught. She had just been named the school district's "Parent of the Year" and had sent her son to one of the schools set to close. "Very close knit community," she commented on the live stream, "Was a complete turnaround for my son." Other parents left equally candid comments: "Close the school you may as well close the community. These communities need these schools 🙏🙏🙏."

The decision to close these two schools and the public conversations that have ensued capture many of the challenges and dynamics that I documented in Sunflower County as I completed this dissertation. When I moved to the Delta in the summer of 2018, I knew that both depopulation and school quality would be at the center of any analysis of rural poverty. I was not surprised to hear that East Sunflower Elementary and Inverness School were closing but was still saddened by the news. The Facebook commenter was right - the impending closures of the two schools would likely accelerate the decline of both communities. The schools are the largest employers in both towns and represent the core of civic life there. In the fall of 2019, the city hall in the Town of Sunflower had posted a large poster on its front door boasting about the school's modest enrollment gains. The Inverness school has a reputation for providing a close-knit

community that helps students with behavioral issues or trouble fitting in at Indianola's larger schools – much like Sheena's son referenced above. When these schools close over the summer, the children and families that made use of them will still live in town and will work to recreate civic life and social infrastructure elsewhere, but it will be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine new families moving in. The students in these two towns, all Kindergarten through 8th grade, will spend extra time riding buses through the county's endless fields of cotton, corn, and beans and less time building community with their neighbors. Students and families in Ruleville and Indianola will be left wondering how much time they have left – while their overall student populations are larger, the growth trends are the same. Mobility in – and out of – Sunflower County will be that much more difficult when the fall semester starts.

Steps to Mobility

The primary theoretical intervention made by this dissertation is the schema of mobility moments, checkpoints, and frustrations that we all experience as we move through life. The small moments and encounters that occur in the course of daily life shape the trajectory of the long term. An overheard racist remark by a teacher, a three-month delay in receiving virtual learning technology, the despondent feeling prompted by watching your town's elementary school close all contribute to frustrated mobility; people are forced to adapt their plans in the moment, make suboptimal decisions, or simply recalibrate expectations. While this dissertation has focused primarily on these barriers, corollary positive forces also exist: a teacher who puts in extra effort to nurture a student's potential, a school with the resources to offer exciting electives and SAT prep, and the potential and energy of a booming local economy can make upward mobility easier. In short, social mobility in the United States has become a game of chutes and

ladders, in which each roll of the dice is a chance for a boost up or a push down.[5] Not everyone in the United States, however, is playing on the same board.

The Structure of Opportunity

In chapter 4 I developed the concept of the "opportunity structure" to explore how different types of mobility moment or frustration might emerge in a given spatial context. I defined opportunity structure as "the linkages between educational opportunities and occupational hierarchies that are in turn embedded in a given spatial context" to draw attention to the three-way interaction between education, the labor market, and the community. This concept addresses an obvious reality about upward mobility: people want to like where they live, and they want the option of living near family, friends, and the community that raised them. For much of the era of history captured by the Civil Rights Movement, Black activists were focused on transformation at home: securing voting rights, securing democratic control of local institutions, and working towards a reality when all children would walk down the street to a public school and receive a high-quality education. In more recent years, the right way to create opportunity has become more ambiguous. A culture of individual achievement and carefully measured progression, ushered in by groups like Teach For America, has led to a pathway to mobility that means leaving everyone else behind. The local economy has all but shed its manufacturing and industrial jobs, the modest service sector pays low wages, and agriculture is largely automated. I stumbled across this paradoxical approach to mobility and community development early in my time in Sunflower County. Ingalls Shipbuilding, a shipyard on the Gulf Coast and one of the largest employers in the state of Mississippi, came to Indianola in October

[5] I am thankful to Pat Sharkey for suggesting this metaphor.

2018 in search of pipefitters among the students at the Capps Center, a vocational training facility operated by Sunflower County's community college. The local paper provided an optimistic quotation from the talent acquisition manager:

> Howell said their visit to the Capps Center on Saturday was not just to identify people who want to go to work for the shipwright, but also steer prospects to the Capps' pipefitter training course. Because they believe the course offers future benefits to Ingalls. "We're always going to be looking for great pipefitters," Howell added. (Thomas, 2018)

Work at Ingalls pays well and offers stability, but is also a 6-hour drive from Indianola. The students at the Capps Center, subsidized by the taxpayers of Sunflower County, are, by and large, being prepared for jobs far from home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed just how fragile this network of opportunities has become in Sunflower County. In Chapter 5 I follow the experiences of public school students and parents adapting to the realities of online learning. I found that these students were spending an inordinate amount of time and mental effort just making their day to day lives manageable and were doing so at great cost. The pandemic revealed just how overburdened the underfunded school system and tepid economy were.

Depopulation and Poverty

Manifestations of depopulation are increasingly evidence in day-to-day analysis. Over the course of my fieldwork, the most obvious driver of population decline was COVID-19; as of March 6, 2022, 120 residents of Sunflower County had died of the coronavirus, and 1 in 250

Mississippians overall had died.[6] These deaths account for roughly 0.5% of the population in a county that already loses 1% each year to outmigration. Signs of outmigration where equally obvious – of the 72 heads of households I interviewed in the summer of 2021, nearly all expressed hopes that their children or grandchildren would move away when they finished school. However, even with these obvious signs of population loss, a short-term analysis of Sunflower County's population shifts belies the scale of terminal depopulation.

The loss of population in Sunflower County bears the hallmarks of what Draus (2009) terms a "slow disaster." Writing about the decline of Detroit, Draus describes the city's slow disaster as the result of "the confluence of significant structural vulnerability with concentrated collective susceptibility, which has prolonged and reinforced the effects of broad-based economic, social, and policy-driven assaults" (368). Draus draws on an ecological-symbolic approach to disaster, quoting Kroll-Smith & Couch (1991), in which disasters are "disruptions of the ordered relationships between individuals, groups and communities and their built, modified and natural environments" (361).

While the language of slow disasters captures the scale, temporality, and impact of depopulation on Mississippi Delta communities, it risks naturalizing these processes as ordinary components of social development and economic transition. The impacts of depopulation captured in this dissertation are also evocative of what Rob Nixon (2011) has termed slow *violence*. Writing primarily about the planet's slow erosion by climate change, Nixon conceives of slow violence as

> a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is

[6] In the same time period nearly 6,000 had officially tested positive for a mortality rate close to 2%. https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/resources/18254.pdf

> customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. (2)

Understanding depopulation as both slow disaster and slow violence, then, is a call to think about the cumulative, generational, and political implications of population loss, particularly in situations of persistent poverty. The slow violence inflicted upon Sunflower County stems from a racialized refusal to transition out of an economy dominated by plantation logics – the region's tepid experiments with industrialization and manufacturing were never enough to replace agricultural employment. Indeed, as I argue in Chapter 3, the local White elite were more receptive to Black outmigration than they were to the prospect of a politically enfranchised Black middle class during the decades of the Great Migration.

The Other Side of Urbanization

These reflections on population loss point to broader sociological questions about the role of urbanization in producing social stratification. While natural fertility certainly plays a role in urban growth, migrants to the city have to come from *somewhere*, and historically they have come from rural communities. Implicit in this dissertation is the consequence of selection effects of rural-to-urban migration; the students with the right human capital and personal ambition are the ones who move to Memphis or Atlanta or beyond, with the large majority of young people stuck in place. The consequences of this brain drain have been documented in other rural communities (Carr & Kefalas 2009), but this aspect of urbanization takes on a racialized

character in the Mississippi Delta. The literature surveyed in Chapter 4 demonstrates that the impacts of rural-to-urban migration for Black Americans have been, at best, ambiguous, and the empirical data in the chapter show that this is still a fraught process for young Black students in Sunflower County today. Choosing to migrate out means choosing to several social and family ties and take on the risk of marginalization or racism in new spaces.

Terminal Poverty

This dissertation describes a form of poverty that marks communities above and beyond the circumstances of any individual or family. This condition can be considered "terminal poverty," a situation in which high levels of poverty have persisted across generations with no obvious means of alleviation or stabilization. Entrenched poverty of this type is compounded by the vicious cycle embedded in the effects of outward migration: moving to a new community provides mobility opportunities for individuals and families but exacerbates the underlying conditions that prompted their exit from the community. Terminal poverty is also marked by deep entanglement with other structural forms of disadvantage, such as depopulation and structural racism. The net result is a form of persistent poverty which is fundamentally intractable; absent a major external intervention, high levels of poverty will define the community until it eventually collapses or dwindles. Articulating a conception of poverty that exists beyond the family or individual level advances the sociology of inequality, poverty, and mobility in crucial ways.

Policy Implications

This dissertation was structured as a community study grounded in questions of history and people's lived experiences in Sunflower County, but people (both in Sunflower and

elsewhere) inevitably asked what I thought needed to be done. The simplest answer is money. Schools struggle to provide basic educational services, not to mention the social support that many of their students receive. Large portions of the community live in poverty and have done so for decades. The local economy is dominated by an agricultural sector that employs almost no locals, especially Black locals, and the remaining segments of the economy are shrinking rapidly. While aggressive infusions of cash might be the fastest way to solve these problems, they are also politically intractable. A more nuanced policy response might center three issues instead: confronting population loss, eliminating barriers to social mobility, and tackling the persistent racism that structures these problems.

Grappling with Population Decline

Population loss, discussed at length in Chapter 3, is one of the most pronounced sources of structural frustration to social mobility described in this dissertation. Mississippi was one of only three states that lost population between the 2010 and 2020 Censuses, and the counties of the Delta were hit especially hard. Despite these ominous signs and persistent trends, public policy in Mississippi (and elsewhere) has largely been disinterested in population decline. Governor Tate Reeves, a Republican from the Jackson suburbs, was largely dismissive of Census reports about the state's population loss: "I like to look at the good things that are happening" (Amy 2018). Reeves went out of his way to discount the role of "brain drain" in the state's population woes:

> "I bet you would find that the percentage of in-state students that are staying in state once graduating from college has not changed significantly in 20 years and is right on top of and very near the national average," Reeves said (Amy 2018).

If communities like Sunflower County are going to improve poverty rates, increase education attainment, raise living standards, or achieve any of the other goals associated with basic good governance, policymakers are going to have to address the consequences of population loss more forcefully. Targeted policy solutions are evident in the experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic – many workplaces have transitioned to work-from-home arrangements, and small communities like Sunflower or Inverness could easily become hubs for telecommuting workers in IT, back-office business services, and other professional services. Modest investments in broadband and targeted tax credits for remote employment could facilitate this sort of growth. More generally, however, policymakers need to grapple with these challenges in the context of a regional redevelopment agenda. The stalled economic and community development of the Mississippi Delta did not happen because of local decisions, and the solutions cannot be local either. None of the counties of the Mississippi Delta has the tax base or capital to engineer grassroots change. If the state of Mississippi is committed to addressing poverty and population decline, it must do so forcefully. Similar challenges are present in persistently poor and disadvantaged regions across the country; Appalachia, the Texas border, Native communities, and large portions of the Rust Belt and Upper Midwest are similarly victims to urban-centric growth.

Facilitating Mobility

At a more micro-level, this dissertation has explored the interpersonal determinants of social mobility. While the structural issues discussed above present substantial challenges, individuals with ambition and support can navigate around them. At the same time, institutional actors can frustrate these mobility dreams, either through malice or through application of ill-crafted policy. These institutions can be recalibrated instead to facilitate mobility dreams and

aspirations. Chapters 4 and 5, which highlight the role of education in this social context, offers numerous examples and sites for targeted intervention and policy change. Chapter 4 suggests that a major barrier to upward mobility through education is the experience of students once they enroll in a university outside of their home community. This transition is already challenging for students from more privileged backgrounds, and young adults from a place like Sunflower County face the compounded feelings of marginalization associated with their race, class, and rural identities. Many universities have established "first year success" programs targeted at students at risk of dropping out; these initiatives intervene in the types of institutional frustration that may depress retention rates and should be expanded to regional universities and community colleges. The lessons of Chapter 5 suggest a need for forbearance within institutions vis-à-vis students from backgrounds like this; the emotional and time costs of navigating stratifying situations create an undue burden that can be alleviated elsewhere. While the ethnographic chapters of this dissertation engage primarily with education, similar pitfalls and opportunities are present in other institutions and domains of life and should be approached with a similar attitude of grace.

Recognizing the Enduring Impacts of Racism

At the core of these policy concerns is a simple truth that is often too uncomfortable for policymakers to say aloud: large portions of social policy in the United States were designed to preserve White supremacy, and many of those policies, whether through inertia or ongoing malice, continue to do so. The looming school closures referenced at the beginning of this chapter provide a clear example. The Mississippi legislature codified a funding formula for public schools – the Mississippi Adequate Education Program – in 1994. However, the state

government has consistently failed to allocate what this formula determines is necessary for an "adequate" education. Allocations for the 2021-2022 school year were short by $271 million and the cumulative shortfall since 2008 totals more than $3 billion. Predominately White schools in a handful of Mississippi suburbs – north of Jackson, west of Hattiesburg, south of Memphis – are able to make up the gap through higher local taxes and robust PTA and athletic booster associations. The predominately Black schools of the Delta and cities have to do more with less, with each year's shortfall creating problems and deferred maintenance for the future. Surely a small portion of that $3 billion would have been enough to maintain two small schools in Sunflower County.

Education is perhaps the most obvious segment of life in Sunflower County where race and racism are still defining social variables. The public schools that are closing, like the rest of the public schools in the county, are just shy of 100% Black; White children attend one of the two "segregation academies" in town, Indianola Academy and North Sunflower Academy. The persistence of these parallel systems in the face of declining enrollments is testament to an ethos in which (some) White elites would rather wither alone than strive together. This ethos – a structural version of the impulse to cut off one's nose to spite one's face – defines the history of Sunflower County. The mechanization of agriculture could have been a chance to industrialize the economy and create opportunity for displaced farm workers. The Civil Rights Movement could have been an opportunity to build new communities across racial lines. The modest economic booms of the pre-NAFTA era could have created wealth in communities long deprived of it. The continual decision not to make these choices has created a region on life support.

Early in my fieldwork I drove around Indianola with a Black pastor and banker, Aaron Tucker, who had been referred to me as a young leader. Rev. Tucker had been a successful real

estate banker in Texas before returning home to Indianola to help care for his mother and take the helm of his childhood Missionary Baptist Church. As we started talking he noted an unusual feature of Indianola's commercial strip that I hadn't considered: the surprising number of banks in town. From his past career in Texas he knew that the town couldn't sustain so many banks just with individual and family businesses – the county's unexpectedly large financial sector was evidence of the immense agricultural wealth surrounding the city. As we pulled out of the church parking lot he noted that most of the payday lenders and check cashing establishments in town were owned by these same banks. Rev. Tucker's church is on Church Street, which runs perpendicular to downtown Indianola's main streets. Tucker remembers this street being the heart of Black middle class life in the 1970s when he was young. There was a Black equivalent of every White-serving downtown business: Black barbershops, Black-owned insurance companies, a Black doctor, a Black-run grocery. Today the street is dead quiet and the lot across from Tucker's church – which once held a small grocery story – is now a dirt square. Many of his childhood friends are doing well in new places, but the neighborhood he grew up with is gone, and his own children are left with the task of navigating uncertain futures in a region so heavily defined by the weight of history.

Amy, J. (2018, January 8). Lt. Gov. Reeves talks up Mississippi economy and population. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/e3f4d804fab94c53a2b9b19a8217efd6

Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. (2011). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Beacon Press.

Draus, P. J. (2009). Substance Abuse and Slow-Motion Disasters: The Case of Detroit. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *50*(2), 360–382. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2009.01144.x

Kroll-Smith, J. S., & Couch, S. R. (1991). What is a disaster? An ecological-symbolic approach to resolving the definitional debate. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, *9*(3), 355–366.

Nixon, R. (2013). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor* (First Harvard University Press paperback edition). Harvard University Press.

Thomas, R. (2018, October 11). Ship builders wanted: Ingalls shipbuilding comes to Capps center in search of labor. *The Enterprise-Tocsin*. https://www.enterprise-tocsin.com/news/ship-builders-wanted-ingalls-shipbuilding-comes-capps-center-search-labor