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

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Mobility has become more constrained, and patterns of immobility are spatially concentrated in certain parts of the United States. Drawing on three years of ethnographic fieldwork in Mississippi, this article examines the role of college as a pathway out of this entrenched poverty and the social and structural barriers that limit the potential of higher education for poor students. It argues 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 that is not often expected of students from more privileged backgrounds. This transition creates social, psychological, and cultural barriers that limit students' ability to be mobile through education.

Keywords: mobility, inequality, rural poverty, race, education

How do depopulation and racial stratification shape the educational and mobility trajectories of the rural poor? This article argues that for rural youth, especially rural youth of color, enrolling in college and finding employment that draws on that education requires a permanent transition from one opportunity structure to another, a transition not often expected of students from more privileged backgrounds. This transition creates social, psychological, and cultural barriers that limit students' ability to achieve social mobility through education. Drawing on three years of ethnographic fieldwork in rural Mississippi, including participant observation in education institutions and interviews with students and their families, this article explores the experiences of a cohort of high school students to highlight the ways in which education 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. Such 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. 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 their education in the city and find a job that rewards their educational attainment all while remaining close to their 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 that 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.

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 that 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 Central Delta county (as I refer to my field site), 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 Central Delta county, the social psychologist John Dollard ([1937] 1988) and the cultural anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker ([1939] 1993) 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 United States has increased in recent decades as 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 Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren (2018a) finds that children from a place like the Mississippi Delta, including Central Delta county, who are born into the bottom income quintile have around a 5 percent chance of reaching 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. The authors (2018b) 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 among 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 William Julius Wilson's (1987) pathbreaking work on the urban underclass. Although 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 deindustrialized regions of the Rust Belt and the Upper Midwest (see, for example, 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, Peter Blau and Otis Duncan (1967) 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 and Grigoryeva 2018). Recent work by Chetty and Hendren (2018b) 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 Heather 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 postwar peaks in the 1950s, nearly half of America's counties have persistently lost population to outmigration and falling fertility rates. Accounts of this shift often focus on structural variables such as automation and natural decreases in fertility as incomes rise (Johnson and Lichter 2019). The impact of automation on rural populations and agriculture is significant; an often-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. The 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] 1993) and John Dollard ([1937] 1988), the two social scientists who studied Central Delta 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 because 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 [Central Delta 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. ([1937] 1988, 131)

Whereas Dollard looks to structural shifts awaiting Central Delta, Powdermaker looks 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. ([1939] 1993, 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 impacts on both the trajectories of Black Americans who opted into urbanization and the communities they left behind.

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. Although 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 do not reach a consensus that migration improved rural Black migrants' socioeconomic outcomes. Elizabeth Eichenlaub, Stewart Tolnay, and Trent 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, Adelman, and Crowder 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 outmigrants from the South are similarly ambiguous. Despite conventional understandings of migration as a means to improve opportunities for children, Alexander and his colleagues (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 Isabel Wilkerson (2011) describes, 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 a head and the civil rights movement was beginning to take form. The puzzle reflected in this 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).

Race and Poverty in the Contemporary Rural South

Rural America is large, covering 75 percent of the country's land area, but is home to only some 14 percent of its population. Although rural regions are increasingly diversifying, they remain overwhelmingly White. Swaths of rural America, such as mineral-rich Appalachia and the auto supplier manufacturing towns of the Rust Belt, have diversified their economies, but the historic cotton belt of the Deep South remains primarily agricultural (Johnson 2017). The transition to mechanized agriculture, combined with a long history of racial exploitation and the failure of the rural South to develop to a robust industrial sector, have created patterns of persistent poverty throughout the region. Although much of rural America has been vulnerable to the periodic impact of macroeconomic shocks such as the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, the Deep South is marked by patterns of White supremacy and Black oppression that have created lasting forms of economic disadvantage. Even in bumper crop years, Black tenant farmers or underemployed people in the rural South were unlikely to enjoy the benefits of good economic times. Cynthia Duncan (2015) describes a continuity in racialized class relations that echoes the analysis of Dollard and Powdermaker. Her work charts how the plantation system's echoes are still seen in modern-day class and racial arrangements in the Deep South. A minority of wealthy White landowners control the bulk of the economy, a small and mostly White middle class provides professional services, and the region's Black majority are predominately employed on the margins of agricultural or seek low-wage employment in the region's small service sector. Although political control of local government has largely shifted to the Black majority, the White elite's continued dominance of the economy has contributed to stagnation and persistent poverty.

The poverty found in these communities can reach extreme levels. Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer's (2015) work on extreme, $2-a-day poverty highlights the challenges of the poor Mississippi Delta communities such as Central Delta. With the all but complete disappearance of cash welfare since the 1990s, the very poor living in deep poverty—who make up 20 percent of Central Delta families—resort to a broad array of strategies to make ends meet. These challenges are particularly acute for rural America, where the logic of economies of scale undermine nonprofit solutions to extreme disadvantage; the region's nonprofit infrastructure must serve a larger geographic area with fewer resources. The patterns found in the Delta reflect national trends in race and rural poverty; poverty rates for rural families of color are more than double that of White families. However, race has rarely been central to sociological analysis of rural poverty (Harvey 2017). Given the continuity between overtly racist institutions in the pre–civil rights movement era and patterns of racialized class stratification today, analysis of rural Black poverty and mobility must be attuned to the institutional structures that reproduce that poverty.

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, 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 class structure of the labor market in a capitalist framework (Bowles and 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 Central Delta county is thus of utmost importance to addressing patterns of persistent poverty and immobility.

The schools in places like Central Delta, however, have rarely provided opportunities for upward mobility. Dollard's analysis of educa-

tion in Central Delta highlights their role in providing stratified education: a liberal arts curriculum for White residents and a vocational education for Black residents ([1937] 1988, 191). Powdermaker notes that even the few Black Southerners who were able to graduate from college felt a greater sense of alienation; their educational achievements highlighted the structural discrimination they faced without providing a way to ameliorate or sidestep those barriers ([1939] 1993, 307). Contemporary schools in Central Delta continued to face underinvestment, disinvestment, and competition from private schools founded in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.[1] These "segregation academies," many of which received public funds in their first few years of operation, have led to the complete resegregation of education in Central Delta county today (Bolton 2005; Crespino 2009; Carr 2012).

Children growing up in Central Delta 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 three years of ethnographic fieldwork in Central Delta county, which is 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. Central Delta has a population of around twenty-five thousand according to 2017 ACS estimates. About ten thousand 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, and an additional few thousand live in unincorporated areas. The population of Central Delta has fallen by more than half since its high in the 1930s of nearly seventy thousand. The county's population is 70 percent Black and 25 percent non-

Hispanic White and includes a small number of Asian and Hispanic families.

A third of Central Deltans live in poverty, half of them 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 socioeconomic condition as adults; the county has some of the lowest economic mobility rates in the country (Chetty and Hendren 2018b). Historically, agriculture was the primary source of employment and the driver of the regional economy. An influential U.S. senator who served from the 1940s through the 1970s owned a ten-thousand-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 a hundred people (the son of this senator quipped that they try to round up at least a hundred 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.

This article draws on a larger ethnographic study of barriers to economic mobility in communities like Central Delta. As part of my fieldwork, I embedded in several organizations around the county, including churches, civic organizations, educational institutions, and family service providers. Throughout my fieldwork, I also developed close relationships with families in the county and have been able to follow them through both daily life and significant life events. The data for this article come primarily from my work with the Leadership Institute, an afterschool and summer program that serves public school children in Central Delta county. The Leadership Institute provides daily afterschool programming in the form of literacy classes, college prep courses, and extracurricular clubs such as drama, chess, and art. During the summer, it offers a full day, five-week summer camp that offers similar op-

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1. *Brown v. Board of Education,* 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

portunities for middle school students and college-credit courses for high school students. Throughout the year, the institute takes its students on college visits throughout the country. Students who are active in the program throughout the year also receive support to attend summer programs elsewhere. In past years, students have attended programs at Andover, Exeter, Yale, Harvard, and other elite institutions. Participants are recruited from nearby schools and through the personal networks of existing members; thus they are not a random sample of the local school-age population but rather a self-selected group of students with upward mobility aspirations. An ethnographic method is appropriate for a study such as this in which the goal is to elucidate and describe the life processes of a relatively unseen population rather than to produce a summary of a random sample (Katz 1997).

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. All of the students I worked with identified as Black or African American. A slight majority were female, particularly among the high school cohort. Most students have Bs and Cs in class, with a smattering of A and B students and of 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 grade point average, 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 who do enroll disproportionately benefit from a college degree in terms of income (Brand and Xie 2010). Although the staff of the Leadership Institute strongly influence students' thinking about post–high school plans, the students in the program are encouraged to develop their own specific academic and career plans.

For the past two years, I have worked with the institute as a college application mentor, chess coach, literacy class instructor, substitute bus driver, and general volunteer. 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. As part of my involvement, 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. Although 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 Central Delta county who proactively want to move up the economic ladder. Although students in this group are largely similar to their classmates in terms of grades and ACT scores, they are unique in their willingness to take on additional responsibilities as part of their preparation for college: the most dedicated students spend twelve hours per week at the Leadership Institute during the school year and up to ten weeks during the summer participating in summer programs organized or funded by the institute. As a result, this cohort of students is not representative of their peer group in any statistical sense; instead, their experiences (and in particular the ethnographic analysis of those experiences) help illuminate previously undetected processes (Katz 1997), which in turn shed light on how mobility processes operate. 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 Central Delta. The data collected in this article were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic reached Mississippi; in the weeks after the first case arrived in Cen-

tral Delta county, schools closed abruptly and transitioned to online platforms for the 2020–2021 school year.

THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE OF CENTRAL DELTA COUNTY

Midway through the fall semester, Jeremy hunched over a Chromebook at the Leadership Institute working on homework for his ninth-grade earth sciences class. Most of the homework assigned by the school district in Central Delta 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 and typically include material well below grade level standards:

> Rain, hail, snow, fog. These are all examples of _____ on earth.
>
> A. Water
> B. Soil
> C. Air
> D. Sun

Nearby school districts face 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 television screen who is simultaneously lecturing to hundreds of students in similarly under-resourced schools.

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 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.

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). Recent work by Siwei Cheng and Barum Park (2020) formalizes the concept of the opportunity structure to refer to the networked flows of people across occupational categories, that is, how easy it is for someone to move across occupations given their starting position. A more nuanced analysis of the opportunity structure in Central Delta county identifies the importance of expanding that conceptualization to not only the education and employment opportunities of a place, but the social and spatial 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 plays 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 Central Delta 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 toward public education from the county's small but wealthy White population. The segregation academies also reflect 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 Central Delta county are still segregated at the neighborhood level, often by literal train tracks, and opportunities for cross-racial social interaction are nearly nonexistent. This history of segregation and White supremacy has resulted in forms 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 and 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 sixties, 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 Central Delta 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 Central Delta. Both are seniors at the city high school and are actively working on college applications—Amanda hopes to attend a prestigious HBCU 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 Central Delta county to find jobs that meet the basic needs of their families (Thiede, Lichter, and 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 and Crowle 2001). Relatively few jobs in the county 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. Although 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 percent of the county's population is employed by farms, most of them White. Although 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 who have inherited plantation estates. For most people in the county, the 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 Central Delta county emerged at a recent community meeting that was organized in response to a series 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 children 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 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 mother and stepfather share an air mattress with their youngest son and 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 condi-

tion 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 reunited family was working—Deshawn's parents had left behind decent jobs once their son was healthy enough to move back to Central Delta, 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 children watched their father play an basketball videogame on their small television.

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 will take to go to college and what comes next. As we sat in a booth by the window, he talked about what he wanted 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 Central Delta County more generally, belong a group that Anthony 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 because it influences the intangible resources they need to transition to a new opportunity

structure. Almost none of the parents or care-givers 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' aspirations for their future (Byun et al. 2012). In Central Delta 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 Central Delta 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, 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. Students are assisted as they navigate these barriers by people like Kasey, who works as a full-time college and career counselor for the Leadership Institute. A Black woman and native of the region, Kasey returned to Mississippi after college through Teach For America and started working at the Leadership Institute at the same time my fieldwork began. Kasey 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 has 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 does not 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 children. 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 is a good ladder to get on and that he can get off whenever he wants but is 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 no longer walk 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 Central Delta county, the only college graduates in their lives are their teachers. Although 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, traveling 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 institute, and the costs often outweigh the benefits. One of Deshawn's chess teammates, ninth grader Jackson, had quit altogether to prioritize making the varsity football team. Jackson's good friend RJ, another ninth grader, continued to show up at the Leadership Institute only 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 institute without homework and has decided to stop doing any assigned work 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 26 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 that 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 institute after football season started, Kasey, the college advisor, caught him in the hallway. The other students had been abuzz with stories from the past week's game between Central Delta 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 Norbert Wiley (1967) terms 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 Central Delta county, the traps are not the result of ethnic enclaves or racial segregation per se, but instead the ways 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 Central Delta county as they try to make their way out of a weakening opportunity structure, role models who can transmit the right cultural capital and help them navigate through the process of upward mobility are essential. Sheena, an official with the school district and member of the Leadership Institute's advisory board, had a difficult childhood in Central Delta county. When she was in high school, she did not have adults helping her navigate the transition to adulthood. She did not take the ACT until midtwelfth grade and did poorly because she had not been prepared. As a young single mother at the end of high school, she barely qualified for the local community college, failed 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 who 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 whether Sheena had filled out any scholarships. Sheena did not even know what that meant. The teacher applied for a $500 PTA scholarship on Sheena's behalf. Sheena says if she had known about that sort of thing in eleventh grade the options would have been much better—options such as 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 and helped Sheena finish her bachelor's degree online. After that, 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 a master's degree in rural public policy with a 4.0 she immediately started working on her doctorate because she knew she would not if she took a break. Her doctorate 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 Central Delta 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. Although 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" (Ray 2017; McCabe and Jackson 2016). 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 for leavers 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 whether 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. Although 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 Central Delta. Many of the students I worked with during this research expressed regret at the prospect of having to leave home permanently—few jobs are available for college graduates in Central Delta 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 took the ACT only 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 Central Delta 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, and 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 your 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 ends the conversation by asking Shaunda to sketch out a six-year plan for her 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 Central Delta 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 being presented with the advantages of higher education, students are subjected to dire warnings about the failure to pursue it (Rondini 2018). Cultivating an attitude of fear with regard to higher education makes the concrete reality of life after high school 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 grapple with. The 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 1973). 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. Although students from most rural backgrounds may experience these psychological pressures, Black students' experiences are compounded by the feelings of marginalization that accompany both growing up in a region marked by White supremacy and in entering elite, nominally racially progressive spaces.

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 Central Delta county who 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 Central Delta 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. Taesha enjoys being able to take advanced classes like Biology II and Sports Medicine, but 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 call-

ing 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; many of the teachers did not like the "new" students and thought they were ruining the school's reputation. While there he made no White friends and decided by Christmas break that he wanted to transfer back to Central Delta. Even though his original high school does not have nearly as many academic opportunities, he appreciates the community feel at the smaller, all-Black 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 Central Delta students are acquainted with—the Gothic architecture and cloistered campuses evoke comparisons with Harry Potter. Central Delta 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 that comes with the added pressure of adopting a "cleft habitus" (Lee and 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 Central Delta 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 grader 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 incidental expenses. Asher brought $120 in cash for the

summer to cover incidental meals and souve-
nirs, but no one told him that he was respon-
sible for buying textbooks as well. The book re-
quired 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 in-
stead 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 scholar-
ship.

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

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Education's impact on mobility is well docu-
mented, particularly through the transmission
of cultural capital (Swartz 1977). Scholars note
the different pathways through which educa-
tion socializes students into given occupational
destinations in the United Kingdom (Willis
1977) and the United States (Bowles and Gintis
1972). Education functions to entrench class
and occupational positions across the socio-
economic spectrum, elite education also pro-
viding access to cultural capital to succeed in
elite professional spaces (Khan 2010). The mu-
tually reinforcing impacts of cultural capital
and education attainment are produced in the
home as well; Annette Lareau (2003) documents
class-based parenting strategies that give chil-
dren the tools they need to succeed in their
present life, though not necessarily the skills
they would need to successfully navigate mobil-
ity processes. Recent work by Ranita Ray (2017)
shows how these same processes frustrate the
types of mobility goals formed by the students
in my study. By discussing mobility in the con-
text of avoiding risk (such as gang membership,
unwanted pregnancies, drug addiction), the
nonprofits and teachers that work with low-
income teenagers fail to properly prepare stu-

dents for the actual work of upward mobility.
That is, by emphasizing the challenges that
young people ought to avoid, rather than work-
ing to help them "opt in" to mobility, many ed-
ucation interventions put students onto diffi-
cult paths without the actual support they
need. The findings of this article extend this
literature by calling attention to the role of spa-
tial mobility in these processes. Mobility aspi-
rations entail more than navigating institutions
and bureaucracies: they also require life-
altering decisions about where that mobility
would happen. In doing so, poor rural commu-
nities ask their young people to choose between
a "better" life or a life close to family and loved
ones.

The data presented here yield several impli-
cations for the sociological study of rural pov-
erty and relevant policy practice. First, these
data highlight the "vicious cycle" of rural pov-
erty that Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas (2009)
identify. Central Delta county, like most of the
rural Deep South, has persistently lost popula-
tion in ways that have taken a toll on the com-
munities people leave behind. Encouraging
young people to seek their fortunes elsewhere
has the paradoxical effect of improving indi-
vidual outcomes while worsening structural
conditions for later cohorts. Research on rural
students from the Midwest identify ways in
which schools can play a role in their own de-
cline: by prioritizing students with potential to
succeed elsewhere, communities export their
most talented young people but neglect those
who might succeed at home (Carr and Kefalas
2009). As long as upward mobility entails mov-
ing out of the region, individual mobility will
deprive these regions of human capital. Stu-
dents like Cierra and Amanda who attend uni-
versities outside the region are unlikely to re-
turn, contributing to both "brain drain" and
general population loss. At the same time, local
institutions struggle to attract professionals.
Organizations like Teach For America fill gaps
such as these, but not in sustainable or perma-
nent ways.

These findings also draw attention to the
spatial concentration of disadvantage in the
United States. The vicious cycle described here
is fundamentally embedded in space: mobility
aspirants grow up in one opportunity structure

and must choose between lingering there or transition to a new geography of opportunity. The problem is rooted in the physical space of Central Delta county and the Delta region writ large: depopulation and the dominance of agriculture have created a region shaped by persistent poverty and compounded disadvantaged. This study complements other work finding that forms of disadvantage follow spatial patterns. Chetty and Hendren's analysis of county-level mobility rates (2018b) demonstrates clear clusters of immobility in regions such as the historic cotton belt of the Deep South, the rural communities of Appalachia, and Native nations in Western and Plains states. These and other clusters—the rural Deep South, Appalachia, the Rust Belt, the Rio Grande Valley, and Native nations—are recognizable in most maps of social indicators. This spatial concentration is intuitive within the opportunity framework developed in this article; insofar as people's economic, social, and family lives are intertwined, factors that affect one dimension of life will affect others. By extension, this article reiterates the importance of recognizing the structural nature of the challenges that individuals face. The young people profiled in this article each grew up in poverty, and their decisions to pursue higher education are rational and are likely to improve their life chances. Solutions to these challenges must address their structural underpinnings rather than shift the burden to the individual.

In sum, this article highlights several important challenges to upward mobility processes in communities like Central Delta county. The senior students discussed here finished the school year abruptly when COVID-19 prompted the district to shutter schools during spring break. The pandemic was at its worst in the late summer of 2020 when these students started college, and none of the students had made their first-choice plans work. Frank, after initially opting for a private HBCU a few hours away, decided at the last minute to attend a regional university closer to home. Taesha and Shaunda were set to attend public universities in the Jackson, Mississippi, area, but both of their plans fell apart for financial reasons and they enrolled at the local community college. Amanda, who was admitted to her dream school in Atlanta, eventually convinced her parents to let her attend a slightly less prestigious private school a few hours closer to home. Cierra, after having been rejected from the tuition-free school that was her first choice, enrolled in a regional public university four hours from home but withdrew after a semester. Although each of these students is still enrolled in higher education, none of them is where they had hoped to be when their senior year began.

Many of the challenges discussed in this article 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 Central Delta's public schools offers a weak network of low-wage, service sector jobs with little room for advancement. Although the nonprofit sector offers limited resources to students who decide to prioritize higher education and socioeconomic advancement, such students still have to grapple with an opaque admissions process and unsupportive schools (and often, 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 concentrated in rural spaces that can only sustain limited opportunities for socioeconomic advancement.

Alternatives to the difficult process that these students faced do exist. 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, and Edin 2016). Although 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, and Hicks 2018). The special challenge facing rural communities is the number of ways in which individual success paradoxically exacerbates the problem at a community level.

In her ethnography of Central Delta county from the 1930s, Powdermaker describes a process of acculturation for Black families in which moving up in the local status hierarchy leads to increased dissatisfaction with the inequalities around them—their tentative advancement within Central Delta 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 Central Delta 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 Central Delta 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.

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